



Is Iran Looking to Inspire Shia Homegrown Violent Extremist Attacks?

Moustafa Ayad and Matthew Levitt



Left: Salman Rushdie attacker Hadi Matar appears in court, August 2022.
Right: Gen. Qasem Soleimani
Reuters.

In January 2020, U.S. airstrikes killed Gen. Qasem Soleimani, who commanded the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and was, according to U.S. officials, plotting attacks against American interests at the time.¹ Within days, Iran fired more than a dozen missiles at U.S. bases in Iraq—where Soleimani was killed alongside top militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—causing traumatic brain injury to more than a hundred U.S. service members.² By October 2021, Iranian agents were plotting to assassinate former U.S. national security advisor John Bolton, along with other U.S. officials suspected of playing a role in the Soleimani operation.³ But Iranian state-sponsored maneuvering was hardly the whole story.

Alongside regime-led efforts, a parallel development emerged in which individuals with no formal ties to Iran or its agencies or proxies took it upon themselves to carry out attacks of the types encouraged by the Islamic Republic and its supporters.

Consider the case of Nika Nikoubin, a woman who reportedly met a man online and scheduled a rendezvous in March 2022. The two convened at a Las Vegas hotel, where they were engaging in sexual activity when Nikoubin stabbed the man in the neck “for revenge against U.S. troops for the killing of Qassem Soleimani in 2020,” according to a police report.⁴ Police body camera footage showed Nikoubin confessing to the attack. “I guess [it was] out of spite and revenge,” she said in the recording. “I mean, the U.S. killed Soleimani. Lots of blood spilled. So, I feel like it’s fair that American blood be spilled.”⁵

Then, in August 2022, a man attacked the writer Salman Rushdie as he prepared to speak at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York. Hadi Matar, a twenty-four-year-old from New Jersey, was accused of stabbing Rushdie and charged with second-degree attempted murder and assault with a weapon.⁶ Rushdie had been under a death threat since Iran’s founding leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued a fatwa against him in 1989 in response to his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Ever since, the 15th of Khordad Foundation, which operates under the Office of the Supreme Leader, has offered a bounty on his life. (Several weeks after Matar’s attack, the U.S. Department of the Treasury used its counterterrorism authority to designate the foundation for sponsoring or materially assisting in an act of terrorism.⁷)

Matar had visited family in Lebanon for a month in 2018, and his mother recounted that the stay “changed him,” making him more religious and isolated. Although no available information points to his direct involvement with Iran or its proxy groups,⁸ Matar did demonstrate an affinity for Iran’s current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, using the ayatollah’s visage as his email avatar.⁹

In the decades since the Iranian fatwa against

Rushdie, the author—or his translators or publishers—has been targeted in eight plots around the world.¹⁰ In one horrifying case in 1993, a mob burned down the Turkish hotel where a Rushdie translator was staying, killing at least thirty-seven people.¹¹

More broadly, the Nikoubin and Matar attacks suggest that a phenomenon that has long preoccupied U.S. intelligence and law enforcement may now be emerging as a tangible threat. An October 2018 analytical report by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)—“Envisioning the Emergence of Shia HVE Plotters in the U.S.”—defined Shia homegrown violent extremists as “individuals who are inspired or influenced by state actors such as Iran, foreign terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, or Shia militant groups but who do not belong to these groups and are not directed by them.”¹² While the NCTC report did not note any current confirmed cases of Shia HVEs plotting attacks in the United States, analysts identified several factors that would increase their likelihood of mobilizing to violence, as elaborated in the following sections.¹³

A Catalyzing Event

The first factor identified by the NCTC is a “catalyzing event,” such as “direct U.S. military action in Iran, sustained U.S. operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon or Syria, or the assassination of a senior Iranian or Hezbollah leader perceived to have U.S. involvement.” Such an event would be significant enough, the report stated, that it “might push some U.S. Shia to radicalize and consider retaliatory violence.” The Soleimani killing transformed this scenario from theoretical to very real.¹⁴

Indeed, within twenty-four hours after the drone strike that killed Soleimani, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security released a bulletin under its National Terrorism Advisory System warning of potential Iranian or Iranian-inspired plots against the homeland. The bulletin stressed that the department had no information regarding a specific,

credible threat, but advised that “Homegrown Violent Extremists could capitalize on the heightened tensions to launch individual attacks,” adding that “an attack in the homeland may come with little or no warning.”¹⁵

A few days later, the Homeland Security Department, FBI, and NCTC released a joint intelligence bulletin advising federal, state, local, and other counter-terrorism and law enforcement officials and private-sector partners “to remain vigilant in the event of a potential GOI [government of Iran]–directed or *violent extremist GOI supporter threat* to U.S.-based individuals, facilities, and [computer] networks” [emphasis added].¹⁶ The report warned not only of Iranian-directed plots—including both physical attacks and cyber operations—but of attacks by supporters of Iran inspired to act on their own.

Radicalization Enablers— Especially in the United States

According to the NCTC report, Shia HVE mobilization could emerge in the United States concurrent with certain other developments. Some of these have happened in the past without Shia HVE mobilization, the report noted, but “repeat occurrences of such incidents could contribute to or spark radicalization.” Besides U.S. military action, these events include calls by Shia leaders and clerics for violence in the United States; lethal operations by Israel or a Sunni Arab government targeting Iran, Hezbollah, or other Shia actors; or anti-Shia activity in the United States.

The potential for Shia HVE mobilization to violence increases, the report warned, if the catalyzing event occurs in conjunction with “radicalization enablers” who begin actively “amplifying anti-U.S. and pro-Shia rhetoric among audiences in the U.S.”¹⁷ Such enablers could include charismatic U.S.-based radicalizers—perhaps people who have fought with Hezbollah or other Shia militant groups overseas—who promote

Shia grievances and advocate attacks. Alternatively, what the NCTC report referred to as “Shia cyber actors”—social media influencers tied to Iran or Hezbollah, or independent websites promoting Shia grievances—could conduct influence operations to sow discord among Shia in the United States and mobilize them to violence.

Consider, for example, the social media outfit known as the “Electronic Resistance,” which spreads Shia extremist material online and supports (but is not controlled by) Hezbollah. If such media, which is dominated by Iran and its proxies, began to openly sanction retaliatory violence, that too would serve to enable Shia HVE mobilization.

Iran itself runs extensive digital influence operations. After the Soleimani killing, it used Instagram accounts to menace the White House and Trump family members with images of coffins draped in U.S. flags, captioned “Prepare the coffins.”¹⁸ A study by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change detailed how IRGC ideological training documents distributed online in Persian “propagate the idea that there is an existential threat to Shiism and Shia Muslims from a [Sunni] Arab-Zionist-Western axis.”¹⁹ Among the paper’s key findings is that “the worldview within which this training is framed is extremist and violent,” and that it “identifies enemies—from the West to Christians and Jews, to Iranians who oppose the regime—and advocates supranational jihad in the name of exporting Iran’s Islamic Revolution.”²⁰ In spring of 2023, Britain’s media watchdog, Ofcom (the Office of Communications), fined the Shia satellite television station in the country—Ahlebait TV—for broadcasting anti-Semitic hate speech that included references to divine punishment to justify the expulsion of Jews from various societies throughout history, and blamed this persecution on the Jews themselves.²¹

Some Shia militia groups go a step further, producing social media material aimed at radicalizing fellow Shia and mobilizing them to violence. A tweet by a Kataib Hezbollah spokesperson on January 3, 2020, right after the strike that killed the group’s leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, along with Qods Force chief

Qasem Soleimani, encouraged Shia to volunteer for “martyrdom operations against invading ‘Crusader’ foreign forces,” noting that the first to register would be the first to be martyred.²² A tweet dated February 5, 2020, claims to show a photograph of Kataib Hezbollah’s registration form for those interested in carrying out suicide operations against U.S. forces in Iraq.²³

Various factors inhibit the emergence of Shia HVE activity in the United States, including the hierarchical nature of Shiism and an associated disincentive to carry out lone-offender attacks absent direction from senior Iranian, Hezbollah, or other authority figures. But—the NCTC argued—should radicalization enablers build upon one or more catalyzing events, this would “probably increase the number of Shia HVEs or accelerate their mobilization to violence by amplifying anti-U.S. and pro-Shia rhetoric among Shia audiences in the U.S.”²⁴

In another scenario, a Shia person in the United States or elsewhere in the West might self-radicalize with the help of online messaging. Even more likely, someone already involved with a Shia extremist group could be mobilized to act on their own, independent of the organization. This may perhaps have happened with Hadi Matar if he interacted with Hezbollah operatives while in Lebanon, although those details are not publicly available. Such interactions, however, are undoubtedly occurring in general.

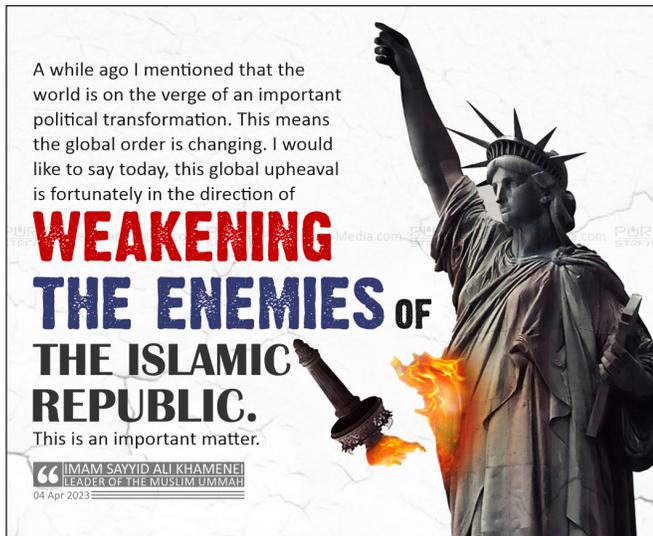
The Shia Cyber Actor Ecosystem

The digital ecosystem nurtured by the Iranian government, comprising the work of numerous state-run media outlets and Middle East militias (and published in many languages), has been well documented.²⁵ These regional outlets have long circumvented efforts to moderate their content, attacking regime opponents and openly seeding Tehran-approved tropes across a range of

platforms.²⁶ Beyond outlets engaged in information warfare are numerous support groups, channels, pages, and influencers in (extremist-friendly) alt-tech and closed platforms, which create echo chambers that support attacking Iran’s enemies globally. More concerning is that these radical influencers are engaging primarily with English-speaking audiences. Young Shia are clearly imbibing content provided by supporters of the Islamic Republic. But the question remains, to what degree will they respond with action?

The vast English-language digital ecosystem propagating Shia extremism increasingly targets younger audiences, providing them with tools to slander anti-regime Iranian activists, Sunni Muslims, and the United States and its allies. Rather than relying on disinformation, these “cyber actors” actively proselytize for Tehran, its various military and intelligence services, and its Middle East proxies. Not only do they translate speeches by Iranian officials and like-minded ideologues into English; they also provide the audiovisual content that enables others to easily build new online communities spreading Iranian propaganda.

Many of these communities are based in the United States and rely on U.S. digital infrastructure.²⁷ The use of America as a staging ground for information warfare by Iranian cyber actors, which play a central role in disseminating content focused on martyrdom and revenge,²⁸ should alarm U.S. officials, analysts, and investigators. These networks target U.S.-based Muslim communities, feeding off disaffection in marginalized communities and often highlighting law enforcement abuses as being emblematic of a state “dripping with the blood of the Black man.”²⁹ By exploiting such disaffection, they hope to weaken “the enemies of the Islamic Republic.”³⁰ These networks are ostensibly focused on the theological teachings of Iran’s clerical regime, but they similarly venerate and spread the narratives of its security apparatuses and its proxy militias across the Middle East.



The Role of “Pure Constellation”

One such “volunteer-run” network, which this study’s authors have dubbed Pure Constellation,³¹ has managed twenty websites supportive of Iran, its proxies, its clerical leadership, and Iran-linked clerics in Pakistan, and is building archives, news sites, and chat forums. Ten of the sites are currently functional and accessible, while the other ten are inaccessible or defunct.

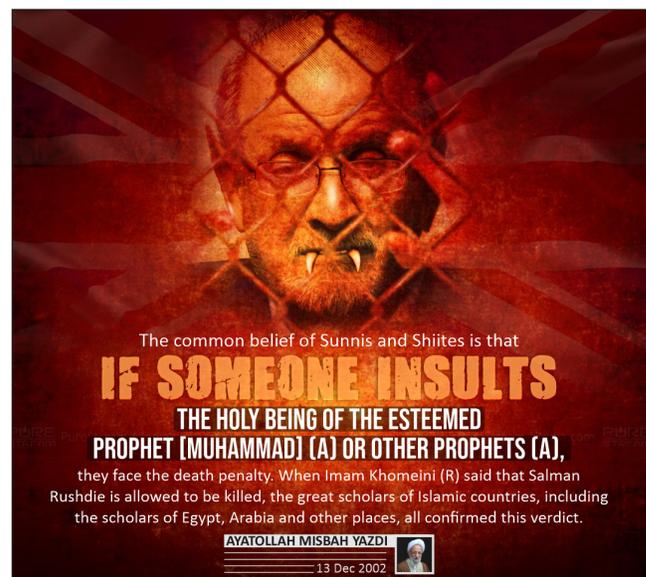
The de facto administrator of these sites, responsible for information technology and software solutions, was registered as a limited liability company in Michigan from 2010 to 2015, and simultaneously registered in Georgia in 2012 as a foreign limited liability company—although its Georgia registration was revoked in 2016. This administrator is pivotal for having designed most of Pure Constellation’s sites. The ten functional sites serve as Iranian-regime-support and Shia proselytization hubs, as well as archives for propaganda by Tehran, its proxies, and their ideological allies. They can be identified as products of Pure Constellation through the administrator, which claims to have no affiliation with or funding from “any group, organization or governmental body/institution(s).”³²

This study’s authors have mapped these sites and their links to other “nodes”—i.e., Telegram channels, WhatsApp groups, and social media sites such as

Facebook and Twitter. For the purposes of this study, the emphasis will be on two specific sites, both of which host material from foreign terrorist organizations that has been translated from Persian and Arabic into English and rebranded through Pure Constellation.³³

Pure Constellation’s most prominent website, which will remain unnamed here in order to avoid driving traffic to it, outlines its “beliefs” via a thirteen-point statement in the “About Us” section. One of the points reads: “We strongly and categorically oppose, condemn, and are enemies of every brand of ‘Islam’ that is promoted and spread by the United States of America and the United Kingdom.”³⁴ The site has 238 pages of digital posters asserting, among other things, that the United States and Britain have “cultivated terrorism” and that Europe helped “nurture” Islamic State foreign fighters.³⁵ The site also includes several professionally edited videos about Qasem Soleimani.

On February 13, 2023, the site produced a digital poster depicting Salman Rushdie as a demon alongside a 2002 quote from the late Iranian cleric Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi justifying the idea of killing Rushdie. The poster quotes Mesbah-Yazdi as saying, “The common belief of Sunnis and Shiites is that if someone insults the holy being of the esteemed Prophet [Muhammad]... or other Prophets...they face the death penalty.



When Imam Khomeini...said that Salman Rushdie is allowed to be killed, the great scholars of Islamic countries, including the scholars of Egypt, Arabia and other places, all confirmed this verdict.”

This site, which averaged more than 10,000 visitors in April 2023,³⁶ is linked to a Telegram channel with 3,472 subscribers and a WhatsApp group with 240 participants. Additionally, the Rushdie message was spread across the websites, channels, and groups of Pure Constellation, which manages a Facebook page with 203 followers, an Instagram account with 649 followers, and a Twitter account with 1,038 followers, and constantly reminds its subscribers and followers to fight the “soft war,” or “cultural war,” against the United States through propaganda and media.

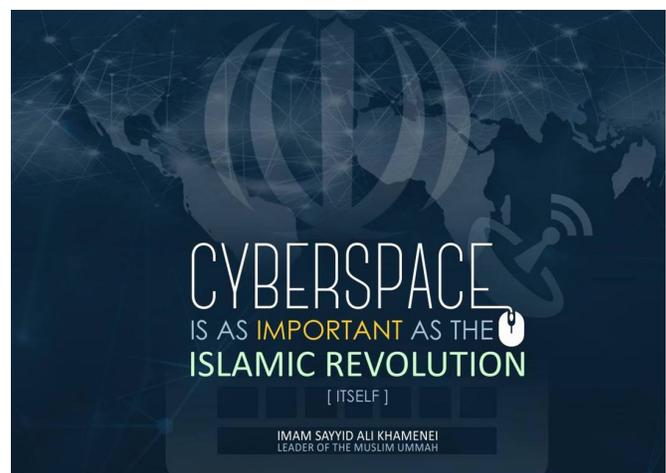
Central to Pure Constellation’s online presence is the veneration of “martyrs,” many of them linked to the IRGC and its Middle East proxies. Pure Constellation thereby aggressively helps spread English-language messages, wills, books, and biographies through a website dedicated to martyrs. The site describes itself as making “a humble attempt” to introduce martyrs because “a martyr is a true inspiration for all and, through his/her martyrdom, is capable of reviving a dead and decaying society from dark[ness] just like a candle that burns itself in order to provide light to those around it.” The martyr-dedicated website, like other Pure Constellation sites, has an open social media presence, including an Instagram account with 1,745 followers, a WhatsApp group with 140 participants, and a Telegram channel with 1,155 subscribers.

These two sites—focusing on “digital posters” and martyrs—play a critical role with English-speaking Shia cyber actors, building communities rooted in the aesthetics and principles of regime-sanctioned martyrdom and echoing the Islamic Republic’s geopolitical and theological stances. Consider the linked collection of English-language Telegram channels broadly dubbed “Shia Nation,” which has been banned from YouTube but is still linked to several Telegram channels dedicated to “Iranian assets.” These channels archive online material and provide followers with raw footage and content from

the Iranian regime and its regional proxies such as Iraq’s al-Hashd al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF), Hezbollah, and Yemen’s Houthis. The content on these channels is continually updated and provides enterprising propagandists with material to curate for cultivation of online communities. Each channel carries “two hundred-plus” videos of various fighting forces linked to Tehran and its Middle East proxies.³⁷

Channels like these support online communities encompassing young English speakers who back the Iranian regime and its proxies and engage in attacks on Sunni channels and pages, including doxing detractors. The authors have mapped seven of these channels on Telegram connected to servers on the Discord platform, which has been used to share manifestos by several perpetrators of mass casualty attacks in the United States. Scrutiny of prevalent inflowing and outflowing links allowed the authors to identify other “network nodes” central to these Telegram channels.

To be sure, closer research is required to determine whether this ecosystem of pro-Iran online networks is actively fueling the radicalization of would-be attackers in the West. But Pure Constellation clearly illustrates how one online network nourishes young English-speaking users sympathetic to regime ideology. The resulting echo chambers, spanning digital platforms, champion martyrdom as noble and theologically sanctioned and could potentially precipitate real-world harm.



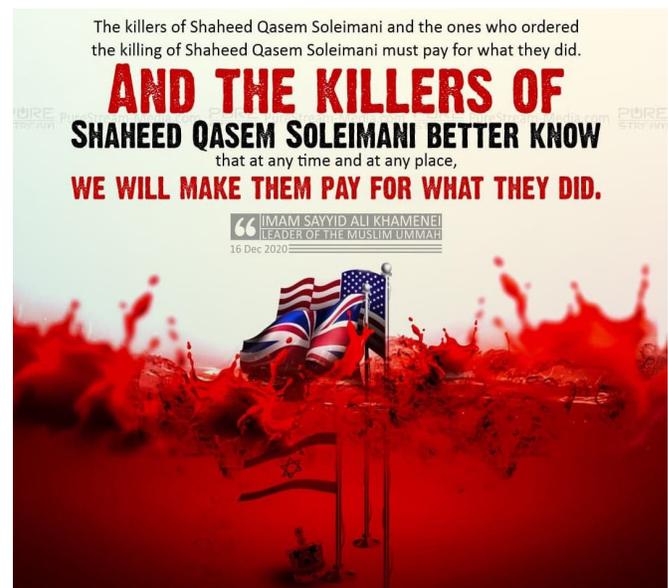
Historical Precedents

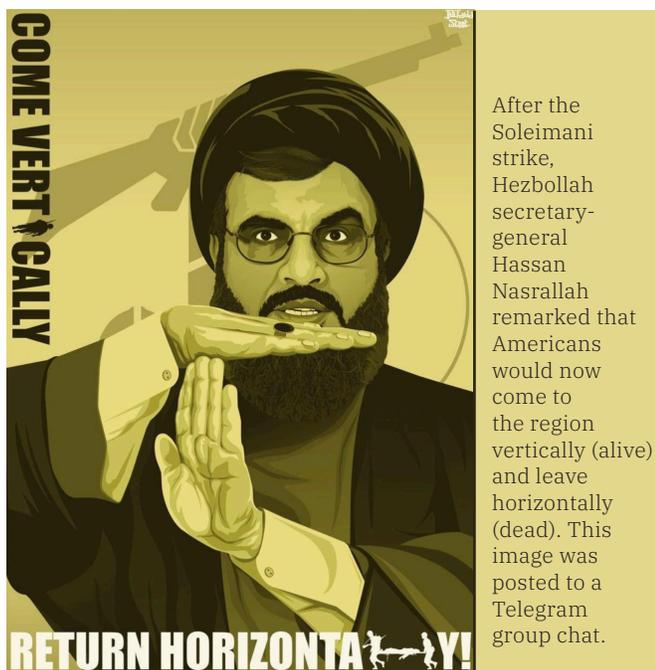
Given how active Shia cyber actors are today, concerns about HVE attacks are warranted, especially in light of history. The June 1988 edition of the CIA's classified publication *Terrorism Review* included a section titled "Attacks Against Saudi Interests: Inspired by Iran?"³⁸ The text, published nearly a year after at least 275 Iranian pilgrims died in riots during the Hajj pilgrimage in July 1987, stated, "We believe that Tehran began a harassment campaign shortly after the Mecca riot."³⁹ It added that "we cannot confirm that Iran has directed the recent anti-Saudi attacks"—meaning attacks since August 1987—but noted that "Tehran has assets in Islamic fundamentalist populations worldwide on which it could draw..."⁴⁰

And a case from 1989 remains salient today. On August 3 of that year, Hezbollah operative Mustafa Mahmoud Mazeh died when an explosive device he was preparing detonated prematurely inside London's Paddington Hotel.⁴¹ His target was Salman Rushdie. Mazeh, a Lebanese citizen born in Conakry, the Guinean capital, joined a local Hezbollah cell in his teens and apparently sojourned in his parents' Lebanese village before traveling to Britain through the Netherlands.⁴² Later, a Hezbollah commander, speaking about Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie, would tell an interviewer that "one member of the Islamic Resistance, Mustafa Mazeh, had been martyred in London."⁴³ According to the CIA, attacks in July 1991 on the Italian, Norwegian, and Japanese translators of *The Satanic Verses* suggested "that Iran has shifted from attacking organizations affiliated with the novel—publishing houses and bookstores—to individuals involved in its publication, as called for in the original fatwa."⁴⁴ Today, a shrine dedicated to Mazeh still stands in Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, with an inscription reading, "The first martyr to die on a mission to kill Salman Rushdie."⁴⁵

Conclusion

In January 2023, Iranian officials marked the third anniversary of Qasem Soleimani's death, issuing a series of public statements threatening retaliatory attacks. Iran's state-affiliated media released a list of fifty-one Americans accused of playing some role in the Soleimani operation, warning that they were "under the shadow of retaliation."⁴⁶ Speaking on the occasion, however, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri—chairman of Iran's Armed Forces General Staff—focused not on what Iranian agents might do, but on how angry youths inspired by the regime might act on their own. "Revenge against the masterminds and perpetrators of General Soleimani's assassination will never be removed from the agenda of the youths of the Muslim world and his devotees across the world," Bagheri asserted.⁴⁷ A few days later, after the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published caricatures of Ayatollah Khamenei, IRGC chief Gen. Hossein Salami warned, "You have made a big mistake, but sooner or later Muslims will take revenge, and you may arrest the avengers, but the dead will not come back to life."⁴⁸ In case his reference to regime-motivated lone actors was unclear, Salami cited the attack on Salman Rushdie just a few months earlier, stating: "I refer the French and the directors of this institution [*Charlie Hebdo*] to the fate of Salman Rushdie."⁴⁹





Such public statements from senior Iranian officials are disconcerting, but the cyber actors actively advocating violence in the United States present a unique and pressing threat. When NCTC analysts produced their report on the potential for Shia homegrown violent extremism in October 2018, they could point to no tangible examples of plotters on U.S. soil. The landscape has now changed. What was previously the basis for a theoretical exercise is now a real challenge. Tracking networks of Shia radicalization enablers, as the NCTC described them, could help investigators and researchers further assess the extent of their influence and the specific threats they pose. This much is clear: the Shia cyber actors about whom the NCTC has voiced such concern—those who support the IRGC and its Qods Force, along with Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies—are already dangerously active online. ❖

NOTES

- 1 Reuters, “Pentagon Says Iranian Commander Soleimani Was Developing Plans to Attack Americans,” January 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-blast-pentagon/pentagon-says-iranian-commander-soleimani-was-developing-plans-to-attack-americans-idUSKBN1Z2056>.
- 2 Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, “More Than 100 U.S. Troops Diagnosed with Brain Injuries from Iran Attack,” Reuters, February 19, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pentagon-tbi-exclusive/more-than-100-u-s-troops-diagnosed-with-brain-injuries-from-iran-attack-idUSKBN2041ZK>.
- 3 U.S. Department of Justice, “Member of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Charged with Plot to Murder the Former National Security Advisor,” August 10, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/member-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-irgc-charged-plot-murder-former-national>.
- 4 “Woman Stabbed Her Date in Vegas Hotel Room as ‘Revenge’ for U.S. Killing Iranian Military Leader, Police Say,” CBS News, March 14, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nika-nikoubin-stabbed-date-revenge-us-killing-qas-sem-soleimani-nevada-police/>.
- 5 David Charns, “Woman in Las Vegas—Area ‘Revenge’ Stabbing over Death of Iranian Leader Takes Deal, Could Avoid Prison,” 8 News Now, May 10, 2023, <https://www.8newsnow.com/investigators/woman-in-las-vegas-area-revenge-stabbing-over-death-of-iranian-leader-takes-deal-could-avoid-prison/>.
- 6 Hurubie Meko and Lauren D’Avolio, “Rushdie Stabbed Roughly 10 Times in Premeditated Attack, Prosecutors Say,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/13/nyregion/rushdie-video-stabbed-ny.html>.
- 7 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iranian Foundation Behind Bounty on Salman Rushdie,” press release, October 28, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1059>.
- 8 Associated Press, “Salman Rushdie Attacker ‘Surprised’ the Author Survived,” Politico, August 17, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/08/17/salman-rushdie-survive-attacker-00052549>.
- 9 Chelsia Rose Marcius, Tracey Tulley, and Ana Facio-Krajcer, “‘I’m Done with Him’: A Mother’s Anger over Rushdie Attack,” *New York Times*, updated August 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/nyregion/salman-rushdie-stabbing-suspect.html>.
- 10 Hikari Hida and Mike Ives, “Rushdie Attack Recalls 1991 Killing of His Japanese Translator,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/13/world/asia/rushdie-attack-japanese-translator.html>; Matthew Levitt, “Tehran’s Unlikely Assassins,” *Weekly Standard*, August 20, 2012, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tehrans-unlikely-assassins>; Reuters, “Events Following Iran’s Fatwa Against Author Salman Rushdie,” August 12, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/events-following-irans-fatwa-against-author-salman-rushdie-2022-08-12/>.
- 11 Treasury Department, “Treasury Sanctions Iranian Foundation,” <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1059>.
- 12 National Counterterrorism Center, “Envisioning the Emergence of Shia HVE Plotters in the U.S.,” *NCTC Current*, October 16, 2018, <https://publicintelligence.net/nctc-shia-extremist-emergence/>.
- 13 NCTC, “Envisioning the Emergence of Shia HVE Plotters,” <https://publicintelligence.net/nctc-shia-extremist-emergence/>.
- 14 NCTC, “Envisioning the Emergence of Shia HVE Plotters,” <https://publicintelligence.net/nctc-shia-extremist-emergence/>.
- 15 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Summary of Terrorism Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin, January 4, 2020, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/ntas/alerts/20_0104_ntas_bulletin.pdf.
- 16 “Escalating Tensions Between the United States and Iran Pose Potential Threats to the Homeland,” Joint Intelligence Bulletin (DHS, FBI, NCTC), January 8, 2020, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FBI-NCTC-Iran-Threats-2020.pdf>.
- 17 NCTC, “Envisioning the Emergence of Shia HVE Plotters,” <https://publicintelligence.net/nctc-shia-extremist-emergence/>.

- 18 Emerson T. Brooking and Suzanne Kianpour, *Iranian Digital Influence Efforts: Guerrilla Broadcasting for the Twenty-First Century* (Washington DC: Atlantic Council, 2020), https://atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranian-digital-influence-efforts-guerrilla-broadcasting-for-the-twenty-first-century/#Chapter_5.
- 19 Kasra Aarabi, *Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, February 2020), <https://institute.global/policy/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>.
- 20 Aarabi, *Beyond Borders*, <https://institute.global/policy/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>.
- 21 See “Decision: Sanction: To Be Imposed on Ahlebait TV Networks,” Ofcom, April 25, 2023, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/260308/sanction-decision-ahlebait-tv-networks.pdf.
- 22 “Abu Ali al-Askari” (@abualiaaskry), “The form organized by the Hezbollah Brigades to register in the martyrdom operations against the American forces in Iraq,” post on Twitter, February 5, 2020, 2:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/abualiaaskry/status/1213195091625598977>; thanks to Phillip Smyth for directing the authors to this tweet.
- 23 “Ali al-Iraqi” (@pTWFTqkVXt4NXlr), post on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/pTWFTqkVXt4NXlr/status/1225141058465685504>; again, courtesy of Phillip Smyth.
- 24 NCTC, “Envisioning the Emergence of Shia HVE Plotters,” <https://publicintelligence.net/nctc-shia-extremist-emergence/>.
- 25 The authors define a digital ecosystem as a simple or complex network of actors and institutions (state and nonstate) interacting with or interlinked to one another online through websites, messaging channels, social media accounts, and other applications. See Jack Stubbs and Christopher Bing, “Special Report: How Iran Spreads Disinformation Around the World,” Reuters, November 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyber-iran-specialreport-idUSKCN1NZ1FT>; and Issie Lapowsky, “What We Now Know About Iran’s Global Propaganda Campaign,” *Wired*, August 24, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/iran-global-propaganda-fireeye/>; also see Hamdi Malik, *The Revolution Will Be Televised in Arabic: Iran’s Media Infrastructure Abroad*, Policy Note 122 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2022), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/revolution-will-be-televised-arabic-irans-media-infrastructure-abroad>.
- 26 Brian Bennett, “Iran Steps Up Efforts to Sow Discord Inside of the U.S.,” *Time*, June 9, 2021, <https://time.com/6071615/iran-disinformation-united-states/>; Naomi Nix, “Facebook Removes Iranian Account Network Trying to Sway Politics,” Bloomberg, October 11, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-11/facebook-removes-iranian-account-network-trying-to-sway-politics>; Sarah E. Needleman and Bowdeya Tweh, “Twitter Suspends Accounts Linked to Hamas and Hezbollah,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/twitter-suspends-accounts-linked-to-hamas-hezbollah-11572888026>; and Michael Shkolnik and Alexander Corbeil, “Hezbollah Is Using Internet Violence to Incite Violence Inside of Israel,” *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 9 (October 2019), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/hezbollahs-virtual-entrepreneurs-hezbollah-using-internet-incite-violence-israel/>.
- 27 Digital infrastructure can be defined as technological assets leveraged to support the spread of information, protect information assets online, and collect data.
- 28 Based on a review of the content being shared by key networks that have linkages to the United States and appear to be operating in the country.
- 29 Digital poster titled “Uncle Sam’s hands are dripping with blood,” which references a Malcolm X quote (linked to Pure Constellation network, discussed later).
- 30 Digital poster that quotes Ali Khamenei and features an image of the Statute of Liberty dropping her torch and setting her robe on fire (also linked to Pure Constellation).
- 31 Pure Constellation, a conglomeration of websites, Telegram channels, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts that support the Iranian regime, claims to be “a service provider to many Islamic media projects in the cyberspace.” The authors used the term “constellation” to refer to various satellites revolving around a central orb (the administrator) with a role in the survival of the interlinked sites, channels, and groups across the open web.
- 32 This quote has been transcribed directly from Pure Constellation’s administrator.

- 33 Based on the Foreign Terrorist Organizations list maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism. The websites promote, share, and rebrand both IRGC and Hezbollah content, and the two groups have been on the FTO list since 2019 and 1997, respectively. The list can be found here: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.
- 34 The Instagram page for the website claims that its name is derived from the “continuous stream of the blood of martyrs.”
- 35 Five pages on the website promote digital posters focused on “Qasem Soleimani’s ideology”; see https://pure-stream-media.com/image_category/qasem-soleimanis-ideology/.
- 36 Statistics on the website’s traffic were derived from the analytics platform SimilarWeb.
- 37 Based on a review of the Telegram asset channels linked to each of these groups.
- 38 U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “Attacks Against Saudi Interests: Inspired by Iran?” *Terrorism Review*, June 2, 1988, approved for release June 1999, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258675.pdf.
- 39 CIA, “Attacks Against Saudi Interests,” https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258675.pdf.
- 40 CIA, “Attacks Against Saudi Interests,” https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258675.pdf.
- 41 Anthony Loyd, “Tomb of the Unknown Assassin Reveals Mission to Kill Rushdie,” *Times* (London), June 8, 2005, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tomb-of-the-unknown-assassin-reveals-mission-to-kill-rushdie-58gkcjz0gkb>.
- 42 Loyd, “Tomb of the Unknown Assassin,” <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tomb-of-the-unknown-assassin-reveals-mission-to-kill-rushdie-58gkcjz0gkb>.
- 43 H. E. Chehabi and Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2006), 292–93.
- 44 U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “Iran: Enhanced Terrorist Capabilities and Expanding Target Selection,” April 1, 1992, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000676446.pdf.
- 45 Loyd, “Tomb of the Unknown Assassin,” <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tomb-of-the-unknown-assassin-reveals-mission-to-kill-rushdie-58gkcjz0gkb>.
- 46 Associated Press, “Iranian President Vows Vengeance 3 Years After General’s Death,” January 3, 2023, <https://ap-news.com/article/iran-politics-government-iraq-qassim-soleimani-3353602bd30e683afec45d8c78196886>.
- 47 “Top Iranian General: Muslim Youths Determined to Avenge Death of Soleimani,” *Times of Israel*, January 2, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-iranian-general-muslim-youths-determined-to-avenge-death-of-soleimani/>.
- 48 Yaghoub Fazeli, “Iran IRGC Chief Vows Revenge Against Charlie Hebdo over Khamenei Cartoons,” *Al Arabiya*, January 10, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/01/10/Iran-IRGC-chief-vows-revenge-against-Charlie-Hebdo-for-Khamenei-cartoons>.
- 49 Fazeli, “Iran IRGC Chief Vows Revenge,” *Al Arabiya*, January 10, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/01/10/Iran-IRGC-chief-vows-revenge-against-Charlie-Hebdo-for-Khamenei-cartoons>.

The Authors



MOUSTAFA AYAD serves as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's executive director for Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. He has more than fifteen years of experience designing projects focused on elections, conflict resolution, and gender empowerment across the Middle East and Africa. His research on extremism in social media has been featured in BBC, Vice News, CNN, NPR, the Daily Beast, the *Times* (London), and *Wired*.



MATTHEW LEVITT is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. A former Treasury Department official, he has authored books on Hamas and Hezbollah and created the *Lebanese Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activities Interactive Map and Timeline*.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW, SUITE 500 | WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG
©2023 THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.