



EYAL ZAMIR

COUNTERING IRAN'S REGIONAL STRATEGY

A Long-Term, Comprehensive Approach



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Translated from the Hebrew by Susann Codish

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Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| AAH | Asaib Ahl al-Haq |
| IDF | Israel Defense Forces |
| IRGC | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps |
| IRGCAF | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force |
| IRGCN | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy |
| JCPOA | Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action |
| KH | Kataib Hezbollah |
| LTC | long-term competition |
| MESDA | Middle East States Defense Alliance |
| PIJ | Palestinian Islamic Jihad |
| PMF | Popular Mobilization Forces (aka al-Hashd al-Shabi) |
| UAV | unmanned aerial vehicle |

Acknowledgments

This work represents the fruit of many years of wide-ranging reading, study, and contemplation of the Iran challenge during my experience in a variety of roles at all levels of the Israeli military. In the end, to balance reader accessibility with comprehensiveness, I cut much from the original draft. This document is intended for experts able to quickly comprehend the organizing principle and recommendations as well as readers new to the subject who want to understand it in a more basic way.

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Foreword

This work was written amid two dramatic world developments that, in different ways, affect the Middle East. The first, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has developed into a far-reaching global crisis, although it is still too early to understand its long-term implications for Middle East power competition. The second, the expected U.S. return to a modified Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, exited by the Trump administration three years later—is expected to create many challenges linked to the future of the Iran nuclear program as well as larger Iranian capabilities and knowledge. It could also generate “renewed energy” for Iran in its campaign to dominate the Middle East.

The connection between the extremist ideology of the Islamic Republic and its evolving military capabilities renders it a dangerous country that undermines regional and global stability. This buildup includes its pursuit of nuclear capability and weapons while developing strong and advanced conventional military capabilities, including long-range precision fires, and the proliferation of regional proxies, militias, and local forces under its control to varying degrees. Iran’s perception of the Middle East as a space to expand its influence lies in its historical roots and the vision of the country’s 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran is seizing opportunities and harnessing additional forces in the region and around the world to advance its ambitions.

U.S. and other Western attempts to reach agreements and arrangements with Iran are important and should be continued. This is the best option to prevent escalation. It must be understood, however, that Iran sees compromises and agreements as temporary forced concessions and “detours” on the path to realizing its ultimate vision. Furthermore, whereas Iran may appear on the surface to be pursuing unconnected goals—such as a nuclear

breakout or greater influence across the Middle East through destabilizing means—these aspirations are really all of a piece. In light of this, the anti-Iran bloc—led by the United States and countries that perceive Iran as a direct threat—must not allow a weak nuclear agreement to give Iran a free pass in its aggressive regional campaign. As long as Iran continues its negative direct or indirect regional activities—through proxies, covert activities, and cyber efforts—the region will be less stable. A weak nuclear agreement, in any case, must not prevent the anti-Iran bloc's ability to thwart, punish, or deter Iran's regional freedom of action.

The research conducted for this study clearly shows that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is the center of gravity of the regime and its regional campaign. The IRGC leads all attempts to establish and carry out aggression in the area, and the weakening of its power and capability will, in turn, weaken Iran's ability to harm the regional campaign proposed here to counter it.

To summarize, this work will review the Iranian threat and its regional components, and propose a systemic approach rooted in seven principles meant to defeat Iran in the regional campaign. The work seeks to present a comprehensive, coherent concept that will facilitate the design of a more effective campaign, with a focus on the Revolutionary Guards.

Because the threat is regional and multidimensional, involving many state and nonstate actors alike in the Middle East and beyond, the response will also need to be regional and multidimensional. This work is not intended to analyze perceptions and systems of any individual country in the regional system. Each country acts in accordance with its interests and strives to strengthen its national security. Each state is responsible for defending itself and its own sovereignty. But the analysis presented here will recommend an additional layer and the adoption of a different strategy centered on changing ways of thought, adopting new concepts and patterns of action, and crystallizing a concept for an integrated regional campaign.

The anti-Iran camp has opportunities that reinforce this perception, including the Abraham Accords—the 2020 normalization treaty signed

between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and then Sudan (along with the parallel but separate Israel-Morocco deal)—and Israel's alignment with U.S. Central Command.

At its core, the concept presented in this work is fundamentally defensive and preventive, but success in curbing aggression will require taking a systemic, proactive approach in conducting the campaign. Iran can be deterred and restrained and returned to its borders. To achieve this, the United States and its Middle East partners must radiate power and deterrence, and while every effort must be made to prevent escalation, sometimes doing so requires developing regional deterrence and making clear that any provocation will be met with a decisive, determined response. For the Iranian leadership, attempts at reconciliation and compromise are perceived as an expression of the adversary's weakness and embolden extremist elements in the regime.

To elaborate, for the Iranian regime, the nuclear agreement is a temporary measure that purely facilitates the pursuit of long-term goals unfettered by international pressure. Iran will definitely work to prevent another "longer, stronger," agreement, in reference to the language initially used by the Biden administration to describe its intentions. Because the 2015 agreement omitted regional issues, likely economic benefits from a future deal—including an inflow of billions of dollars for the Iranian budget—will let the regime further expand its regional influence, develop its missile project, deepen deterrence of its enemies, and undermine regional stability with the various tools it has developed. That is, even if a particular line of operation in the overall Iranian strategy is temporarily suspended, the other lines of operation remain active, and the path to realizing the overall vision proceeds apace.

Thus, the anti-Iran bloc, led by the United States and also comprising Israel and Arab states threatened by Iran, must acknowledge that the nuclear agreement does not prohibit responding to malicious Iranian interference in the region. As long as Iran continues its direct or indirect regional aggression, the nuclear agreement must not be used as an excuse to allow Iran regional freedom of action or to prevent action to thwart and deter it.

1

Introduction

This paper addresses the regional conflict between enemy camps over control of the Middle East and offers an up-to-date, holistic concept for dealing with it. It pays particular attention to the role played by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), colloquially called the Pasdaran in Persian, and the theory of victory needed to defeat it.

While the United States, the other great powers, Israel, and various Arab states are focused on stopping Iran's nuclear program, the Islamic Republic continues to build up both its own military and what this paper refers to as a Regional Radical Shia Army to attain regional hegemony. On one side is a radical axis led by the Iranian regime; on the other side stand the United States, Israel, and some Arab nations, most prominently Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan. The campaign against Iran and its proxies is ongoing and will determine the future of the region.

In recent years, the "axis of resistance," as Iran calls it, has developed into a regional strategic threat. Iran is increasing its influence in the Middle East and entrenching its presence in the region's nations, disrupting the regional order, undermining stability, and threatening to eradicate the state of Israel.

Iran is furthering its ideological goal of exporting the Islamic Revolution and attaining regional hegemony along two paths: the achievement of military nuclear capabilities and the building of conventional forces—the latter comprising the IRGC and its Regional Radical Shia Army. The two projects may seem unrelated, but both support the same overall strategy. They feed each other and are led by mechanisms united within Iran's top leadership, including its Supreme Leader. Even if the nuclear program is stopped or

frozen for a time, Iran, through other ostensibly conventional capabilities, already poses an unprecedented “sub-nuclear” or “supra-conventional” threat to the functioning of the region’s nations and their population centers and critical infrastructure. It will present even more of a threat in the future. By accurately and massively firing on military and civilian centers, Iran—using its regional army and operating its active regional terrorist organizations—is capable of seizing control of territories or having its proxies do so, thereby deterring every regional player and fulfilling its vision.

Iran maintains two parallel armed forces. One is its regular military, which is like any other national military, and its responsibilities are currently security, border security, and preparedness for conventional war with foreign enemies. Its structure and organization resemble those of other militaries. In the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), it deployed ground forces, an air force, a navy, and military intelligence assets.

Iran’s other armed force is the IRGC, which is leading an ongoing war. The first claim made in this paper, in a historical sense, is that the Middle East is engaged in a war or an overarching battle consisting of several sub-campaigns. This war is constant, and the Revolutionary Guards are the regional Iranian army waging it against the United States, Israel, and several Arab states. The IRGC is thus the means by which the Iranian regime is trying to impose its regional vision. Since the 1980s, the IRGC has also been constructing a regional Shia army. Understanding this distinction is critical to any ability to wage an effective campaign and weaken Iran’s efforts to destabilize the current order and achieve regional hegemony.

This war is multifaceted and is being waged on multiple fronts and in multiple domains; no single center of gravity exists that, if effectively targeted, will decide the entire campaign. Therefore, this paper’s second claim is that success in this protracted conflict requires taking a long-term, holistic approach characterized by comprehensive planning and robust action, flexibility, determination, patience, and resilience, as well as the capacity for taking hits, recovering, and seizing and holding the initiative, in all dimensions.

The third claim of this paper is that the U.S.-Israel-Arab axis needs to show a high degree of cooperation and demonstrate joint, synchronized

efforts on a regional scale in this campaign against the radical axis led by the Iranian regime.

The outcome of the campaign will determine the future of the Middle East and decide who will control the region for decades to come. The campaign is critically important mainly for nations threatened by Iran's regional ambitions. These nations must face this challenge now, together, before it is too late and the challenge is too strong to counter.

Any other approach is merely tactical. Without critical mass and focus, it will be impossible to achieve the strategic objective to weaken Iran domestically and regionally.

Iran's race for the nuclear bomb is a core element of the regime's effort to ensure its long-term survival. However, to achieve its overall goals, it is willing to make tactical concessions, postpone the attainment of its nuclear ambitions to some year in the future, and make temporary agreements. The international attempt to deny Iran nuclear capabilities will be key in deciding the fate of the region and the globe, and must therefore be continued and amplified with every means available.

But the global focus on Iran's nuclear project has been at the expense of the campaign to counter its regional influence. The Iranian regime is using the nuclear negotiations as a diversion to distract from its ambition to achieve regional hegemony by means of subversion and accelerated development of its aggressive conventional regional capabilities. Iran operates on the basis of long-term strategy in cooperation with allied regimes and its Regional Radical Shia Army, which is primarily made up of trained fighters.

Iran has built its "axis of resistance" throughout the Middle East using its strategy of regional proxies, and through these proxies has expanded its operational capabilities into regional nations. The radical axis could inflict significant damage with its advanced armaments and forces on land and at sea by striking at strategic targets, critical infrastructure, and civilians. Iran has built its capacity to operate far from its own borders by both direct and indirect means—that is, by its proxies.

Iran understands that there are ups and downs in any campaign and takes a long-term approach in pursuing its ideological beliefs and its revolutionary agenda. Thus, weakening and deterring Iran and preventing its regional

entrenchment are long-term strategic objectives shared by most of the region's nations, including Israel, and the United States.

Necessary changes for improving the region's security are weakening the "axis of resistance," reducing its sphere of influence, and damaging its forces, infrastructure, and capabilities. These achievements will allow more moderate forces to gain strength. Weakening Iran's regional posture will also affect its nuclear program and allow for much more significant and reliable deterrence that can force Iran to abandon or at least postpone the program by years, thereby improving chances for preventing a regional war.

Damage to the resistance model will undermine Iran's ability to project regional influence; weaken extremist organizations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip; and allow regional states whose sovereignty Iranian efforts has compromised to regain their sovereignty, which will in turn enhance regional stability and security.

Displacing Iran and weakening it regionally will shore up the status of positive actors, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and even Turkey, and strengthen their standing in the international arena. Moreover, such a reality will enhance the global standing of the United States and strengthen its hand in its competition with Russia and China—a struggle in which the Middle East plays an important role.

Thus far, efforts to counter Iran have been tactical, short term, reactive, and disjointed. What is needed is leadership, as well as novel modes of joint, synchronized action with allies and partners, to counter this threat. The time to act is now.

2

Iran's System, Regional Strategy, and Security Doctrine

At the heart of Iran's security doctrine is its long-term objective of securing the survival of the revolutionary regime—the Islamic Republic. But unlike most nations, this regime is not content with merely establishing national objectives within its own borders. Rather, it strives to actively export its ideology and expand its influence through the use of force, thereby transforming itself into the dominant power in the Middle East and a major international actor.

Iran's regional ambitions were present in the revolutionary vision of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—the founding leader of the Islamic Republic—and implicit in the idea that the Islamic Revolution is a model that must be exported. Nader Uskowi convincingly explains this view held by Khomeini in his book *Temperature Rising*, wherein he describes a meeting Khomeini convened in November 1978, a few months before his return to Iran, in the Paris suburb where he spent part of his exile. Uskowi quotes Khomeini saying, “The revolution is not about Iran; it is about the whole region.”¹ Uskowi notes that “[Khomeini] envisioned a revived Islamic state

governed according to his militant interpretation of Shia Islam that would transport the revolution across the region.”²

Iran's security concept emphasizes power projection, deterrence of its enemies, and waging war far from its own territory—when that becomes necessary. Iran seeks to avoid direct attacks on its own soil, which might rally the nation around the regime but might also catalyze strong internal criticism and opposition. The memory of the Iran-Iraq War and its many casualties remains a deep trauma in the national collective consciousness. Therefore, a key part of Iran's national security concept is to transfer the fight to enemy territory and establish a “security belt” to prevent threats to its borders. Iran is constantly working to strengthen its borders on land, in the air, and at sea, and to secure its strategic assets.

Iran operates at several levels to export the Islamic Revolution, expand its regional influence, and attain regional hegemony. The regime views strengthening Shia communities throughout the Middle East as an important goal and a way of expanding its own influence.

The Iranian regime has frequently adopted the path of active resistance against its enemies: the United States (“Global Arrogance”), Israel (“International Zionism”), and Saudi Arabia. It therefore takes a proactive aggressive stance and operates flexibly to manufacture and exploit opportunities by walking close to the edge while also being careful not to cross the line. It operates patiently using organized decisionmaking processes based on regional and geopolitical circumstances.

The Iranian regime abhors the West and Western culture, opposes Western global hegemony, and sees the United States as its main enemy and threat of reference. The regime acts against all cultural markers of the West within Iran's borders.

To realize its security concept and national security objectives, including the export of the revolution, the regime oversees internal mechanisms to ensure loyalty to the regime and suppresses most forms of internal opposition. The regime is impatient and brutal toward anyone suspected of being an opponent, and it uses detentions, torture, and the death penalty to ensure compliance.

All phases and aspects of the nuclear project are meant, first and foremost,

to safeguard the survival of the regime and catapult Iran to the status of regional and global superpower.

Iran is busy establishing its vision of regional dominance and becoming a superpower beyond its borders by forming regional alliances with organizations, political parties, and states and engaging in subversion and destabilizing enemy nations. To further its capabilities, Iran establishes forward bases across its borders by means of militias and internal opposition groups mainly in Shia strongholds. Iran means to encourage security and economic cooperation with these entities in border countries to eliminate its enemies and disseminate the values of revolutionary Shia Islam. It wants to transform the Shia communities around the region into appendages of Iranian policy, on the pretext of defending the Shia branch of Islam and its holy sites throughout the Middle East.

As a foundation for its desire to create a modern Iranian empire, the regime feels it necessary to establish territorial contiguity, a type of “Shia crescent.” The key to its vision of regional hegemony is, therefore, deepening its influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This is a critical land corridor connecting Iran with Lebanon via Iraq and Syria, all the way to the ports of the Mediterranean and Israel’s borders.

This corridor is a cornerstone for control of the region and connects Iran to most of its regional partners. The territorial swath is a crucial logistical axis on land, in the air, and at sea, making it possible to move masses of troops, weapons, and provisions with relative ease and speed. Therefore, one of the major functions of the Revolutionary Guards is to secure this corridor at any cost, manifested in the battles of the past decade for the control of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Iran’s second critical sphere is control of the southwestern wing around the Arabian Gulf with its strategic Strait of Hormuz.³ The Arabian Gulf and its ports are one of the world’s largest sources for the production and export of oil. Iran’s Arab enemies—with Saudi Arabia in the lead, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and others—are located along its shores, and the Arabian Gulf hosts the U.S. Navy and its naval bases.

To realize its ambitions, Iran seeks to extend its influence to the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and Yemen by supporting the Houthis. This

expansion would allow Iran to create even more fronts in which to operate against its enemies. Taking a longer-term perspective, Iran would like to see its own navy deployed in the Mediterranean and in Syrian and Lebanese ports.

These objectives and this vision are precisely the reason for the existence of the IRGC.

Iran's external interests in the region are as follows:

- Securing the regime and reducing the external threat to its survival
- Projecting power and deterring its enemies from attacking Iran within its borders
- Exporting the Islamic Revolution and expanding the “axis of resistance”
- Expanding Iran's base of support in the region—especially among Shia communities
- Expelling the United States from the region
- Weakening its Arab enemies
- Weakening Sunni terrorist organizations, including the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other global jihadists
- Seizing control of resources and expanding the potential for economic gain
- Destroying the state of Israel

Notes

- 1 Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), xiii.
- 2 Ibid., 1.
- 3 The Arabian Gulf is also known as the Persian Gulf.

3

The IRGC as a Regional Military Force

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is an extremely powerful Iranian terrorist and security organization that comprises several branches of service. Its main functions are to ensure the survival of the regime, defend it against domestic opponents, and advance and export Islamic revolutionary ideology beyond Iran's borders.

Immediately after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini had doubts about the loyalty of the Iranian military and worried about a counterrevolution coming from within the army. Khomeini and the revolutionary leaders' greatest fear was a U.S.-led coup attempt that would rely on the Iranian army's cooperation.¹ Only a few days after the revolution began, when Khomeini returned from exile after the shah's departure, he declared the formation of the IRGC.

The IRGC was charged with two primary functions, one internal and one external. Internally, the IRGC was to be the regime's backbone. It would defend the revolution and ensure the survival of the new Islamist rulers who seized national control in 1979. Its areas of responsibility would also include foiling terrorist attacks on the regime, subverting political movements, and suppressing any hint of opposition. Externally, the IRGC was charged with

exporting the revolution, expanding Iranian influence, generating regional deterrence of enemies, and attaining regional hegemony in the Middle East.

In the regional arena, the IRGC operates to further Iranian entrenchment using proxies. It seeks to build forward bases, thereby extending its force and influence throughout the length and breadth of the Middle East. The IRGC aspires to intensify its influence to the extent that it can control territories and populations directly or indirectly and exert dominance politically, ideologically, culturally, and economically.

The IRGC commander, who holds the rank of major-general, is formally subordinate to the general staff of the armed forces, but he also enjoys independence and direct access to the Supreme Leader. The IRGC commander wields much clout: he participates in small forums of Iran's top leaders and is involved in strategic decisionmaking and national policy shaping.

But the IRGC is not a typical army. This powerful organization controls Iran both economically and politically. The IRGC receives a standard annual budget from the state but also serves as its own economic conglomerate. It owns businesses conducting deals to the tune of tens of billions of dollars a year. For example, the IRGC controls a large slice of imports to Iran; it owns dozens of terminals in Iran's largest ports; it conducts business in oil and natural gas, banking, insurance, petrochemicals, aluminum, and transportation; and it owns construction companies, hotels, and dozens of civilian factories. Through its companies and concerns, the IRGC controls about 40 percent of Iran's economy, directly or indirectly, and is responsible for about 15 percent of the national GDP.² These income sources provide the IRGC with tremendous independence and flexibility in financing activities and the regional proxies, regardless of the size of its official, direct state budget.

The IRGC's military and economic strength and status in national decisionmaking processes have made it a sociopolitical force of great might. Former members hold key positions in the government, parliament, civil service, and economy.

To realize its missions, the IRGC includes several staff directorates and service branches. Among the staff directorates are the operations branch, intelligence branch, and logistics branch. The IRGC's various service

branches are responsible for building and operating its field forces, which include ground, aerospace—missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and air defenses—naval, the Basij militia, and the Qods Force. The IRGC has advanced capabilities, some of which are not available to the regular Iranian army, and is responsible for Iran's strategic systems, including the ballistic missile project and other long-range strike systems.

The IRGC is responsible for most covert activity, subversion of other governments, terrorist acts, and political assassinations in the Middle East and around the world, as well as maintaining contact with its regional and global partners.

To realize its regional objectives, the IRGC established a Regional Radical Shia Army, as noted earlier, which it trains, arms, and operates for warfare at loci of interest and friction. This army allows Iran to fight its enemies beyond its own borders, undermine regional stability, and expand and entrench itself regionally. The IRGC deploys the regional army in zones of conflicts and helps that army's ground forces by developing missile strike and other standoff capabilities. The IRGC then provides the radical regional militias with these advanced strike capabilities. Among its advanced lethal capabilities developed by Iran's military industries are precision ballistic missiles, UAVs, aerial defenses, surface-to-sea missiles, advanced antitank missiles, and radar systems, all meant to deter or defend against enemies, or retaliate for attacks on Iran, as well as to support offensive action by the regular army or to target the enemy's strategic assets.

The IRGC is the regime's primary vehicle for spreading terror and subversion around the Middle East and the world. On April 8, 2019, former U.S. president Donald Trump designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization. In response, then IRGC commander Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari said that "if the United States defines us as a terrorist organization, its army will know no peace in western Asia." Former U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo explained, "We're doing [this] because the Iranian regime's use of terrorism as a tool of statecraft makes it fundamentally different from any other government. This historic step will deprive the world's leading state sponsor of terror the financial means to spread misery and death around the world."³

Iran's Proxy Strategy

The physical form of Iran has sometimes been compared to that of a crouching cat; if so, Iran's four main regional proxies and forward bases can be likened to a cat's paws: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Assad's regime in Syria, the radical Shia militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. Iran's regional *modus operandi* has also been called the "four capitals strategy": Beirut in Lebanon, Damascus in Syria, Baghdad in Iraq, and Sanaa in Yemen, the four cities in which Iran would like to entrench its influence en route to regional hegemony. In discussions about weakening "the cat," one question raised in recent years has been the usefulness of "cutting off the paws" (i.e., acting directly against these proxies without imposing costs on Iran itself).

Except for Syria, the proxies are radical, nonstate actors that are organized as military and political forces—inspired, armed and financed by Iran—and that are ideologically inclined to operate at Iran's behest to achieve shared interests. The forces are primarily hybrid, operating in different theaters of operation primarily with the support of the IRGC's Qods Force. The proxies consist largely of militias or paramilitary organizations—some organized like small armies—armed with advanced weapons, some of which have morphed into political parties. Most draw their support from pro-Iran elements in Shia communities or groups with links to Shia Islam in the region and beyond, such as the Alawites in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. Iran opportunistically uses its proxies to exploit or exacerbate local Middle East conflicts and regionalize them.

Among the prominent proxies are Lebanese Hezbollah, the numerous pro-Iran Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas in the Palestinian sphere; proxy groups have also recruited from Shia communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bahrain, and Nigeria. The IRGC provides them with guidance, financing, weapons, and training and uses them to conduct terrorist attacks, acts of subversion, or military operations in support of its allies or against its American, Israeli, or Arab enemies in the region.

Using this strategy, Iran has become a dominant regional power and the dominant external force in at least the four Arab capitals noted earlier:

Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Sanaa. In all these places, it has exploited civil wars and interstate conflicts to deepen its political, economic, and military influence.

Figure 1. Iran and Its Proxies



Iran's "Shia Foreign Legion"

The IRGC is responsible for creating and supporting what is known as the "Shia foreign legion." For the purposes of this paper, this assemblage of armed forces will be referred to as the Regional Radical Shia Army as this name better portrays the aspects of the force emphasized in the following argument. This army and its capabilities can no longer be ignored and must be taken into account in every Middle East war scenario. Intelligence organizations and commanders must study this army in depth and familiarize

themselves with its tactics, spheres of deployments, weapons, means of transportation, and fighting fitness.

In the past decade, the Regional Radical Shia Army has been involved in fighting at various levels of intensity in several geographic arenas simultaneously, from Yemen to Syria. This radical army's objective is to serve as the military force for spreading the Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East and forcing Iran's ideology on others, destabilizing the current regional order, and expanding Iran's influence in the region.

Since the 1980s, the IRGC has been establishing radical Shia fighting units consisting of non-Iranian men commanded by IRGC officers. Generally, most units are organized by ethnic or national origin and trained in military settings. These units are transported to various theaters of warfare to augment local troops, as part of the strategy of building a regional fighting force to advance Iran's interests.

Fighters are recruited mostly from Shia communities in the Middle East and Asia, such as Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kuwait. They undergo training and military drills and are placed in the units, equipped with weapons, and sent to fight in battles on various fronts. Former IRGC Gen. Mohammad Ali Falaki, a brigade commander in the Iran-Iraq War who also fought in Syria, stated that the goal of the Regional Radical Shia Army is "the destruction of Israel in the next twenty-three years" by means of "fighting on three fronts—Syria, Iraq, and Yemen."⁴ Later in that statement, he noted the diversity of not only fronts of operation but also of recruitment, emphasizing the induction of Afghan and Pakistani recruits in addition to locals.

Some fighters join the Regional Radical Shia Army out of jihadist-religious ideological motivation; others are refugees, displaced by regional wars, such as the one in Afghanistan. Those who enlist are paid in cash and are offered Iranian citizenship for their service, as well as other benefits.

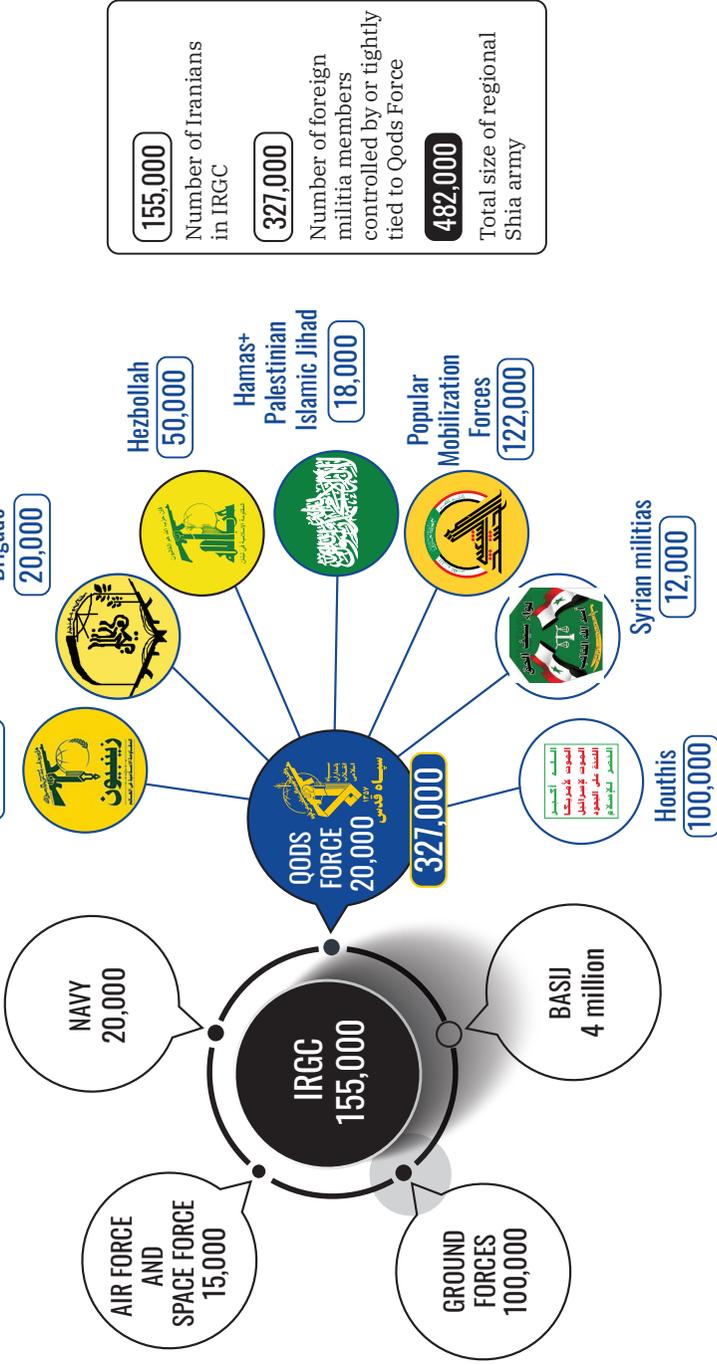
The structure of the organization provides Iran with great use-of-force flexibility. Most units are well-trained infantry units, which are easy to move relatively quickly from one sector to another and even from one front to another. Most logistical and battle support comes from the host nation and

with the support and agency of the IRGC command center in that theater. Using local proxies, Iran can obscure its fingerprints on regional subversive acts and maintain deniability. But most important from Iran's perspective, the Regional Radical Shia Army allows Iran to be involved in fighting by proxy and not get dragged into direct wars of attrition, which would entail the risk of Iranian soldiers getting killed on foreign soil and elicit domestic criticism. Hundreds of militia fighters have already been killed. In Syria, for example, it is difficult to estimate Regional Radical Shia Army numbers, because most are not Iranian citizens, and Iran is not openly reporting their identities or losses in general. Iran denies it has its own soldiers elsewhere, insisting that the Iranian generals and commanders are there purely as military advisors. However, a report issued by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights published in July 2021 estimates that 1,707 of the Lebanese Hezbollah and 8,593 non-Syrian Shia militias, mostly Afghans and Pakistanis, have been killed in the fighting in Syria.⁵ Therefore, the model of fighting for Iranian interests using proxies is very much preferred by the regime.

A conservative force estimate for the Regional Radical Shia Army is two hundred thousand throughout the whole Middle East, counting Hezbollah in Lebanon, the radical Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and the mobile Shia brigades.⁶ All are financed, trained, and armed by the IRGC. The number does not include other organizations that are part of the sphere of influence of the Iranian army, whether directly or indirectly, such as the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and, of course, the Syrian army itself. In addition, throughout the Middle East and all over the globe, particularly in target nations such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the IRGC runs dozens of terrorist cells consisting of Shia operatives.

In calculating the Regional Radical Shia Army's orders of battle, one must consider all IRGC branches assisting it from a distance, including significant deadly precision fire by means of advanced surface-to-surface missiles, UAVs, and cyberattacks, as well as direct command, advisors, guidance, instruction, training, and smuggling of advanced weapons into the theater of combat.

Figure 2. Iran's Network of Influence



Note: These are total force numbers; forces available for external deployments would likely be substantially lower. Basij figures are not included in the count because most of their focus is domestic.

The Regional Radical Shia Army, led by the Qods Force of the IRGC, emerged as a multinational regional army in Syria fighting intensively alongside the Syrian army against Sunni rebel organizations and the Islamic State. During the fighting in Syria, tens of thousands of Regional Radical Shia Army fighters were mobilized under Iranian command from Lebanese Hezbollah, the Shia Iraqi mobile divisions (from two divisional frameworks—Liwa Dhulfiqar and the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade), the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, and the Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade. These forces fought side by side with the Syrian army and in cooperation with Russian troops. The militias, operating like a regional army, were a decisive factor in defeating various Sunni uprisings and leaving control of Syria in the hands of the Assad regime.

The Regional Radical Shia Army has turned into a force that cannot be ignored. It is no longer a force specializing only in carrying out pinpoint terrorist attacks. This army—including the IRGC’s Qods Force, the militia units that fought alongside the Syrian army, and Hezbollah’s elite and fire units—has accrued combat experience in applying deadly capabilities in offensive and defensive actions. The regional army has done so in densely populated urban settings, providing supporting fires, maneuverable forces, a common professional language, and logistical support to serve its Iranian patron in various deployments across the Middle East. Some of the Iranian militias base themselves in special camps in Syria, and in the case of an Israeli campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, they could conceivably fire missiles from deep within Syria at Israeli targets. It would take relatively little time to move them to the Syria-Israel border to fight in the Golan Heights and pin down Israel Defense Forces, or to transfer them to Lebanon to fight alongside Hezbollah against the IDF.

In some scenarios, officials can expect these militias and their subversive counterparts to be deployed and operate in other arenas, such as Iraq, Yemen, or even Bahrain, either to oppose external enemies or to reinforce Iran’s proxies against domestic foes. This possibility must be taken into account by Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United States in terms of intelligence gathering, surveillance, and interdiction.

Another important point is that these fighters could return to their nations

of origin armed with guerrilla warfare experience, giving them the ability to coordinate other operatives and act with Iranian guidance or independently against the current government or foreign troops on their soil.

The Qods Force's Path from Unconventional Warfare to Regional Army

The Qods Force was established in 1988 as a wing of the IRGC. At first, it constituted a staff directorate whose functions were twofold: (1) to export the revolution, especially to Shia communities in the Middle East and around the globe, and (2) to coordinate and supervise all IRGC clandestine activity outside of Iran and ensure its implementation, including intelligence gathering, terrorist attacks, and special operations against U.S. and Israeli targets.

As regional events occurred, the Qods Force evolved over the years and turned into a much stronger and significant entity, in part because of its charismatic leader Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani and his close and trust-based relationship with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

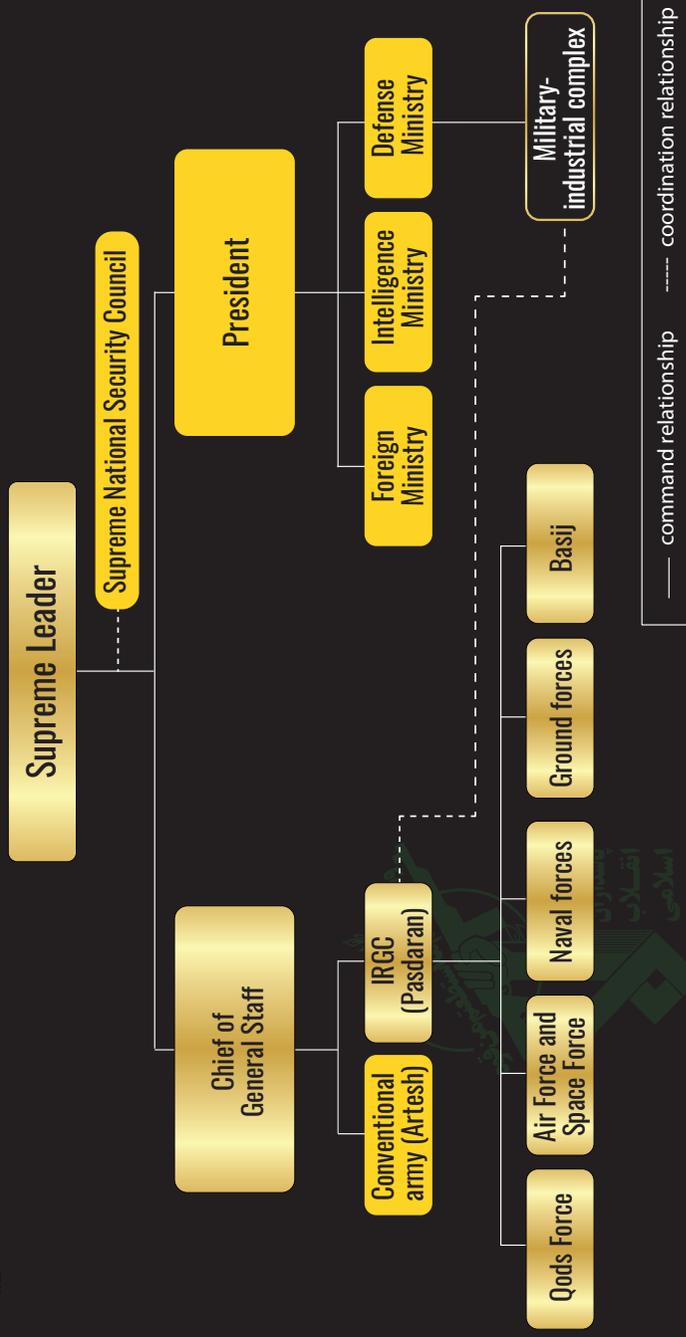
The Qods Force became the vanguard in implementing Iran's vision of regional hegemony. It is now a dominant factor in making strategic decisions and leads the implementation of Iran's regional policy. The moment the challenge of what was then the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS; later the Islamic State or IS) arose and the Houthi rebellion in Yemen began, the Qods Force assumed command of and control over proxy forces fighting in several theaters.

The Qods Force has developed a regional network of armed groups and organizations, mostly from Shia communities across the Middle East, including Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and the Gulf states (Bahrain and Saudi Arabia). This network has additional affiliates around the globe, including in Africa, North America, and Europe. Several Western and Arab nations—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Canada, and the United States—have added the Qods Force to their lists of terrorist organizations.

The regional network is based on a shared religious, Islamist ideology and common political and security interests. Exceptions are Iran's support for the Sunni Taliban, which fought U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and the Sunni



Figure 3.
The IRGC Within the Iranian Military-Political Hierarchy



Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, which in the latter case stems from the common goal of weakening Israel.

The structure of the Qods Force consists of a staff and several geographical branches that assist with force building and steer the activities of all associated proxies. Thousands of active recruits from target nations are under direct Qods Force command, most of whom are non-Iranian Shia organized into fighting military units. In practice, these are the forces serving as a Regional Radical Shia Army under Iranian control.

The IRGC Aerospace Force

The IRGC's Aerospace Force (IRGCAF) serves as Iran's strategic long-range branch and possesses both offensive and defensive capabilities. The IRGCAF has a wide array of domestically produced ballistic missiles, UAVs, and air defense systems it can use to deter and rapidly respond to Iran's enemies and serve as a regional source of assistance by providing standoff fire to benefit Iran's proxies. The IRGCAF is responsible for defending Iranian skies and operating air defense systems. Its primary mission is to defend the greater Tehran region and critical infrastructure, especially Iran's nuclear facilities, against aerial attack. This body is also in charge of missiles launched into space in the context of Iran's aerospace program.

Although the IRGCAF is a force operator of weapons in its own theater, it is also responsible for transferring arms and know-how, supporting force building, and providing advice and training to Iran's proxies and partners. The force is involved in smuggling weapons to many theaters of interest, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and the militias in Iraq.

Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, who has been IRGCAF commander since 2009, is known as an aggressive, hawkish leader. Since the killing of Qods Force commander Soleimani, Hajizadeh's influence on Iran's decisionmaking processes has grown.

Iran's missile program is a core project that the regime is developing to gain power, along with its nuclear program, plans for the region, and deterrence of its foes. Iran never accepted external limitation on its missile project.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action did not place any limits on the ballistic missile program. A return to the JCPOA without such limitations will leave a gaping hole in the agreement. In the context of regional security, Iran's developing missile and UAV capabilities, present and future, and their transfer to nonstate actors, such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the militias in Syria, will ramp up tension and change the regional balance of power. A Middle East arms race is already in high gear and will only accelerate over the next few years.

Advanced UAVs and ballistic missiles have greater precision, range, and in the former case, the ability to conduct coordinated swarm attacks. These and other capabilities that will undoubtedly be developed over the next few years will challenge any aerial defense system currently in existence and require the nations of the region to make enormous investments to improve their ability to defend against these threats.

Iran's ability to employ massed precision fires against other nations reaches the level of supra-conventional or sub-nuclear threat, and the IRGCAF is capable of launching coordinated strikes from several geographical locations in the Middle East. Iran's developing capabilities also threaten U.S. military forces in the region, particularly its aircraft carrier strike groups.

The IRGCAF constitutes the major component of deterrence and of Iran's growing influence in the region. It can respond quickly with deadly force and support offensive operations by the Regional Radical Shia Army. It has defensive capabilities as well.

The IRGC distributes its fire capabilities to its Middle East proxies, which have proved that Iran possesses a wide range of long-range precision missiles that can wreak havoc on critical economic infrastructure and strategic installations. Moreover, the strategy of indirect approach by which Iran can hit sensitive targets throughout the Middle East from different theaters of operation while maintaining deniability, because there is no direct Iranian fingerprint, has shown itself to be successful.

The IRGC Navy

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) operates separately from the nation's regular naval forces. It is in charge of the Arabian Gulf, whereas the regular navy patrols the Gulf of Oman and the Caspian Sea. Both operate at the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran's leadership considers the sea a sensitive sphere with both defensive and offensive value. The Islamic Republic must be protected against invasion and attack from the sea, and protecting Iran's maritime economic interests is also critical. In terms of offense, the sea is a necessary setting for strengthening deterrence, increasing Iran's regional influence, and realizing the nation's desire to become the dominant regional power. A major Iranian concern is sanctions and a naval blockade, which would strangle Iran's ability to export and hamstring its economy. In addition, the IRGC uses the sea in its efforts to smuggle weapons throughout the Middle East to its proxies.

The Arabian Gulf is the scene of another race for regional dominance between Iran and its regional foes—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq—given the access to the sea it provides. Another threat is the U.S. Navy, which operates in the Arabian Gulf and maintains critical bases along its southern coast. Iran, interested in establishing itself as a military force at sea, is not satisfied with the Arabian Gulf alone but is sending arms to proxies and partners by way of the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea, too. By controlling two strategic straits—Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, the latter via the Houthis—Iran can cause significant damage to world trade and oil exports.

The IRGCN was built as an elite force that adopted an asymmetric warfare doctrine, manifested in the construction of small, fast vessels and rooted in the understanding that in the realm of superpower navies and large warships, the relative advantage remains in the hands of the United States and its regional allies. But it is precisely those small vessels—fast, highly maneuverable, easily concealed, elusive, capable of operating clandestinely or in swarms—that make it possible for Iran to exploit the weakness of its enemies and hit them in their Achilles' heel. These vessels include speedboats equipped with antiship missiles, cruise missiles, naval artillery, machine guns, and unmanned-boat bombs. The IRGCN has commando

units capable of delivering and affixing limpet mines to enemy ships without being detected. The IRGCN has also adopted swarm attack tactics, whereby enemy vessels are sunk by dozens of missile-launching speedboats or by remote-controlled missiles. The IRGCN is ready to block the Strait of Hormuz, disrupt tanker traffic, and threaten the Gulf states whose economies depend on freedom of shipping in the Gulf.

Iran's two navies—the regular navy and the IRGCN—also support the Regional Radical Shia Army. Beyond defending its shores and economic assets, Iran is projecting military power, creating deterrence, generating threats, and operating in secret to carry out terrorist attacks at sea, while maintaining deniability throughout. Using the IRGCN, Iran conducts terrorist attacks on civilian tankers and threatens to disrupt freedom of navigation via its control of the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab Strait. Iranian naval threats and acts of terrorism that have harmed many innocents have yet to draw any international response, which only gives Iran an incentive to take similar steps in the future.

The nations of the region, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have been deterred; they fear disruptions to the shipping that is critical to their economies. This, of course, affects their policies. Iran is trying to deter the United States by acting against it, by threatening damage to U.S. Navy warships and to sink them with missiles, and by disrupting freedom of navigation. Further, Iran is trying to establish itself in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean and to help the Shia forces it nurtures by smuggling various types of weapons to them, including antiship missiles.

Notes

- 1 Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), xiv.
- 2 Ibid., 154; and Bijan Khajehpour, "The Real Footprint of the IRGC in Iran's Economy," *Al-Monitor*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/08/iran-irgc-economy-footprint-khatam-olanbia.html>.
- 3 "Secretary Pompeo Announces Intent to Designate IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," press remarks, April 8, 2019, <https://eg.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeo-announces-intent-to-designate-irgc-as-a-foreign-terrorist-organization/>.
- 4 "Iran Formed 'Shia Foreign Legion' for Wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen" (in Persian), *Al Arabiya*, August 18, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3jnpwhX>.
- 5 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights report, June 2021.
- 6 Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, xiv.

4

The IRGC's Middle East Spheres of Operation

The IRGC, using mostly its Qods Force, is strengthening its influence throughout the Middle East via its regional proxies. In Lebanon, or Beirut, the first capital in its “four capitals” strategy, this aspiration has been accomplished via Hezbollah; from the perspective of the Iranian regime, the organization represents a model proxy. Hezbollah is a prominent example of a dual organization: on the one hand, it portrays itself as a patriotic Lebanese party defending all of Lebanon, not just the Shia community; on the other hand, it is a proxy of the Iranian regime and part of the Regional Radical Shia Army the regime built. The organization has tens of thousands of trained fighters and an arsenal of advanced weapons, including thousands of rockets and missiles. In fact, Hezbollah is Iran’s regional “troubleshooter,” thus facilitating Iran’s control of Lebanon, ensuring the survival of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Iran’s foremost regional ally, and enabling the campaign against Israel.

Hezbollah is militarily and economically dependent on Iran and has an ideological kinship, a profound loyalty, and a direct relationship with the leadership of the IRGC and the Iranian regime. Hezbollah exemplifies the notion of a “hybrid organization”; today, it is the strongest military force in Lebanon and a significant political power within the ruling authority. Hezbollah’s major military assistance to Assad and direct involvement in the fighting in Syria alongside other forces are part of the developing strategic

doctrine of the IRGC and the Iranian regime to concentrate effort in a theater of fighting and of the Iranian regional militias to prevail over Iran's enemies in the Middle East. The most important Iranian undertaking on Lebanese soil is the "precision project"—that is, the establishment of hardened underground industrial facilities dedicated to the production of precision missiles on an industrial scale. From Israel's perspective, this project is a dangerous threat that alters the balance of power to its disadvantage and embodies the potential for escalation to trigger another war with Hezbollah. Should such a war break out, it might drag in the entire region and cause severe damage to Lebanon and Israel's interior.

Iran has significant interests in Syria, or Damascus, the second capital, representing a major component of its regional strategy. Syria is Iran's only Arab state ally and a crucial entity in the Iranian regime's resistance doctrine and regional strategy. The war for control of Syria is pivotal for control of the entire Middle East. Syria, through its ruling Alawite minority, allows Iran to maintain territorial contiguity through an overland corridor to Lebanon controlled by Hezbollah and facilitated by Syrian air bases and seaports. Bashar al-Assad's rule makes it possible for Hezbollah to preserve its power by providing strategic depth and a channel for supplying weapons that help Hezbollah's force-building efforts. Syria allows Iran and Hezbollah to open another front against Israel, in the form of fire bases of different kinds or a staging area for ground operations in the event of war against Israel. These observations are based on how Hezbollah and radical Shia militias have entrenched themselves and carried out terrorist actions on the Golan Heights border, with the active or passive assistance of the Syrian military.

The Iranian regime is trying to entrench itself in Syria using the Regional Radical Shia Army under the command of the IRGC's Syria force. These entrenchment efforts involve regional Iranian command centers "hosted" at Syrian army bases or independent bases built on Syrian soil (the "Eastern Command" center), Iraqi Shia militias (the Haydariyoun Brigade), Shia fighting divisions (Imam Hussein), and an independent missile force.

The price that Iran, Hezbollah, and the Shia militias paid fighting the rebels and the Islamic State in Syria was heavy but the reward was great. Alongside Russia, Iran now controls Syria's economy and Assad who, as a

war criminal, is shunned by the West. The Syrian regime's survival depends on the continued military support from the Regional Radical Shia Army and Lebanese Hezbollah in particular. The critical logistical axis running from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut is open and secure. The aerial corridor for smuggling arms to Syrian airfields is only partly open. Thanks to precise intelligence developed in the course of Israel's "campaign between wars" (as discussed later), the aerial corridor has been disrupted to a significant degree. The naval corridor for smuggling arms and oil from Iran's seaports to the Syrian port of Latakia is active. And, most important, the IRGC and its Qods Force are now entrenching their militias on Israel's northern border, from where they plan to open another anti-Israel front in case of war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon or an Israeli strike on Iran.

Because of Iran's entrenchment efforts, Syria has become the direct theater of struggle between Israel and the Regional Radical Shia Army. In this undertaking, known as "the campaign between wars," Israel acts to prevent Iranian entrenchment in Syria. This means that after every attempt by IRGC forces and Hezbollah to fortify their positions in the Golan Heights and smuggle arms along the various corridors (overland, by air, or by sea), Israel—on the basis of solid intelligence—executes an attack, including against IRGC interests in Syria. The Syrian state, whether or not it chooses to host Iranian forces on its soil, pays the price. Israel attacks Syrian infrastructure and components of the Syrian army trying to interfere with Israel's warplanes or defending the militias and IRGC command centers. To date, Israel's activity has managed to partially disrupt and prevent the IRGC from implementing its full plan to entrench in Syria and build a radical Iranian army there in addition to the Syrian military. However, gradually, Iran is succeeding in realizing some of its plans to build a military infrastructure, command centers, independent forces, and weapons, including missiles and UAVs deep inside Syrian territory, all of which are capable of wreaking havoc on targets well within Israel.

In the war between the world powers over regional hegemony, Russia, which has worked jointly with Iran, has had the upper hand compared to the Arab-U.S. coalition. Today, control of Syria is split between Russia and Iran, both

of which are backing the Assad regime, each in pursuit of its own interests.

Iran sees Iraq, or Baghdad, the third capital, as a core component of the security belt to thwart threats and defend Iran's borders. Furthermore, Iraq is the center of Iran's entrenchment and territorial contiguity—Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon—to control the Middle East and disseminate the values of the Islamic Revolution. Iraq is a regional forward base of operations and a convenient sphere from which Iran can operate against its rivals and enemies in the Middle East and open new fronts. Iran sees a complete U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq as a strategic goal. Should this occur, it will be viewed as a huge victory for the “axis of resistance” and Iran's planned takeover of Iraq.

The desire for Iranian control of Iraq is based on historical relationships and support for the Shia population there, about 65 percent of Iraq's total population, which has long suffered discrimination by the Sunni minority that has ruled the country. When the Saddam Hussein government collapsed after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran identified and exploited the opportunity to reverse the strategic situation. The IRGC entered the vacuum created in Iraq and established and regulated Shia militias there to fulfill the vision of exporting the revolution and building an Islamic state inspired by Iran.

Iran exploits its proxies in Iraq in seeking to exert indirect control over its regional enemies. These enemies include Saudi Arabia, bogged down in its own war against the Houthis in Yemen, and Israel. Actions against Saudi Arabia and Israel consist primarily of missile attacks from batteries located in Iraq, as a means to open up more fronts in the long-term Iranian competition against its adversaries. Using the IRGC, Iran has nurtured loyal political parties and organizations and has trained Iraqi militias, which it now uses to promote its interests, including driving the Americans out of Iraq. Iran is also working to strengthen its grip and influence on Iraq by eliminating political opponents, seeking the goal of signing a military cooperation treaty with Iraq, and increasing Iraq's economic dependence on Iran. Iran has become a pillar of economic support for Iraq, serving as the source of one-fourth of Iraqi imports. Some 20 percent of Iraq's electricity and a significant amount of its gas come from Iran. Using propaganda, Iran is strengthening its ties with the Shia population and is acting to defend them and the sites holy to the Shia.

Iran owes most of its achievements in Iraq to the many pro-Iran militias that now belong to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, aka al-Hashd al-Shabi), an umbrella organization supported by the Iraqi government that receives a special budget. The PMF was founded in 2014 during fighting to defend Baghdad against the Islamic State and to recapture other IS-held cities. The PMF consolidates dozens of Iraqi militias, with experts estimating their numbers in the range of 100,000–160,000, with about half of these under Iranian direction or control.¹ A Brookings Institution blog post elaborates: “Those numbers included a) fighters from pre-existing, mostly pro-Iran, militias like the Badr Brigade, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq; b) so-called shrine militias, i.e., Shia volunteers who responded to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s fatwa to defend Iraq from IS; and c) various Sunni, Yazidi, Christian, and other minority self-defense groups.”²

Most of the factions within this umbrella organization are now controlled by the IRGC, so the Iraqi radical Shia militias largely operate with Iranian inspiration, direction, and financing. The IRGC leads this group as part of its regional approach, which prioritizes exporting the revolution and building proxies to seize political and cultural control of Iraq as well as consolidating its regional army. Among the prominent militias are the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

After the victory over IS, the Iraqi government tried to disband the PMF and integrate its parts into state-sponsored security mechanisms, as is expected of a sovereign nation. It failed to do so, however, given that the Iranian regime had other plans: turning Iraq into its satellite state. Using the PMF’s pro-Iran groups and also the Lebanese Hezbollah model, Iran is constructing a hybrid force in Iraq: an armed military loyal to Tehran with its own independent agenda. The PMF has significant political strength, and its Iran-backed elements serve the interests of the Tehran regime. At the political level, the PMF’s pro-Iran groups established the Fatah Alliance. In the parliamentary election of 2018, the pro-Iran parties won a respectable number of seats, but in the 2021 election they took a blow and saw their power significantly diminished.

A war of identity is raging in Iraq and the outcome will determine the nation’s future. Not all Iraqis, not even all Iraqi Shia, view Iran’s deep

involvement in their country positively. A prominent example is the popular Shia religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who opposes any external intervention in Iraq. In the 2021 election, his political party won the highest number of seats in parliament. He subsequently declared that the PMF had to be dismantled and that all weapons had to be in the hands of the state. That is to say, he outright rejects the notion of Iraq being an Iranian satellite, claiming that there is no room in Iraq for independent militias with an external foreign agenda. Indeed, some Iraqis are growing increasingly angry about Iran's very intrusive presence in Iraq. Many Iraqi sources emphasize the importance of national pride, independence, and sovereignty, and reject any external interference in internal Iraqi matters. Should the Iran-backed militias be disbanded, Iran's influence of the nation and consequently also that of the Regional Radical Iranian Army and the Iranian resistance axis would weaken.

Despite its strategic location, Yemen, or Sanaa, the fourth capital, never had the luck of becoming a primary focus of international or regional discourse. But since the start of the Arab Spring and through the events of the years that followed, Yemen has been central to regional shock waves. The fight between Iran's coalition and the West over the future of the Middle East is being fought in this theater, too.

The Houthis, Iran's proxy in the Yemeni sector, are located mostly in the country's north and represent a substantial minority of the population. They seek to touch off a revolution in Yemen modeled roughly on the Islamic Revolution and the Islamist government in Tehran and, therefore, view the Iranian regime as their ideological patron. The organization's anti-imperialist ideology is especially hostile to Saudi Arabia and the West, notably the United States, Israel, and Jews. The official Houthi slogan expresses this ideological fanaticism with the statement "Allah is greatest, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam."

Figure 3. Houthi Slogan



In translation, the Houthi slogan reads, "Allah/God is greatest, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam."

Iran has important interests in Yemen. Having identified the opportunity, the Iranian regime views this sector as a complementary component in the regional campaign against rival Arab states and the West. Iran's support for its Houthi proxy could allow Iran to seize influence in yet another territory, expand its regional influence, open another front against its rivals, and threaten and deter them. The Yemeni arena constitutes an active front in the struggle against the great ideological and religious enemy, that is, the Saudis and the UAE, and the patrons of Yemen's Sunni government, with the objective of exhausting their strength and motivation in the ongoing campaign. Another critical interest is the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait, which controls the shipping lane connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Horn of Africa. One-quarter of all global trade, about half of Asia's trade with the U.S. Eastern Seaboard, most traffic to the Suez Canal (representing Egypt's primary source of revenue), a large portion of oil exports from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, and all of Israel's maritime trade with East Asia and Oceania pass through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, making it an artery of international magnitude threatened by the possibility of seizure by the Houthis.

Figure 4. Bab al-Mandab Strait and Arabian Gulf



The IRGC provides significant aid to the Houthis in the form of weapons, advice, and training, which has helped the Houthis to rack up a growing number of battlefield successes against the Yemeni army. In 2014, the Houthis even managed to seize Sanaa and in 2015 took the port city of Hodeida, allowing control of Bab al-Mandab Strait. Consequently, a regional coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, together with Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Morocco, embarked on a military operation—known as Operation Decisive Storm—to restore rule to the Sunni leadership. Despite the marked differences in military might between the sides, the Houthi-Iran alliance is holding out and gaining operational achievements and advantages on the battlefield because of IRGC support and Houthi resolve, perseverance, and sacrifice.

The distance between this theater and Israel is great—about two thousand kilometers. But the Iranian regime's influence and the Houthis' ideological hatred directed toward Israel and Jews—along with long-range fire attack abilities and experience—mean that Yemen is now a theater with negative potential. It is another possible big red button Iran holds in the regional campaign against its foes, including Saudi Arabia and Israel.

To date, it seems that the Houthi proxy, which at first had a limited ability to do damage, has managed, with IRGC support, to become a dominant regional political and military factor on Saudi Arabia's border and the entity controlling Bab al-Mandab Strait. The Houthis operate like a militia armed with advanced weapons as part of the Regional Radical Shia Army. Today, no political settlement in Yemen is possible without the Houthis and without realizing Iran's interests. And Iran has a new theater of operation through which it can open another front against its enemies, carry out clandestine operations, and threaten nearby and distant theaters without assuming responsibility.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are home to an important Shia population, part of which represents potential for influence and a source for recruiting fighters to the Regional Radical Shia Army. As a result of the extended fighting in Afghanistan, millions of Shia Afghans—a minority in their homeland—fled to refugee camps in Iran, where they constitute an accessible pool of recruits from which the IRGC can enlist fighting militias,³ the best-known of which

is called the Fatemiyoun Brigade, whose size is estimated at ten thousand men.⁴ The Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade were moved to the front in Syria where they participated in key battles to defend the regime against rebels and the Islamic State. The two divisions are light mobile forces camped at Iranian bases in Syria near the Iraqi border, some of which have been sent to camps in Iran and represent an available regional intervention force.

Ever since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iranian regime has had a profound interest in the Palestinian theater of operation and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Iran has identified an opportunity to expand its influence into the Palestinian theater and open another front of its own against Israel. The Iranian regime is trying to deepen its penetration by fortifying its hold on Palestinian terrorist organizations. Iran is using the Palestinians and the Palestinian issue to promote its status in the regional arena. Iran has no interest in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the contrary, it wants only to escalate the conflict and increase tensions. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict helps Iran expand the regional alliance of the “axis of resistance,” add more fighting forces and theaters to use whenever Iran needs a direct or indirect campaign, and paralyze Israel and wear it down. Ramping up tensions and escalating the conflict serve Iran’s approach to the region and the path of active resistance. Iran tries to thwart any negotiation for a settlement and strengthens the most radical organizations and enemies of the Palestinian Authority, first and foremost Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). The IRGC also views the Palestinian theater, especially the Gaza Strip’s active status, as an important operational and technological learning opportunity. The operations Israel carries out in the Gaza Strip after terrorist attacks and rocketfire on its cities are used by the Iranian regime to try to isolate Israel internationally. Iran also hopes to deflect attention from the crimes its regime carries out on its own soil and in its sphere of influence, and the crimes against humanity carried out by its allies, such as Assad’s murderous regime in Syria. The IRGC, through the Palestinian force, helps the PIJ and Hamas with arms smuggling, training, economic support, and political backing for these and other Palestinian terrorist organizations.

Unlike the other theaters of war, the uniqueness of cooperation of

Palestinian groups lies in the fact that they are fundamentalist Sunni terrorist organizations teaming up with the Iranian regime's radical Shia axis. But the shared interests, especially animosity against Israel, the United States, and the West, and also the Palestinian Authority and the moderate Arab states, outweigh the ideological-religious differences. The PIJ in the Gaza Strip is an Iran-backed proxy entirely financed and armed by the IRGC budget. By this metric, Hamas is not a complete proxy, even as most of Hamas's military budget comes from Iran; the group will act primarily in its own interests but will cooperate with Iran to pursue their common enemy.

Cooperation between Hamas and Hezbollah has grown closer in all ways. In the event of a war, this partnership increases the potential for another front for Israel to contend with. The fundamental goal of eradicating the state of Israel and founding an Islamic empire connects the Palestinian terrorist organizations to the radical Shia groups led by the IRGC.

Notes

- 1 Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 72.
- 2 Ranj Alaaldin and Vanda Felbab-Brown, "New Vulnerabilities for Iraq's Resilient Popular Mobilization Forces," *Order from Chaos*, Brookings Institution, February 3, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/03/new-vulnerabilities-for-iraqs-resilient-popular-mobilization-forces/>.
- 3 Noor Zahid and Mehdi Jedinia, "Iran Sending Afghan Refugees to Fight in Syria," Voice of America, January 29, 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/a/hrw-says-iran-sending-afghan-refugees-to-fight-in-syria/3168887.html>.
- 4 Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 27.

5

Assessing Long-Term Competition

The concept of long-term competition (LTC) is mostly associated with the struggle between the Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, which ended with the collapse and breakup of the latter. At the strategic level, LTC involves protracted and potentially violent open-ended multidimensional conflict between two or more state rivals for power and control. In such a conflict, a participant will synchronize all efforts, from statesmanship and strategy to operations and tactics, to gain cumulative achievements over time.

LTCs are generally protracted, low-intensity conflicts that occur in the twilight zone between war and peace. The management of LTCs requires a steady hand so as to avoid escalation and a broader conflict, even though the sides must be fully prepared for such an eventuality at all times. In such a campaign, it is necessary to force the enemy to pay continuing costs. During a conflict, blows might be exchanged, and limited clashes, engagements, or military operations might be carried out proactively or reactively. What matters is the cumulative damage, the enemy's exhaustion, and the high overall cost the enemy incurs compared with its gains. Under the weight of all those factors, the enemy will lose its will to fight and be deterred.

To reach a decision in this sort of campaign, a country or force must identify and exploit the enemy's weaknesses and create asymmetric advantages. The enemy has its own objectives that it tries to achieve by exploiting its own ideas and advantages in a campaign aimed at targeting the other side's weaknesses.

The Art of Long-Term Competition

Foreign policy scholar Hal Brands, in his essay “The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition,” writes about the United States that “good strategy...demands intensive intellectual effort...The United States must have a theory of victory; it must know what it is trying to accomplish and how.”¹ Later, he points out the twelve elements to implement an LTC approach:

1. Have a theory of victory.
2. Leverage one's asymmetric advantage.
3. Get on the right side of the cost curve.
4. Embrace the ideological competition.
5. Compete comprehensively and holistically.
6. Operate multilaterally and win bilaterally.
7. Exploit the strategic importance of time.
8. Know your competition intimately.
9. Institutionalize a capability to look forward as well as backward.
10. Understand that LTC is a test of systems.
11. Pace yourself.

The Middle East Campaign and the Competition Between World Powers

The confrontation between the axes in the Middle East must be seen and defined as a case of LTC. The campaign among the camps of the Middle East and the campaign among the global powers over influence are interlinked and affect one another. More than ever before, the anti-Iran nations of the Middle East together with the United States must formulate a joint smart strategy to confront the geopolitical and regional changes appropriately.

China and Russia are competing with the United States over global power and influence in several theaters and dimensions. Thus, the Middle East has entered a new and dangerous era in the long-standing campaign among rival camps that is shaping and will continue to shape its character and future for many years to come. The United States must view the regional struggle in the Middle East as part of a campaign among global powers for world dominance. The United States is the enemy of the Iranian regime, which views it as the Great Satan. The regime plans to seize control of the Middle East; the global power it intends to partner with is China. The strengthening of this strategic partnership was signaled in March 2021 when China and Iran signed an agreement of economic and security cooperation. The agreement includes significant Chinese investments in Iran in exchange for a twenty-five-year supply of oil, which is so critical to the Chinese economy. Iran views China as an important counterweight to the United States, and the desire to weaken the United States is a shared and linking interest. In the military field, China-Iran cooperation is growing, including the transfer of military technologies and advanced Chinese weapons deals.² Iran's navy holds joint exercises and maneuvers with the navies of China and Russia under the banner of a naval security belt.

Campaign Objectives

The definition of victory in an LTC is the extended isolation and weakening of the enemy until its surrender, where surrender equals the defeated camp being forced to accept its enemy's terms and losing its motivation to continue fighting given the high cost of the campaign. The proper objective of the current campaign is the extended weakening of Iran and its deterrence capabilities, and the denial of its ability to use its forces and resources to destabilize the region.

The objectives of the campaign in relation to Iran are as follows:

- Curbing its expansion to regional nations and forcing it to withdraw to its own borders
- Weakening its regional power—culturally, economically, and militarily
- Compelling it to adhere to relevant decisions by the international community

To date, the concept of active resistance has served Iran well, bringing it successes without paying dearly for them. A conceptual change is crucial. A new strategy to stop the Iranian regime must be adopted. At its core, there must be active regional resolve for backing the United States and other nations of the international community to stop the expansion of Iran to regional states, to rein in Iran, and to isolate it.

All those who doubt the possibility of meeting this goal must be reminded that, in the context of the Cold War, an even more far-reaching objective than that was achieved against a global superpower: the Soviet Union collapsed and the political system of Russia changed. No one was able to predict when and how the USSR would fall. The more far-reaching the objectives, the greater the willingness to sacrifice to attain them, and therefore also the greater the chances of reaching those objectives.

The most dangerous approach is what, in the Cold War, was called *détente*. In the context described here, this would mean recognizing “Iran’s regional rights,” accepting its actions, and coexisting with it. This approach would lead to the defeat of the anti-Iran camp and the West in the Middle East and open the door to the realization of the regional and global vision of the radical Islamist Iranian regime.

Notes

- 1 Hal Brands, “The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition,” *Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2019): 32.
- 2 Assaf Orion, “Strategic Partnerships Ltd.: China-Iran Relations and Their Significance for Israel,” special publication, Institute for National Security Studies, April 18, 2021, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/iran-china-cooperation/>.

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How to Defeat Iran in the Region

This chapter will present the outlines of a campaign plan that, if adopted, will weaken the Iranian regime regionally and prevent it from becoming the dominant regional power and from realizing its goal of becoming a great power. Currently, nations in the Middle East understand more and more that weakening the Iranian regime and disrupting its regional capabilities are critical, and these nations are already experiencing positive momentum. For now, given the centrality and urgency of these objectives, the nations under threat need to set aside other interests and take advantage of these positive developments so that they can rally around their shared “meta-goal,” which is to confront the most serious threat to regional security and a significant one to global security.

The United States has a critical leadership role to play in this regard. America must project its might, bolster its deterrence, and take the lead in organizing against the mutual enemy. U.S. partners in the Middle East need American support to effectively execute the campaign plan to defeat Iran’s regional strategy and thwart its broader ambitions.

Contrary to conventional wisdom in some quarters, the radical pro-Iran axis is not homogeneous. Among and within Iran’s partners, there are clashing interests, ideological and policy disagreements, areas of incomplete

control, and internal power struggles, both in Iran and within Shia groups across the Middle East. These can be exploited to weaken and topple the radical axis.

Similarly, through the long-term competition lens, trends such as birth rates, demography, the economy, and the climate are serious factors not in Iran's favor, as discussed later, as it strives for regional dominance based on force and national resilience.

The campaign plan introduced here offers a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenge. The Abraham Accords and the U.S. decision to move Israel into CENTCOM play an important role in regional strategy. Given growing cooperation among those nations opposed to the policies of the Islamic Republic, some methods and principles are already being discussed and barriers broken. But it is necessary to accelerate these processes and adopt other steps, as described here. Even if all suggestions are not fully adopted, there is significance in merely examining them, if only for the organization of a U.S.-Israel-Arab axis as a basis for multilateral action.

Seven Principles for the Campaign to Counter Iran's Regional Strategy

To realize its objective, this paper proposes the following guidelines for action:

- 1. A multilateral, long-term, campaign-type approach** that is organized regionally, in which players and roles are clearly defined, and activities are conducted in accordance with a comprehensive, long-term strategy.
- 2. Acting in multiple dimensions and domains against the IRGC—the Iranian regime's center of gravity**—in order to weaken it and thereby undermine the Islamic Republic's influence in the Middle East. IRGC capabilities must be damaged in a comprehensive manner, in Iran and the theater as a whole.
- 3. Employing "flexible direct deterrent reprisals"** to deny Iran the ability to operate indirectly (via proxies) and to strengthen deterrence against it by direct attack on the Islamic Republic or its interests.

4. **Strategically isolating Iran's regional proxies** through efforts to attack, weaken, and coopt them by cutting deals.
5. **Applying comprehensive pressure on the regime** to weaken it in response to its terrorist acts, independent of any negotiations or agreements regarding its nuclear program.
6. **Expanding the gray zone campaign**, which would involve adopting the Israeli model and experience to expand the gray zone campaign (aka campaign between wars) as an overall concept designed to weaken the Iranian regime, the IRGC, and its regional capabilities by employing low-signature actions short of war while preserving deniability.
7. **Waging an ideological-cultural campaign** to win the “hearts and minds” of the region’s sects, tribes, and population groups, in a way that highlights the advantages, especially for Shia communities, of moderate Islam and the values of democracy, as opposed to authoritarianism and dictatorship.

The seven guidelines are elaborated as follows:

Multilateral, Long-Term Approach

The campaign is regional and is being conducted in every part of the Middle East. On the one hand is the radical Shia axis led by the Iranian regime and spearheaded by the IRGC: Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, the pro-Iran militias in Iraq (most of the PMF), the Houthis in Yemen, Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, and several other underground organizations and Shia militias are all part of this axis. Hamas is a semi-proxy receiving military aid and political support from the IRGC.

On the other side is a regional alliance of the United States, Israel, the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait), Egypt, and Jordan (henceforth “the allies” or “the alliance”). Other states that may be defined as part of the coalition are Qatar, Oman, Sudan, and Morocco. The Iranian regional threat is the central threat to the national security of these nations and is the glue—the shared interest—holding the Sunni-Israeli camp together. In the context of defining the camps of the Middle East, it is necessary to

carefully examine Turkey given its own regional ambitions and interests, some of which clash with the interests of other central players in the alliance.

The regional army against which the campaign must be fought is the IRGC and the Regional Radical Shia Army that it has created.

As part of the regional campaign, there are internal struggles within states and across active combat arenas in which the strings are being pulled by the Iranian regime and the IRGC guiding the proxies to destabilize and undermine the regional order.

Theaters of Confrontation and Conflict in the Middle East

Regional theaters of conflict involving Iran include Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and the Gaza Strip.

Syria. In Syria, Israel is fighting against the entrenchment of Iranian militias and Hezbollah and trying to halt the transfer of advanced armaments from Iran to Syria and Lebanon. In Syria, the civil war and fighting between rebel opposition groups and the Syrian regime continue. The nation is split into areas controlled by local, regional, and global rivals.

Lebanon. Lebanon is a failing/failed state, unstable and in crisis. It is the locus of an internal political struggle between the Iran-supported Lebanese Hezbollah, the strongest entity in the country, and the remnants of the anti-Iran/anti-Assad March 14 camp, supported by the alliance of some Arab states, the United States, France, and others, fighting for the nation's identity. There is great concern that the situation will deteriorate into another civil war. Lebanon is a theater of struggle between Israel and Hezbollah, which continues to prepare for another war with Israel. As such, there is a danger of escalation and that another war between Israel and Hezbollah might lead to a regional conflagration.

Yemen. The civil war in Yemen has become a regional struggle. The campaign has developed into a regional war between a Saudi-led coalition and the Iran-backed Houthis, who are now conducting drone and missile strikes against strategic infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Iraq. The struggle for control of Iraq pits pro-Iran militias and parties, led by the PMF, against their domestic rivals, supported by Western and Gulf allies. For Iran, expelling the U.S. Army from Iraq is a strategic objective, and it is working to realize it by means of popular pressure and terrorist attacks by local militias.

Bahrain. Iran is actively destabilizing the nation internally using the Shia majority in a campaign of subversion and attempted coups against the ruling Khalifa family.

Afghanistan. Iran is making sure to nurture and preserve ties with the Shia community in Afghanistan as a source of support and recruitment for the regional Shia militias. Iran supported the Taliban in the war it fought against the U.S. presence on its soil. Now that the Taliban has seized control of the nation, it is necessary to keep a close eye on the relationship between the radical Iranian Shia regime and the radical Afghani Sunni government.

Gaza Strip. The military wing of Hamas—which controls the Gaza Strip—and Palestinian Islamic Jihad receive assistance from the IRGC. In this sector, there are regular confrontations along the border that, from time to time, erupt into larger conflicts.

In addition to the struggle between these pro- and anti-Iran coalitions, there is another important regional struggle: the campaign against radical Sunni terrorist organizations—al-Qaeda and IS—that constitute a common enemy for both axes. The struggle against IS was central until 2019, when Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was eliminated in a U.S. Army operation, and the organization was defeated in Syria and Iraq. However, radical Sunni terrorist organizations continue to threaten regional stability, especially in Syria and Iraq. Thus, alongside a resolute regional campaign against Iran and the radical Shia axis, it is necessary to prevent Sunni terrorist groups from regaining their strength. In this context, the U.S. action to kill IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, al-Baghdadi's replacement, on February 3, 2022, was important, proving the resolve and commitment

of the United States and its partners to continue to fight extremist terror organizations.

Adopting a Systemic Approach to Long-Term Competition

To prevail in long-term competition, a systemic approach is required. The Iranian regime strives for regional dominance in all spheres in a decentralized fashion but under a single unifying concept. As part of taking a systemic approach to countering Iran's strategy, the anti-Iran bloc must view every subsystem operating in the region as an influential component of the grand campaign for influence in the Middle East. Therefore, it is necessary to synchronize all systems into one that is led and choreographed in a centralized fashion but also gives maximal freedom of action to the various subsystem players.

The campaign will be decentralized both functionally and geographically. There is no single center of gravity that if attacked suddenly with great force will decide the campaign. Therefore, it is necessary to see the campaign as a long-term one in which victory will be achieved via consistent, planned, patient, resolute, multidimensional, and multidomain actions, akin to drops of water eventually boring the proverbial hole in the rock.

The campaign will be protracted; in other words, not bounded by time. It will also be affected by developments in the broader Middle East and by global development.

A MESDA Joint Command Center

The key is finding the right way to operate together to attain a shared objective. To achieve optimal coordination and strategic, operational, and tactical cooperation, it is necessary to act in the framework of a regional coalition. The ideal model needed for joint action is presented here, but the real importance lies in agreement among the partners over the goal and then finding a coordinated way to achieve it. Of course, it is possible to adopt an evolutionary approach starting small and building it up over time.

As part of the approach, the partners will have to engage in a comprehensive, long-term planning and implementation effort. Planning must be "breathing," allowing for maximal flexibility and constant adaptation to

events in the regional and international arenas. The coalition must include the United States, Israel, and the Arab nations most threatened by Iran, and it should also work in cooperation with the nations of the EU, especially Great Britain and France.

The coalition members should establish a shared command center of all players, proposed here to be named the Middle East States Defense Alliance (MESDA). The alliance would be for defensive purposes and its function would be to serve as a setting for strengthening defense and maintaining regional security and stability. Should it prove impossible to establish an official defensive alliance, then initially it would be necessary to at least strengthen regional cooperation and topical alliances.

There is already a starting foundation for a coalition such as MESDA. It could be developed as a foundation for a regional coalition system via two existing organizations on which components of the alliance could be based: (1) EastMed, an international organization founded in 2019 whose members are some of the nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea, including Egypt, Jordan, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, in which the EU and the United States have observer status; and (2) the Red Sea Council, which was initiated by Saudi Arabia along with seven other Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coastal states, designed to improve regional security.

A supreme council to provide advice on the campaign's objectives and to define policy is advisable. This council should include senior representatives of the political echelons of the coalition's partner nations, at the level of heads of national security councils or foreign ministers. The supreme council would define the short- and long-term objectives while considering the interests of all regional partners. It would also orchestrate action by the various state entities. To advance the strategic goals, MESDA and its supreme council would need to operate all levers of influence at the regional and global levels.

Beneath the supreme council, which would make strategic-level decisions, there would be an operational-level headquarters that would conduct the campaign. The most natural candidate to head the command center would be U.S. Central Command, under whose responsibility American action in the Middle East, including against Iran, falls. The command center would have to prepare a comprehensive action plan and distribute tasks and sectors to

the partner nations. Alternatively, should the United States or some of the nations, for reasons of their own, not want to take part in a formal coalition, the nations of the region should organize informally to coordinate protection of their interests and defense against Iranian aggression.

The following would be the headquarters' major functions:

- Work out the concept of joint operation to attain the objectives of the campaign—and define the concept of “victory” over Iran and its regional proxies.
- Conduct long-term planning and assign functional tasks and geographic areas of responsibility, when appropriate.
- Fuse and disseminate joint intelligence.
- Thwart regional terrorist acts.
- Deploy a regional defense network—an early-warning defense system against aerial threats (rockets, missiles, and UAVs).
- Launch a joint cyberspace campaign, with emphasis on joint defenses, and prepare offensive response capabilities against the economic and military systems of the regime and its proxies.
- Plan and implement a clandestine campaign to weaken Iran's regional capabilities, including these goals: damage force building and weapons manufacturing, disrupt smuggling/transfer of armaments, and generate a sense of beleaguerment within the IRGC leadership and its main terrorist operatives.
- Conduct operations in the electromagnetic sphere.
- Plan and conduct deterrent responses against violent acts perpetrated by the Iranian regime and its proxies.
- Plan and prepare proactive offensive activities to damage and weaken the proxies and regional militias under Iranian command.
- Implement a soft power campaign to alter perceptions and beliefs of the diverse population groups throughout the Middle East targeted by Iranian propaganda.
- Conduct joint exercises, models, scenarios, and war games.

It will be necessary to assign functional and geographic areas of responsibility among the partners, draw up working plans, and assign essential tasks. Every area of responsibility must be assigned a lead actor. For example, Lebanon might see Israel as the military operator, the Gulf states as the economic operator, and the United States in conjunction with France as the diplomatic operator.

Acting in Multiple Dimensions to Damage the IRGC

The IRGC is the backbone of the regime and the main means by which it seeks to dominate the region. It is the strongest and most powerful military, economic, and political entity in Iran.

The partners must weaken the IRGC in every dimension and use every means possible to exert pressure on it, including the following:

- Work so that a maximum number of nations declare the IRGC a terrorist organization, as the United States did in April 2019.
- Conduct an economic pressure campaign to dry up its financial resources so that it will be difficult for the organization to finance its activities and support its regional partners. The IRGC controls a substantial part of Iran's economy. If it is designated as a terrorist organization, sanctions can be imposed on it and its associated businesses, including Iranian companies it owns in the private and security sector. Because the IRGC controls a significant part of Iran's economy, a comprehensive boycott would damage Iran's economy and cause Iranian and international companies to avoid or at least limit cooperation with the Guards.
- Interdict and disrupt supply lines—on land, in the air, and at sea—that the IRGC uses to support its proxies and militias.
- Target the organization's leadership, commanders, and key operatives who are behind the planning and execution of terrorist attacks and subversion; issue international arrest warrants of designated individuals; and conduct targeted killings against individuals

plotting attacks (the Soleimani model).

- Damage the IRGC's operational center of gravity—its long-range strike capabilities such as rockets, missiles, and drones—by covert action against manufacturing plants and missile and UAV main operating and forward bases, while preparing a plan of action to damage Iran's defensive system (e.g., air defenses). All these measures will also enhance coalition freedom.

Conducting “Flexible Direct Deterrent Reprisal” Activities

Iran is vulnerable to and seeks to avoid direct attacks on its own soil. It constantly works to strengthen deterrence and to defend its borders and its strategic assets on land, in the air, and at sea. By contrast, Iran executes its attacks against regional states and even against U.S. forces stationed in the Middle East by using proxies and standoff capabilities. Operating this way provides deniability and gives its leaders a feeling of immunity.

This feeling of immunity must be shattered. To change the balance of deterrence, Iran must be made to pay dearly for its actions. Iran must not, so to speak, be allowed to have its cake and eat it too.

Adopting the strategy of flexible direct deterrent reprisals means that an attack on a sovereign member of the alliance by Iranian forces or by an Iranian proxy would legitimize a reprisal aimed directly at Iran. A reprisal might occur in the gray zone, (i.e., covert actions without leaving fingerprints) even if the circumstantial connection would be obvious.

Attacking Iran on its soil as a reprisal may embarrass the regime and arouse criticism of it from within. Cracking the leaders' sense of immunity and shaking their confidence in the nation's ability to use its regional capabilities can be affected by, among other things, the alliance's ability to surround Iran with a ring of counterfire—just as Iran has surrounded the Gulf Arabs and Israel with a ring of fire consisting of proxies equipped with long-range strike systems.

Flexible action can take different forms at different times and places. Each nation would be responsible for responding to the attack it had suffered, as

explained shortly. Some reprisals may be taken against proxies (i.e., physical attacks on proxy forces or infrastructure). In other cases, reprisals may be directed at Iran itself, especially military targets connected to the IRGC. So, for example, should a seaport in Israel be attacked by Hezbollah, an appropriate parallel target would be the Iranian seaport in Bandar Abbas. Should energy installations in Saudi Arabia be attacked by the Houthis, an appropriate parallel target would be energy installations in Iran. Should an airport in the UAE be attacked, an appropriate parallel move would be striking a military zone within the international airport in Tehran. Should the actions Iran directs cause casualties, it would be possible to consider counterattacks that would involve casualties to Iranian troops, preferably from the force associated with the original action. It is important to note that the coalition must take extreme care to observe international law and avoid harm to civilians as much as possible. This is a core principle differentiating the values and norms of the two sides and a source of legitimacy for the actions of the coalition, as well as a way of ensuring its continued freedom of action.

To date, such a proposed approach has not been considered. Its potential for deterrence is high, the model is legitimate, and the proposal would place Iranian decisionmakers in a bind. Adopting this approach would require resolve, persistence, and strong defenses. It would be necessary to have reprisal after reprisal planned and ready for execution in case Iran decides to respond and escalate. Over time, however, this approach would be crucial to deter and prevent Iran and its proxies from executing their actions and fulfilling their ambitions in the region.

This approach would also seek to realize synergies from the combined use of military reprisals and economic sanctions. Thus, should an oil tanker be damaged by Iran or one of its proxies, sanctions would immediately be placed on the export of Iranian oil.

An underpinning principle of this approach would be a nation's inherent right to defend itself and thereby preserve its freedom of action. The nation under attack would be responsible for the reprisal. Other nations would not be asked to join a reprisal action or campaign on behalf of another coalition member. Each nation would preserve its own freedom of operational action.

Coalition members would cooperate to defend their borders and receive political and military backing and help with weapons from others. The joint command center would be the coordinator and would, for example, allow the use of airspace, communications, and cyber capabilities; strengthen defensive capabilities; and share intelligence about targets and threats. It is important to note that the coalition must take extreme care to observe international treaties and avoid harm to civilians in all possible cases.

Strategically Isolating Iran's Regional Proxies

Iran's efforts to entrench itself in the region and achieve hegemony via the Regional Radical Shia Army and its proxies generate many exploitable weaknesses. Here, the Sudanese model offers a path forward.¹ Despite their religious differences, Sudan and Iran became close allies after the Iranian revolution. Iran's motivation was clear, as Sudan is strategically located along the shores of the Red Sea, and provided a useful springboard for activities in the Red Sea region and as a transshipment point for arms destined for Hamas and PIJ in Gaza. The two nations signed economic and military agreements of cooperation, and Sudan allowed Iran to smuggle arms and use its military installations, including its seaports, for this purpose. However, a reversal occurred in 2016. Sudan abandoned its alliance with Iran, cut off diplomatic relations, and joined the Saudi-led anti-Iran Arab alliance. More recently, Sudan, which had traditionally been an enemy of Israel, embarked on a normalization process with the Jewish state (with U.S. encouragement) so that Sudan joined the Abraham Accords and full diplomatic relations ensued.

What led to this reversal? For years, Sudan was defined as a terrorism-supporting nation and was subject to extreme sanctions. The alliance with Iran simply did not pay off. Instead, it became an albatross. Iran, up to its neck in its own troubles, has no economic might to help its protectorates. The regime in Sudan realized that to break out of its international isolation it had to change direction and go to the other side. In exchange, Sudan received economic aid from the Gulf states and was removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The Sudanese model, then, exemplifies the value of the “strategic isolation” of nations and organizations. Massive, ongoing pressure affects nations and can change their political orientation/alignment. In the case of Sudan, the carrot and the stick, as well as efforts to drive a wedge between Sudan and Iran, worked well and advanced important objectives.

The anti-Iran axis, led by the United States, the Gulf states, Israel, and their partners, must map and analyze the interests of Iran’s allies. It is a complex task, but it is possible to identify ideological and cultural fissures and use a systemic approach according to an orderly plan to try to weaken, damage, disaggregate, and ultimately undermine the regional Iranian coalition.

The pro-Iran “axis of resistance” is not united by a shared ideology. Within the axis, there are rivalries between militias, groups, and even tribes. Large swaths of the Middle East are opposed to efforts to impose foreign domination. These are nations with a rich Arab history and national pride such as Syria and Iraq, heirs to ancient empires. There is also a language barrier. Where Iran is trying to impose its will by regional proxies, there are often pockets of resistance, opposition groups, and rebels, including in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, the proxy strategy and the proxies’ almost complete reliance on Iran are a heavy economic burden. The external effort requires Iran to invest great resources to help them.

History shows that where Iran tries to entrench itself it brings death, destruction, backwardness, poverty, oppression, and often an anti-Iran backlash. There is no reason to think that, in the future, things will be any different. Therefore, military and economic pressure must be brought to bear on Iran and its proxies to weaken and deter them and, when possible, to drive wedges between Iran and its partners and proxies. The choice is between, on the one hand, “resistance,” isolation, and endless conflict leading to impoverishment and eventual destruction, and, on the other hand, access to political and economic inducements and a degree of normalcy and peace, if the partner changes sides.

As part of a comprehensive effort to isolate the Iranian regime, it will be necessary to disrupt Tehran’s ability to help its regional proxies. Concentrating comprehensive effort on three geographic arenas that potentially could change direction and applying to them the concept of strategic

disaggregation, namely Iraq, Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen, would seem advisable. Such an approach would involve the following:

- Identify political and economic fault lines that can be exploited.
- Enter into secret negotiations, to determine whether they are open to changing sides and what would be required to accomplish this.
- Weaken the nations with pro-Iran organizations and political parties and strengthen pro-West organizations and institutions.
- Disrupt and dismantle logistical supply routes on land, in the air, and at sea.
- Disrupt, delay, and if possible, halt force-building efforts.
- Disrupt and block money transfers.
- Help local forces actively resist the presence of Iranian militias on their soil.
- Act with alacrity in the ideological-cultural sphere to foment and increase sentiment against the Islamic Republic.

Applying such an approach in each theater would look like this:

Syria. This is the only state in the Middle East allied with Iran. The Syrian regime's survival was ensured by the involvement of Iran and its Regional Radical Shia Army, which were among the key factors that saved Assad. But the major power in Syria is Russia. There is no congruence between Russian interests in Syria and Iran's military, cultural, and political entrenchment there. Russia is interested in preserving its influence in Syria; at this time, Assad's rule ensures Russia's paramount influence there. Russia is also making it possible for Israel to carry out attacks in Syria against Iranian forces by means of a coordination mechanism to ensure that no Russian forces or interests are harmed. Moreover, Russia acts with restraint when Israel attacks Syrian forces that help defend pro-Iran militias and Iranian targets under attack.

Assad himself is expressing growing dissatisfaction with Iran's overactive role in his country and its entrenchment there. He is beginning to

understand that he is paying a steep price and losing assets because of the Iranian presence on his soil. More than once, Qods Force commanders in Syria have carried out independent attacks on Israel without first coordinating with the Syrian regime. In response, the IDF carries out widespread reprisals against Iranian infrastructure, and thus Syria often loses important assets, including defenses. The Syrian regime is increasingly limiting Iran's activities, including its ability to operate against Israel from Syrian soil. However, the regime is still in danger, and, having no other option, is locked into a strategic alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, which ensure the regime's survival and helps it economically and militarily.

The Syrian population is multiethnic and mostly Sunni; the opposition and much of public opinion reject the Iranian regime and the religious brand it represents. Undermining the alliance, weakening ties, and cutting Syria off from the regional Iranian axis would be a serious blow to Tehran's regional policy and would mean a loss of a critical arena of entrenchment and financial investment. It is therefore necessary for opponents of Iran to operate on several levels, including exerting pressure and issuing threats to the survival of Bashar al-Assad and his regime, raising the cost that Syria and Iran are paying for the latter's entrenchment in Syria (including attacking and destroying the military infrastructure Iran is building there), and cutting off all logistical supply routes.

In recent years, policy and defense experts have discussed three theoretical options for Syria's future. The first would be the Sudanese model—that is, exerting pressure on the Syrian regime, using the carrot-and-stick approach, and threatening the regime's survival, causing it to change its policy and select a different alliance. The second would be to topple the regime. And the third would be to break Syria into cantons and spheres of influence based on ethnic ratios: Sunni (Sunnistan), Alawite (Alawistan), Kurdish (Kurdistan), Druze (Druzistan), and a sphere of influence under Turkish control. Each of the options would come with its own complications and require international cooperation, especially Russia's agreement and the preservation of its interests in Syria.

At this stage, and especially in light of the Russian position—and the as-yet-to-be-analyzed global implications of the war in Ukraine—the only

reasonable option is the first: i.e., pressuring the Syrian regime to change its policy, thus limiting the entrenchment of Iran, making its troops withdraw, and weakening its relationship with Syria. It would also be appropriate to continue to examine options two and three.

At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the internal opposition to Iran's presence in Syria, under slogans such as "from entrenchment to entombment." For example, in the Euphrates Valley in eastern Syria, Sunni tribes opposed to both the Iranian forces and the Syrian army are dominant. It is in this sphere that the Qods Force is trying to entrench itself by means of building bases for its militias.

This paper recommends maintaining the U.S. presence within the al-Tanf ring, a key region on the Iraqi-Syrian border that controls the important Abu Kamal border crossing, the main logistical supply axis on land, and continuing with counter-attempts to smuggle armaments through it.

Yemen. The Houthis, with help from the Iranian regime, are locked in a long struggle against the Yemeni government and other loci of power in the nation, including al-Qaeda. With support from the IRGC, they have in recent years waged war on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and their coalition partners. The Houthis receive significant Iranian assistance in the form of advanced weapons and are committed to that alliance. But there are some weak spots. The Houthis' objective is limited to an internal struggle over control of Yemen and "divvying up" its spoils. The Houthis have limited resources; they have no regional ambitions or might. However, they could, through tribal and power alliances, become much bigger, using the substantial manpower on hand: millions of unemployed Yemeni young people. Yemen is suffering one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world from which the Houthi population has not been exempt. The war has taken a steep human toll; many civilians and fighters have been killed or wounded in combat.

Geographically, the Houthis are distant from Iran and share no border, so Yemen can be quite easily isolated. It is impossible for Iran to help the Houthis using overland logistical supply routes; they depend entirely on resupplies by air and sea. Using the right action, they could perhaps continue to fight a guerrilla war for an extended time, but they would find it hard

to conduct an effective military campaign or maintain orderly governance. Because of the distance, the IRGC is limited in its ability to control the Houthis or impose discipline, so that the Houthis generally make their decisions independently.

There is a chance that, should increased comprehensive pressure be brought to bear, the Houthis' resources will dwindle, potentially reducing their ability to wreak havoc. Should an attractive political deal be offered, one that would also end the horrific civil war, Houthi leaders may accept it. The various tribes constituting the Houthi movement are not committed as one to the Iranian regime's interests and ideology. They have their own critical local interests concerning the populations they represent. Promoting an international and regional deal to end the civil war between the north and the south, splitting Yemen into two states, and redividing the power of the state is a viable approach. In that context, giving the Houthis autonomy or examining the advancement of federation-based solutions, as well as incorporating the Houthis in a final agreement, would be necessary. The Houthis are already in control of parts of Yemen. One can reasonably expect that no end to the war and no peace agreement in the nation can be effective without a shared solution with the Houthis.

Extricating Yemen from the circle of regional warfare will weaken Iran, reduce its regional influence, and deny it an arena of action. At the same time, the Gulf states would be able to concentrate their efforts and resources on other theaters of confrontation with Iran.

In tandem with negotiations, it will be necessary for the Gulf states, with U.S. backing, to concentrate broad military effort against the Houthis and increase military pressure on its militia. In this context, it is important to attack the Iranian commanders and command center of the Yemen force and to identify and destroy the stock of ballistic missiles and UAVs and the entities manufacturing and operating them.

The anti-Iran axis must improve its ability to obtain intelligence on targets and close the sensor-shooter loop to enable precision strikes against vetted targets while reducing harm to civilians.

The coalition led by CENTCOM must be ready to foil a possible attempt to disrupt shipping through or a blockade of the Bab al-Mandab Strait and

preserve freedom of navigation in the region.

Other efforts needed in Yemen include international humanitarian aid to the Yemeni people in the form of food, drinking water, medical supplies, and more. It is also necessary to continue taking preventive action/conducting targeted strikes against al-Qaeda leaders and operatives in the nation. And, until some form of agreement is reached, it is necessary to return the Houthi movement to the U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

When the new U.S. administration took office in 2021, it revoked the decision that designated the Houthi rebels as a terrorist organization. According to the administration, the decision was based in part on the difficult humanitarian conditions and mass starvation in Yemen. The photos from Yemen are indeed difficult to look at and generate sympathy, but the decision was made without extracting any political concession from the Houthis. In practice, not only did the decision not resolve the humanitarian crisis in that war-torn country, it also did nothing to advance a ceasefire between the warring sides. On the ground, the Houthi rebels only escalated their attacks using ballistic missiles and kamikaze drones at economic, government, and civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Offering concessions without ruthless negotiations encourages radical factions inspired and guided by Iran to continue their campaign of violence and terror and is at odds with the policy of strategic isolation and disaggregation proposed here.

Iraq. Most Iraqi citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, view themselves first and foremost as Iraqis—both Arabs and Kurds. During the war against the Islamic State, the Shia community was united against their common brutal enemy, and fought together with Shia militias, PMF actors, and reinforcements from the Iranian army—many of which operated under Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani. But after the victory against IS, Iraq turned its attention to reconstruction and strengthening its institutions. By contrast, the IRGC, as is its wont, tried to exploit the timing and crisis in Iraq to deepen its influence and turn Iraq into a protectorate, an effort in which it was helped by the armed militias it had helped build there.

But the battle within Iraq persists. This time, the battle is an internal one and is fought over Iraq's future identity and foreign policy orientation.

Iraq is seeing great and growing resistance to Iran's increasing economic and political influence and attempt at cultural, ideological, and religious entrenchment. There is resentment, especially among the young, of public corruption and Iran's hegemony. The more Iran tries to dig into Iraq, the more enmity toward it grows, which boomerangs on it and its proxies. In October 2019, masses of young Iraqis of all religions took to the streets to protest the country's serious economic crisis and faced off against security forces and pro-Iran militias. The protests were violently suppressed the way protests are put down in Iran. In the October 2021 election, the pro-Iran political slate suffered defeat. The party headed by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, representing opposition to all types of foreign presence and influence in Iraq and demanding the disarmament of the militias, became the largest political party in parliament and the decisive factor in establishing the new government. Tensions rose when an attempt was made on the life of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi with explosive drones, apparently by a pro-Iran militia.

Sunnis, who constitute 35 percent of the population, and most Kurds, who have autonomy in northern Iraq, are major forces in the anti-Iran camp and opponents of Iranian involvement in Iraq's affairs. Moreover, it seems that, after the death of Qasem Soleimani, the IRGC and Qods Force are finding it difficult to impose their will on some radical Shia militias, which have begun to take independent action apparently without prior coordination. Examples are the assassination attempt on the prime minister and the launch of a UAV from Iraq against Israel during the May 2021 military operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

All of the above leads to the realization that, in Iraq, a fierce and decisive struggle for identity is now taking place. Given Iraq's importance to developments in the Levant and the Gulf, the outcome of this struggle in Iraq will affect the broader region. Iran, in its attempt to seize effective control of Iraq, is running into difficulties, and public opinion is against it. Anti-Iran sentiment and the weakening of control over the militias are Iranian weaknesses in Iraq. Strengthening the independent anti-Iran camp and Iraq's Arab identity will weaken Iran's hold on the nation. Success in disarming or at least weakening the various militias and strengthening the central

government is a significant regional interest. This disarming, of course, would not apply to the Kurdish forces of the autonomous region in northern Iraq. The outcome of the nation's identity struggle will have enormous implications for the regional campaign and the mission to weaken Iran.

Lebanon. The Lebanese nation is experiencing a profound civil, economic, and political crisis, and the government and services are verging on collapse. This presents a strategic opportunity for the United States and its European partners, the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan to generate levers of influence and to make any economic or energy assistance contingent on weakening Hezbollah and reducing Iranian influence. In response, Iran will try to strengthen Hezbollah and preserve its dominance as a strategic asset and tool for projecting regional strength.

It is necessary to undermine Hezbollah's standing. The organization is acting contrary to national Lebanese interests, and must therefore be isolated, attacked economically, and denied the development of advanced weapons. It is also necessary to encourage any anti-Iran organizations in Lebanon. Israel, if escalation occurs against it, must use its military strength to greatly damage Hezbollah's capabilities and weaken it, as well as strengthen regional deterrence, thus weakening Iran's most important regional proxy.

Palestinian territories. It is necessary to strengthen moderate Palestinians. Given the extremism of Hamas, which denies Israel the right to exist, and its joining with the radical Iranian camp, it is likely that it would play an active role in an Iranian regional military campaign against Israel. Therefore, Israel must weaken it significantly and neutralize core components of its military force.

Applying Comprehensive Pressure Against the Regime

The campaign must be comprehensive and include the use of political, economic, and military levers by the coalition nations along with international backing. In a long-term competition, the coalition's solidarity and

unity of purpose is a fundamental prerequisite for success. Policy shapers at the civil echelon must synchronize their action and steer the political, economic, and military systems. Pressure must be distributed across the entire playing field—both Iran and its partners in the region. Economic entities will have critical significance and will affect the conduct of the campaign and its outcome.

Regarding the nuclear agreement: it is necessary to make it clear to Iran that lifting sanctions in exchange for a return to the nuclear accords will not render Iran immune in the regional campaign. These are two separate axes. Should Iran engage in harmful actions, reprisals will follow.

Conducting Regional Gray Zone Activities

Many nations, including Russia, China, Iran, and Israel, operate in the gray zone, explained earlier as a term also known in Israel as the campaign between wars. The objective is to seek cumulative gains against an adversary to strengthen deterrence, and deny it the ability to act through both covert and overt action, while managing risk and preventing widespread escalation. In this campaign, it is necessary to exploit asymmetric advantages and attack the enemy's weaknesses.

Expanding the concept, as well as exploiting the IDF's and the Israeli establishment's cumulative experience in this type of campaign in Syria and its environs into a broad, deep regional campaign, is a critical tool in the methods of action of the regional anti-Iran coalition. The gray zone campaign also is a tool for applying comprehensive pressure on Iran, the IRGC, and their regional proxies. In this context, it is necessary to develop tools and capabilities to act with a low signature and to maintain a degree of deniability. Flexible direct reprisals may take the form of gray zone activities giving decisionmakers broader freedom of action while managing risk. As part of the campaign, it will be necessary to wage joint covert and clandestine campaigns that exploit the relative advantages of each partner. Actions in the gray zone are not only kinetic acts and mysterious explosions but can include activities that occur in all domains, such as the cyber and information space.

To do so, it is important to act strategically with partners and act unexpectedly to create surprises and uncertainty and generate apprehension both in Iran and among its proxies.

Leading a Regional Ideological-Cultural Campaign

This pillar would involve conducting a campaign for the “hearts and minds” of the people of the Middle East. The seventh principle could easily be the first. The regional campaign against the Iranian regime must be perceived, first and foremost, as an ideological-cultural battle. Shaping public opinion is one of the greatest challenges and a central part in every military campaign of the modern era. The battle for consciousness is a critical ongoing effort, more important even than a fight with kinetic means. The campaign against Iran is, above all, cultural and ideological involving different target audiences.

To export the revolution, the Iranian regime and the IRGC invest tremendous resources into campaigns for public opinion and to spread propaganda to inculcate among various population groups Iran's religious culture and ideology. Any campaign against the Iranian axis should be designed to stoke opposition to the Islamic Republic in various publics and should focus in particular on Shia communities in the Middle East and Iran itself.

An important framing of the message is that the campaign is against all extreme or radical factions in the Middle East. It is necessary to continue to fight to the end against all radical terrorist organization whether they are Shia or Sunni jihadists, whether al-Qaeda and IS, or Iran and its proxies.

Other Important Factors in Long-Term Competition

Iran desires to be the dominant regional power. It frequently flexes its muscles and glories in its achievements both at home and abroad. However, Iran is vulnerable. There are weaknesses and long-term negative trends that cast doubt on its resilience and overall power. The regime faces complex

internal challenges that will only worsen over time, and it will find it difficult to confront and resolve them.

The Economy

Iran is experiencing an extreme economic crisis and suffering from inflation and unemployment resulting from the sanctions and the ongoing economic pressures of the past few years. Easing sanctions without making them contingent on certain conditions is a serious strategic error with long-term ramifications. But even if some of the sanctions are lifted, the future of the Iranian economy over the long term under the present regime looks dark. In all the arenas in which Iran is trying to entrench itself and deepen its influence, the economies are verging on collapse and there is widespread infrastructure damage, social misery, and poverty. This is true of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Iran lacks the financial reserves needed to substantially help these failing economies. Without help from the outside, the future of these nations and their citizens is bleak. Iran cannot be relied on to provide economic backing in the long run. The nations in need of external help will be forced elsewhere. Iran's regional campaign is expensive and needs growing resources. By contrast, the anti-Iran coalition consists of well-off nations with strong economies, including the Gulf states, Israel, and, of course, the United States. The coalition has the economic might and ability to help rebuild failed states, advance infrastructure projects, and reduce unemployment. The picture might change only if China decides to expand its influence in the Middle East. China can operate independently, or, more probably, in cooperation with Iran.

Demographics, Population, and Birth Rates

The population of Iran is not homogeneous. It is split along ethnic lines, with many minority groups, some of which suffer from persecution and which have separatist aspirations. Persians represent half of the overall population, and the other half consists of Azeris, Kurds, the Baluch, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minorities. From time to time, there are violent demonstrations

and protests in outlying provinces where minorities—including the Baluch and Arabs—are a majority. The Arabs tend to be concentrated in oil-rich Khuzestan province, in the country's southwest. Khuzestan is riddled with locally popular separatist groups seeking independence, whose members view themselves as part of the Arab community. They often protest against the regime and carry out attacks. The Baluch are Sunni Muslims and are concentrated along the Pakistan-Afghan-Iran border. Some of the Baluch are demanding independence. In their struggle for national liberation, they often execute attacks on the Iranian security apparatus.

Over the long term, Iran's demographic problems could well worsen and damage the nation's internal cohesion and social resilience. The most striking data point is the aging of the population and decreasing birth rates. According to current trends, one-third of Iranian citizens will be age sixty or older by 2050. Recent years have seen a dramatic reduction in births; the current birth rate is an average of 1.66 births per woman. By contrast, separatist minorities have a growing population: the average Baluch woman has three to four children. This trend spells a downward demographic shift for the Persian community and therefore also foretells a negative economic outlook, attended by shifts in the internal balance of power.

Social Cohesion and Societal Resilience

Iran suffers from many domestic problems. The regime persecutes its opponents and tramples on human rights. There is unrest among the young, who want freedom, challenge the conservative religious establishment, and oppose the regime's religious coercion. Iranian women have no rights. Student demonstrations are brutally suppressed by the regime's IRGC. Informed estimates claim that, over time, the social unrest and protests will grow and the regime of the ayatollahs will have to continue to suppress the demonstrations with a heavy hand to ensure its survival.

Sensitivity to Loss

The Iranian regime and the population are sensitive to casualties. The steeper the costs Iran is forced to pay for its negative actions in the region and the more intense the pressure grows on Iran's IRGC terrorists acting outside Iran, the more pressure the regime will experience and the more the IRGC's effectiveness and control over its proxies will be diminished.

Geography and National Infrastructure

Iran is a vast country, but it is also vulnerable and exposed. The population, the economic assets, and the national and regime-controlled critical infrastructure are concentrated in Tehran—the main locus of governance, the economy, and culture—the country's Arabian Gulf coast, and a few other key cities and locations. It is possible to damage the regime badly by attacking just a few centers of gravity. Iran's oil infrastructure is critical, and a limited strike on its components would cause tremendous damage to the Iranian economy. A limited strike on Iran's seaports and airports would disrupt the regime's ability to control the state.

Climate Change

Global warming and climate change pose a particularly tough challenge for Iran in the long term. Most of Iran is arid, desertlike, and uninhabited. Annual precipitation is low, with the exception of the Zagros Mountains and the shores of the Caspian Sea. Climate change has already been harming Iran: the average temperature has been rising over decades much faster in Iran and the Middle East than elsewhere, as much as one and a half times the average global increase. The rising temperatures also increase surface evaporation. Predictions are that, in the future, Iran will face a severe drinking and irrigation water crisis and many droughts. This is a tremendous challenge expected to lead to an environmental crisis, as well as an economic and social one, which will be difficult for the regime to confront in the long term and will increase its dependence on food imports.

Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Eyder Peralta, "Sudan, Which Once Sheltered Bin Laden, Removed from U.S. Terrorism List," National Public Radio, December 14, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/14/946207797/sudan-who-once-sheltered-bin-laden-removed-from-u-s-terrorism-list>.

7

Conclusion

The Middle East is now experiencing a protracted conflict that is part of a long-term competition whose outcome will determine the region's future character. Under its current religious regime, Iran views itself as a regional empire that aspires to global influence. It is conducting an offensive strategy against the nations of the region—among them Israel—and the United States. It employs force, tries to destabilize other governments, and works determinedly to strengthen its regional influence. It acts to deter its enemies, undermine their influence, and oust the United States from the region. Through the IRGC, the Iranian regime has built a Regional Radical Shia Army and acquired (and is further developing) military capabilities that have allowed it to deter, threaten, and cause grievous harm to its enemies and alter the strategic balance in the region. As part of its self-image as an emerging superpower, it strives to acquire nuclear capabilities stage by stage. Today, Iran may be described as a near nuclear threshold state. The nuclear project is part of the regime's regional plans to ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic in the face of domestic and external threats and to expand its influence.

A return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action without a parallel plan to stop Iran through a regional campaign would mean granting the Islamic

Republic the upper hand in the battle for regional dominance. It would provide Iran with economic benefits that would let it resolve its difficult economic situation and break out of its international isolation. The radical Iranian regime and its proxies would exploit these economic benefits to expand the regime's military arsenal—particularly its long-range precision strike capabilities. Were its economy to improve, Iran would continue to finance and strengthen its regional proxies and enhance their capabilities in their areas of operation. Iran would likely continue to attack U.S. targets in Syria and Iraq; it would not be deterred, and unless met with a resolute response, it would probably ramp up its regional activities as it did after the signing of the JCPOA in 2015.

A shift in approach is needed to prevent Iran from achieving its ambitious goals. It is critical that the United States, Israel, and their Arab partners form a coalition and have a comprehensive coordinated strategy with a chief operator, regional operators, and systems operators. Currently, nations deliver a blend of tactical actions that have no effect on the whole system. Every nation challenged by the radical Shia axis fights on its own without coordinating with others, and thus plays into the hands of Iran, which is capable of dealing with its enemies in a piecemeal fashion.

Coalition members should implement this new strategy by way of a long-term campaign characterized by synchronized multidimensional and multi-domain actions. The objective should be to generate comprehensive pressure on Iran and to weaken the IRGC, the regime's center of gravity. Adopting the "direct deterrent reprisal" approach, isolating and disconnecting proxies, adding measures to the operational toolbox, and conducting a regional campaign for hearts and minds should all be components of this campaign.

The region is experiencing upheavals that create opportunities for a different approach. The Abraham Accords make it possible for an anti-Iran axis to operate together and conclude agreements that would have been unthinkable just a short time ago. Most of the nations opposed to Iran's policies have stable political systems and successful economies. They have advanced weapons and enjoy a relative advantage, thanks to the technological capabilities of the United States and Israel. And although their critical infrastructure and civilian areas are vulnerable, so are Iran's. Acting

responsibly and trying to prevent an overall regional war are important, but the anti-Iran axis must be prepared on the outside chance that war should occur. Iran itself has repeatedly demonstrated that it is deterred by escalation that might lead to war, and its whole *modus operandi* is structured to avoid such an outcome.

The strategy and campaign proposed here will have to deal with the fact that Iran is gaining confidence because, to date, it has been very successful with its indirect approach: operating through proxies or acting covertly on its own to harm and deter its enemies while preserving a degree of deniability. Iran has no trouble sacrificing its proxies—whether Afghans, Pakistanis, Syrians, Lebanese, or Palestinians—and their infrastructure to advance its agenda.

Any regional coalition must operate under a defensive rationale. But a correct defensive rationale must include an active defense concept and incorporate offensive action on the tactical and operational levels as part of an overall defensive strategy. It is necessary to crack Iran's sense of immunity by conducting flexible direct deterrent reprisals in accordance with a measure-for-measure principle. The assumption is that Iran will be deterred when it understands that it alone does not get to write the rules of the game or dictate its limits. The geographic limits of the campaign lie across its political borders. The fire it sends elsewhere will boomerang on it and scorch the hems of its leaders' robes. This approach should have been adopted long ago—such as after the attack on Aramco's oil installations in Saudi Arabia, the attacks on the U.S. bases, the attack on civilian merchant ships and the killing of civilian sailors, the ballistic missile attack on Abu Dhabi, and so on. Conducting a joint covert campaign by expanding the gray zone in joint fashion, aiding opposition groups, and encouraging resistance on Iran's own turf and that of its proxies will be critical in this campaign. Leadership, perseverance, resilience, and resolve will be required.

As shown earlier, Iran is subject to many challenges and weaknesses. In many of the spheres in which it is trying to entrench itself, there is growing opposition by those who view it as a foreign, disruptive, and frequently destructive force. The regime is vulnerable. It suffers from legitimacy problems, resulting in political demonstrations and acts of resistance. The

regime is constantly worried about its own survival. In the long term, Iran's structural problems can be expected to worsen this state of affairs. These weaknesses should be exploited with a strategy and a joint campaign plan that are flexible and adaptive.

The United States is critical to such an alliance and should support and lead it, which would be in its own interests. Furthermore, the United States should strengthen its regional deterrence, which is a restraining factor for enemy entities. The image of the United States in the Middle East improves its standing and its deterrence capabilities in other theaters around the world. It can promote international processes and solutions as part of a regional strategy. Israel's presence in CENTCOM provides an opportunity for creating a defensive military coalition involving Israel and several Arab partners. Israel with its experience can help enhance regional intelligence capabilities and strengthen defenses against Iran's precision strike and cyberwarfare capabilities. Even if an organization such as a Middle East States Defense Alliance is not created, the parties could rely on less formal frameworks to formulate a joint strategy and campaign.

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