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# IRAN'S USE OF SHI'I MILITANT PROXIES

## IDEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL EXPEDIENCY VERSUS UNCERTAIN SUSTAINABILITY

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## SUMMARY

Since its 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has incited violent, radical, and often sectarian nonstate groups across the Middle East to serve as proxies in its military campaigns to influence regional and international politics. This “proxy model” has become increasingly salient since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and more recently in Iraq and Syria, and is now Iran’s primary tool for advancing its regional interests.

The U.S. and the West in general have largely paid attention only to radical Sunni groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. With a few exceptions, such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah, nonstate Shi’i militant groups have generally avoided the same intense Western scrutiny.

This study compares and contrasts regional conflicts that have been shaped by Iranian proxies and Iran’s successful—and unsuccessful—attempts to recruit to its militant groups. It also identifies the key forces that have shaped Iran’s ideological and operational sponsorship of nonstate militant groups, both Sunni and Shi’i, as well as its motivations and preferred modus operandi.

## KEY POINTS

- \* Iran’s military interventions in Iraq and Syria have undermined its message of Muslim unity in the struggle to repel U.S. influence from Muslim lands, which has served as the core of its outreach to Muslims since 1979.
- \* Since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Tehran has systematically attempted to undermine the agenda of the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East by sponsoring anti-American militant proxies.
- \* After years of largely unsuccessful outreach to the Islamic world writ large, Tehran has—since the Arab Spring protests of 2011—narrowed the focus of its outreach to expanding and disseminating the Shi’i nonstate proxy model.
- \* The proxy model approach has overall been successful for Iran. Unless its costs outweigh the benefits, no major shift in this policy can be expected while Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remains the decisive voice in policymaking in Tehran.



## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to assess the central role of the Iranian state in mobilizing, deploying, and sustaining violent transnational groups across the Middle East, and in the Arab world in particular. As this chapter will outline, much evidence points to how key policymakers in Tehran consider the use of the armed nonstate actor—or the proxy model—as an apt instrument to project Iranian power across multiple arenas in years to come. Such Iranian efforts have not gone unnoticed in the capitals of some of Iran's regional rivals such as Jerusalem, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi. This is a worrying trend, as it elevates the risk of a cycle of retaliation or reciprocation with violent sectarianism becoming a primary instrument in the hands of regional states seeking to advance their geopolitical agendas and ambitions.

This chapter will be divided into four sections, beginning with a historical framework placing the nonstate Shi'i proxy model within the context of modern Iranian history. In this opening section, the paper will also summarize and critique key findings from existing literature on the topic. Second, the utility of the non-state proxy model will be examined as a key component of Iran's ongoing military force restructuring. Third, the ideological underpinnings of Iran's non-state militant model will be measured against Tehran's other international priorities and placed in the context of political competition inside the Iranian Shi'i Islamist regime. In this section, the

ideological preferences of Ali Khamenei, the Iranian supreme leader, will receive closer attention. Fourth, and finally, the paper will summarize key findings and point to U.S. policy options that could potentially mitigate further Iranian investment in the militant Shi'a nonstate proxy model.

## PART ONE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Iranian state's use of Islamist Arab proxies is almost entirely a post-1979 phenomenon. The former regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi very rarely adopted the use of foreign proxies, Arab or otherwise, as part of its foreign policy doctrine. When the shah did—best exemplified by his support for Iraq's militant Kurds who stood in conflict with the central government in Baghdad through the 1960s and 1970s—he did so based on an approach that was devoid of any sectarian inclinations, even though he was the absolute monarch of the world's largest Shi'i Muslim country with plenty of resources at his disposal.

Put simply, the sectarian card was very rarely exploited by Iran before 1979. And yet, close personal and ideological ties between Arab and Iranian militants do date back to the reign of the shah. Mostafa Chamran, the first defense minister of the Islamic Republic, and many other anti-shah Iranian activists from that generation, were first exposed to doctrines of irregular warfare among Arabs in Lebanon and Syria in the 1970s. This list of Iranians includes many that later

became prominent commanders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) such as Yahya Safavi, the IRGC's top leader from 1997 to 2007.<sup>1</sup>

After 1979, the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, swiftly added the sectarian layer to Tehran's quest for geopolitical influence. As a man who had lived over a decade in involuntary exile in Najaf, Iraq during the era of Saddam Hussein, Khomeini was, after seizing power in Tehran, quick to turn against his old—albeit reluctant—host by inciting Iraq's Shi'a to rise against the Sunni Ba'athist strongman. As Vali Nasr noted, "Arab nationalism [as in Saddam's Iraq] holds an inherent bias against the Shi'a" and that itself presented an opportunity for Khomeinists.<sup>2</sup> As early as 1971, Khomeini had formulated his ideas for an "Islamic government," which became the title of one of his influential books.<sup>3</sup> In his mind, this notion of "Islamic government" was to be transnational and Shi'i communities everywhere were principal intended audiences.

And unlike the shah, Khomeini promptly framed the struggle against Saddam in Islamist revolutionary terms with tailored messages aimed at mobilizing the Iraqi Shi'i masses. It was often far from subtle. On Apr. 19, 1980, the title of Iran's biggest paper, *Kayhan*, was "Imam [Khomeini] Invites the Iraqi/Military to Rebel [against Saddam]."<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that while he was in exile in Iraq, Khomeini's appeal to Shi'i political mobilization had already made considerable inroads. As Patrick Cockburn observed, "For Khomeini, Islam [was] political" and he played a decisive role in the so-called Shia awakening among Iraqis.<sup>5</sup> He taunted traditionalist clerics: "You busy yourself with Islamic laws concerning menstruation and

giving birth; I am leading a revolution."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Fuad Ajami put it, "The dominant Shia tradition [had historically] counseled distance from political power."<sup>7</sup> For Khomeini, however, religion and politics were inseparable. Within two years of the shah's fall, Iran's Islamist regime created the Office of Islamic Liberation Movements (OILM), placed under the auspices of the IRGC and tasked with exporting Iran's revolutionary model.<sup>8</sup>

Still, such radical religious interpretations or political meddling were not without direct consequences for the Iranian nation itself. From early on, this led to a debate inside the regime itself about the best way forward. Khomeini's incitement of the Iraqi Shi'a was undoubtedly a major factor in Saddam's decision to invade Iran in September 1980. It is thus important to recognize and factor in Iranian Shi'i Islamists' historical links to their Iraqi counterparts when we set out to measure the depth of Tehran's present-day religious and political clout in post-Saddam Iraq. It is also equally important to acknowledge that this relationship has had, and continues to have, unintended effects. For example, a few years after 1979, the more moderate voices in the Iranian regime successfully defanged the OILM. One of the key personalities in the OILM, Mehdi Hashemi, was executed in 1987 in a campaign led by the more moderate voices in the regime including speaker of the parliament, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.<sup>9</sup> Their argument was that Iran, as both a state and a regime that wanted to survive, needed to be selective in the battles it chose to wage.

By 1982, Iran had helped bring about the birth of the anti-Saddam Badr Corps in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, both comprised of



Shi'i Islamist activists that embraced Khomeini's doctrine of sweeping political resistance. Both groups remain to this day the most successful Shi'i militant proxies aligned with Tehran. Throughout the 1980s, Iranian-inspired political radicalism and occasional acts of violence were witnessed in Bahrain, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>10</sup>

## PAN-ISLAMIST UTOPIA VS. SECTARIAN ALLURE

In a sense, as Emmanuel Sivan observed in 1989, the radical Shi'i militant strategy as espoused by the Islamic Republic was at the time very similar to that embraced by its Sunni counterparts, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In both versions, the first step is to delegitimize the ruling power, followed by an armed uprising and then a taking over of government to impose Islamist rule (sharia) over society.<sup>11</sup> It was, of course, in Shi'i-majority Iran that this formula was first successfully executed following the toppling of the shah in 1979. A large and resourceful state had become the key staging ground for this revolutionary Shi'i creed. Once in power, Iran's Islamist rulers looked for ways to redefine Shi'i Islam and to export this brand to Shi'i communities beyond Iran's borders.

The Islamic Republic, as is enshrined in its constitution from 1979, ideologically committed itself to a mission of mobilizing the *mostazafeen*, so-called downtrodden Muslims, against what Tehran labeled unjust rulers. This refers to Muslims in general and did not distinguish between Shi'a and Sunnis. As Afshon Ostovar pointed out in his chapter in "Beyond Sunni and Shia," critics of Iran have tended to see Iranian behavior since 1979 as "an expansive, transnational, pro-Iranian Shia polity." The track record, Ostovar maintains, shows something else. He claims that sectarian factors play a role in Iran's strategic calculations but "not in the single-minded, all-encompassing way that Iran's critics suggest."<sup>12</sup>

To make this point, Ostovar highlights moments when Tehran's actions ignored sectarian preferences. For example, during the Lebanese civil war in the early 1980s, Tehran backed Yasser Arafat's Sunni Fatah movement in its conflict with the Lebanese Shi'i movement Amal. For its political agenda at the time, Tehran prioritized Arafat's anti-Israel stance over Amal's narrow focus on Shi'i Lebanese interests. For Ostovar and many others, such examples embody the Islamic Republic's *realpolitik*.<sup>13</sup>

Though the presence of *realpolitik* in Iran's foreign policy behavior since 1979 is not in question, evidence of it does not



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negate the Islamic Republic's innate sectarian tendencies. The clearest proof is enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic itself: Only a Shi'i Muslim can hold the office of supreme leader and the presidency in Iran, a rigid stipulation that Iran's Sunni minority—about ten percent of the country's population—find discriminatory.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Tehran's outreach to the broader and less or non-Islamist Shi'i communities across the Middle East has not always been entirely successful either. In the case of the minority Shi'i Hazaras in Afghanistan, many in the beleaguered community had little choice but to accept Iranian assistance during the Afghan civil war (1989–2001) when under assault by anti-Shi'i Afghan militants. And yet, there is also a rich record of this community resisting Iranian attempts to impose its ideological preferences on them.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond the hardened Shi'i Islamist circles, the same lukewarm posture was evident in the largely dismissive reaction of Iraqi Shi'a to Khomeini's call for an uprising against Saddam throughout the 1980s. In Pakistan, where the state apparatus is relatively strong, Iran's initial outreach to the large Pakistani Shi'i minority in the 1980s at first created a newfound sense of militancy there. Still, Tehran pulled back from inciting on Pakistani soil when confronted with Islamabad's ire. In reference to the then potential dangers of sectarianism, President Pervez Musharraf said in 2003 that "the greatest danger to Pakistan is not external; it is internal."<sup>16</sup> The warning to Tehran, and other states such as



Saudi Arabia that wanted to exploit sectarianism in Pakistan as part of a regional quest for power, was unmistakable.

And yet the successful inroads Tehran made on this front in the 1980s proved enduring and, as time would show, highly valuable to its geopolitical ambitions. Some of today's most powerful Iraqi Shi'i militia leaders, such as Hadi al-Amiri (Badr Corps) and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes (Kata'ib Hezbollah), were not only early recruits and highly useful to Iran as collaborators during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), but they remain close allies of Tehran to this day.

By the time of Khomeini's death in 1989, an intra-regime debate in Tehran about the utility of the export of the Islamic revolution via the proxy model had led to an end to the more excessive Iranian behaviors. In comparison to the 1980s, which Iran's present-day Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in his June 2017 speech touted as the "golden revolutionary age," the 1990s witnessed a retrenchment in Tehran's use of the proxy model.

This was partly due to a measure of policy reassessment in Tehran, but it was also due to a lack of opportunities; few security voids made themselves available for exploitation in the region that Tehran could seek to fill with its message of armed resistance. This lull, however, proved to be temporary. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 that catalyzed a sudden power vacuum in that country, Tehran hugely bolstered its use of the Arab proxy model.



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## IRAQI AND SYRIAN CHAOS: INCUBATORS FOR NONSTATE GROUPS

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was easily the single key moment that unleashed the phenomenon of violent nonstate actors, beyond any other event before it. In other words, it was again a vacuum that others had created that paved the way for Iran and its Islamist message to be disseminated. What swiftly followed the toppling of Saddam Hussein was the rapid disintegration of Iraq along ethnic and sectarian lines. In the ensuing anarchy, competing Iraqi groups often looked to outside powers for patronage.

Among Iraq's many shades of Shi'i Islamist strands, many looked to their next-door neighbor, the Islamic Republic of Iran, for ideological sustenance and more importantly for arms and funding, as they set out to confront local rivals within post-Saddam Iraqi chaos. Tehran, fully sensitive to the fact that Saddam's fall had put the Middle East in the throes of historical change, was happy to oblige. It might have appeared as a marriage of convenience of sorts, but this was hardly a partnership of equals.

The Islamic Republic, born out of the 1979 revolution as the world's first modern-day theocracy, was the

model to be emulated. With a unique revolutionary ideological agenda, often sectarian, deeply suspicious of the West and wholly antipathetic toward Israel, the ruling Islamist authorities in Tehran saw and continue to see themselves as the center of the "Axis of Resistance." Thus, for any militant nonstate actor to fall under Iranian tutelage means mirroring the Islamic Republic's basic tenets.

With an expanding portfolio of experience in this field dating back to 1979, Tehran quickly expanded this model. After 2003, Iran's IRGC stepped quickly in to identify and cultivate what is in Persian referred to as the *goro-haaye vije*, or "special groups"—Arabs and other non-Iranians—who would become the Islamic Republic's foot soldiers. Additional proxies were created under Iranian auspices due to other regional upsets, such as the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and the upsurge in ISIS with its capture of Mosul in June 2014. Iran decided to intervene by proxy in both countries to keep Bashar al-Assad in power in Syria and to prevent ISIS from taking Iraq's capital Baghdad. Among the most prominent groups within the two states are:

- Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of Righteous People): Iraq and Syria



- Saraya Khorassani (Khorasani Brigades): Iraq and Syria
- Saraya al-Zahra (Zahra's Brigades): Iraq
- Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (The Movement of the Noble of Hezbollah): Iraq and Syria
- Kata'ib Imam Ali (Imam Ali Brigades): Iraq
- Zeynabiyoun Brigade (Pakistanis): Syria
- Fatemiyoun Division (Afghans)<sup>17</sup>: Syria

According to Nick Heras, 40 out of the estimated 67 Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias in Iraq share close links with Iran's IRGC.<sup>18</sup> By late 2017, an estimated 50,000 PMF fighters had mobilized against ISIS within units under direct or indirect Iranian control. To put this number in perspective, the total number of PMF fighters was estimated at 110,000–122,000.<sup>19</sup>

In the years after 2011, Iran was instrumental in keeping Assad in power. A principal contributing factor that enabled Iran's successful military intervention in Syria was Tehran's ability to mobilize and deploy various transnational militant, and often sectarian, groups to Syria's battlefields. In that sense, at its core, Tehran's military intervention in the Syrian war was very similar to the Iranian modus operandi developed in Iraq in the 2000s, where Iran bolstered local nonstate militant actors as its foot soldiers in the broader fight for influence. The major departure in Syria, when compared to the situation in Iraq, was the need for Iran to bring in droves of non-locals—such as Iraqis, Afghans, Pakistanis, and Hezbollah from Lebanon—to fight under Iranian leadership to keep the Assad regime from collapse.

This external focus was necessary due only to demographic realities—Syria's substantial Sunni majority and a general shortage of available Syrians willing to be recruited. Tehran did not engage in any large-scale recruitment of Iranians to be dispatched to Syria. The few thousand Iranians sent to Syria, ostensibly as military advisors, were overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of the volunteer IRGC and not the conscripted Iranian army. Tehran's reluctance to commit manpower to the Syrian campaign has also been evident in casualty figures. According to available data for the January 2012–January 2018 period, more Lebanese (1,213) and Afghans (841) died in Syria than Iranians (535), despite the fact that Iran has the largest population of those three countries.<sup>20</sup>

Such realities suggest that despite Iran's rhetoric about its Syrian intervention being a defensive act necessary to protect national security interests, the authorities in Tehran evidently do not believe mainstream Iranian public opinion shares this view.

Accordingly, Tehran's mobilization effort in Syria has relied heavily on financial and other material incentives, plus the injection of a considerable dose of sectarian messaging to successfully recruit non-Syrians (and non-Iranians) for the pro-Assad military campaign. Afghans, Iraqis, and Pakistanis top the list among recruits to fill the ranks of pro-Iran militias in Syria. This has been a new phase in the evolution of Tehran's war-through-proxy approach and arguably the pinnacle of the internationalization of the Iranian proxy model.

Meanwhile, regional developments following the popular Arab revolts that began in 2011 played a decisive role in pushing the Islamic



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Republic down the path of more pronounced sectarian biases. One principal bi-product of these insurrections in mostly Sunni-majority Arab states was the rise of violent anti-Shi'i groups. While not necessarily of Iran's making, Tehran's actions supporting the Alawi-based Assad regime and other Arab Shi'i communities have played a significant role in fueling this phenomenon of Sunni extremism and militancy.

In 2014, when ISIS erupted throughout Iraq and Syria and threatened core Shi'i population centers in Iraq, the Iraqi Shi'i religious leadership led by Ayatollah Ali Sistani quickly sought to mobilize local Shi'a against ISIS's genocidal sectarian agenda. In this ideological but also considerable logistical effort, Iran and its Iraqi allies were fully on board to the point of becoming critical to the success of what became Iraq's PMF against ISIS. As Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, the top de facto operational

commander of the PMF put it, without Ayatollah's Ali Sistani's fatwa, the PMF would have never been born, and without Iranian technical support, it could have never been sustained.<sup>21</sup>

It was, however, also a moment when Iran became wholly associated with the Shi'i Islamist cause as never before. Put simply, the Islamic Republic's relationship with non-Iranian Shi'i militant Islamists has so far experienced three phases.

The first phase began in 1979 when the fledgling Islamic Republic prioritized Shi'i Islamist groups for two main reasons: existing personal bonds and theological proximity—as evidenced by linkages between Iranian Islamists and Twelver Shi'i counterparts in Iraq and Lebanon—and opportunities to become a





benefactor to groups such as the Badr Corps and Hezbollah, the most lasting groups set up in this timeframe.

What is also noticeable in this first phase is the focus on the U.S. and Israel as primary external ideological targets. At a minimum, this focus on the non-Muslim “other” meant sectarian differences with Sunnis were made secondary. In fact, the focus on non-Muslim adversaries became a basis for collaboration with Sunni groups such as Hamas. Iran cultivated its ties to Hamas from the early 1990s onward, in which the anti-Israel message was the central driving force.<sup>22</sup>

In the second phase, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided the Iranians with the opportunity to double down on this tested formula of mobilizing proxies. In this second phase, which played itself out mostly in the context of an internal Iraqi competition for

power, Tehran began its progression toward becoming more of a protector of the Shi'a and less the pan-Islamic power that the 1979 revolution had stipulated it to be. In this Iraqi theater, the Iranians backed Iraqi Shi'i militias that were engaged in a conflict with local Sunni Iraqis. The latter were often ideologically and financially backed by Iran's Sunni rivals such as Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

In the third phase, the role of sectarianism as a mobilizer was elevated and Sunni states to some extent replaced the U.S. and Israel as the principal external adversaries of Iran and its proxies. In this phase, the same modus operandi and largely the same calculations of maintaining maximum political influence at both the local and regional levels propelled Iran into replicating the Iraqi experience in the Syrian theater. Unlike in Iraq, which is the

cradle of Shi'i Islam, religious justification for intervening in Syria—a country with only a tiny Shi'i population—was a steep hill to climb for Tehran.

Still, thanks to a quick mobilization campaign, the Iranian authorities swiftly turned the fate of a number of religious sites in Syria that some Shi'a revere—such as the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque located in outer Damascus—into red lines that could not fall victim to ISIS's deadly anti-Shi'i worldview. Nonetheless, to paint the military campaign in support of the secular Ba'athist Assad regime as a religious obligation remained problematic for Tehran within its own population.

In fact, despite the Western press's tendency to classify the Assad regime as “Shi'i” and therefore naturally aligned with Iran, there is no strong sectarian connection between Iran's Twelver Shi'i Islam and Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'i Islam.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the Iranian military intervention in Syria was more about Tehran's geopolitical agenda, driven by a fear of Gulf Arab encroachment in the Levant. To a significantly lesser extent, this competition with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf has also unfolded in Yemen. As with Syria's Alawites, the Houthi rebels in Yemen quickly found a champion in Iran. Not because of close religious ties between Iran and the Houthis—who are Zayidi Muslims, a sect theologically closer to mainstream Sunni Islam than the Twelver Shi'i creed found in Iran—but because of shared common adversaries in the shape of Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and the U.S.<sup>24</sup> The Yemeni civil war is a prime example of Islamists in Tehran opportunistically intervening when an occasion presents itself. As Joost Hiltermann of the International Crisis Group put it in 2004,

“The Iranians are just brilliant. They play no [decisive] role whatsoever [in Yemen], but they get all the credit, and so they are capitalizing on it.”<sup>25</sup> Iran's relations with the Houthis have since sharply increased, but overwhelmingly due to the onset of the Yemeni civil war in 2015 and the search of the Houthis for an outside benefactor. It is very doubtful that Iran would have been able to make inroads into Yemen in the same fashion had there been no Yemeni civil war.

As in the case of its relations with the Houthis, despite the awkward religious rationale for its military intervention in Syria, there is presently little reason to assume that Iran's political-military operational blueprint will cease to be relevant once the wars in Iraq and Syria come to a de facto end. A decade and a half following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran's adaptation of the “militant proxy model” is considered by many in Tehran and beyond as a successful strategy worthy of further investment. Relevant officials in Iran never shy away from regularly reminding everyone that this nonstate proxy model is here to stay.

From its own perspective, Iran would likely prefer for the Sunni-Shi'a divide to be downgraded in regional importance. That would allow the Islamic Republic to once again present itself as the champion of the entire Islamic world. It is also amply clear that Tehran would prefer to reinstate the question of the future of Palestine into its main ideological mission, if not its casus belli, potentially as a way to bridge the sectarian divide.



## PART TWO: THE PROXY MODEL IN IRAN'S MILITARY PLANNING

The nonstate militant proxies that Iran recruited, indoctrinated, and helped arm have often had little option but to look to Iran for support. This is leverage that Khamenei and other hard-liners in Tehran consider vindication of their support for the Arab proxy model.

General Qassem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC's expeditionary arm, the Quds Force, who is the public mastermind of the Iranian model, declared publicly on Nov. 21, 2017, that ISIS had been defeated in Syria. In his public response and in a clear signal of Tehran's future intentions, Khamenei urged Soleimani to "maintain readiness for meeting future regional challenges."<sup>26</sup> Two days later, the head of the IRGC, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, explicitly reminded Assad that he was "indebted" to the "people's militias" and called on Assad to "institutionalize [the militias] so they will remain relevant in the face of future threats."<sup>27</sup>

It goes without saying that for Jafari, it is up to Tehran to determine the identity of such future threats, and it is a safe bet that the group's usual targets—notably the U.S., Israel and the Saudis—will be on that list. Such a transition from armed militia to a formidable state-within-the-state reflects, in essence, the historical evolution of the IRGC itself. It began as a militia in 1979 and is today one of the three pillars of power in Tehran (the other being the office of the supreme leader and the presidency). The

IRGC is now envisaging that the non-Iranian proxies it supports in Iraq and Syria should undergo the same process.

The promotion of the proxy model combined with Tehran's eagerness to make sure armed victories are translated into political capital reflects Iran's own military limitations. While the Islamic Republic likes to present itself as a martyrdom-seeking cause and therefore an inherently anti status quo power, in reality, Iran's conventional military strategy has mostly been cautious. Tehran has consistently been careful about the number of troops it has been willing to deploy to Syria and to this day, it does not dispatch conscripts to either Iraq or Syria. Doing so would risk generating awkward political questions within the Iranian public about the direction of the country.

However, as IRGC generals are keen to repeat, the shifting regional security environment requires Iran's military strategy to adapt and reinvent itself. In Tehran, this is increasingly referred to as "forward defense" and the idea that Iran should battle its opponents beyond its borders in order to prevent conflict from taking place on Iranian soil. When ISIS carried out its first attacks in Tehran in June 2017, the proponents of "forward defense" wasted no time to argue that had Iran not militarily intervened in Syria and Iraq, Iran would have had to confront a far greater ISIS threat inside its borders.<sup>28</sup>

The plan behind "forward defense" necessitates substantial readjustments, including the conversion of some of the existing regular military units. It is in the ranks of the conscripted army, or *artesh*, where Iran has the most potential for a transformation.



The *artesh* is in terms of size (about 350,000) approximately three times larger than the IRGC (about 120,000). *Artesh* ground force units are mostly organized in heavily armored infantry and mechanized units. These are a distinct legacy of defense planning from the days of the former pro-U.S. shah when America had helped Iran plan for major conventional ground battles against the likes of the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Today, there is virtually no prospect for such ground-based military battles between Iran and its closest adversaries. As is currently evident, Iran's two most intense regional rivalries with Saudi Arabia and Israel are both happening overwhelmingly via proxy actions and not through direct conventional military confrontation.

Accordingly, some military planners in Tehran appear to consider the *artesh's* present capabilities as ill fitting and inappropriate for Iran's foreign policy ambitions in the region in places like Syria. By converting some *artesh* manpower for so-called "forward operations," the battle-hardened IRGC military units could be made more readily available for domestic security operations should circumstances require them. For example, another domestic opposition movement similar to Iran's Green Movement of 2009 would require a determined suppression.

In other words, if Iran opts for a major military makeover, it will be in the realm of the *artesh* where it will find space for change and reform. Potentially in order to expedite this process, Khamenei appointed a former IRGC commander, Kiumars Heydari, as the new head of the *Artesh* Ground Forces in November 2016.



Again, Iran's latest declarations of a new "forward-defense" strategy are in fact only an extension of a process that has been in motion for many years. The main difference today is that Iran can now launch asymmetric efforts—mostly via the use of Arab proxies—on a scale unseen before, thanks to power vacuums found in so many conflict arenas in the broader Middle East. Iranian operations in Iraq and Syria since 2011 and 2014, respectively, are the best examples of this new reality.

In such a context, and given Tehran's ongoing ideological commitments, the use of the Arab proxy model plays an unquestionably important role.

Whether the IRGC can continue to succeed in such efforts depends largely on two factors: the willingness of Arab groups to continue to be subservient to the IRGC (Iranian) agenda, and

the tolerance level of the Iranian public to see the IRGC continue its military adventurism in the region despite the risks and costs it entails.

In the meantime, the IRGC will continue to retain and perhaps even replicate more proxy groups in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere whenever circumstances call and allow for it. There can be no doubt that Tehran will continue to look for ways to break its image as a "Shi'i power," which inherently limits its ability to maneuver; it is doing so by maintaining ties to Sunni organizations such as Hamas. However, Tehran's reliance on Shi'i militant groups is where it has found the most return for its investments.

To measure the commitment of hard-liners inside the Iranian regime to this model of operation, one only has to listen to their public pledges. "The Islamic revolution in Iran [of 1979] is different from the French or the Russian revolutions as it is a religious and divine revolution...and its ultimate architect is

God." This was a statement made by Ali Saeedi, Ayatollah Khamenei's personal representative at the IRGC. Saeedi uttered these words while speaking to the uniformed IRGC leadership, the more distinguishable mortal architects of Tehran's regional plans. These are the same men who today spearhead Iran's military interventions in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East.

## PART THREE: IDEOLOGY VS. INTERNATIONAL PRESSURES AND DOMESTIC POLITICAL REALITIES

Not everyone in Tehran, however, is as convinced as Khamenei, Soleimani, and other hard-liners about the long-term utility of the proxy model as a sustainable way to project Iranian power. Social and political unrest in Iran erupted on Dec. 28, 2017, where the anger of the protesters was focused upon, among other things, the ruling elite in Tehran's prioritization of foreign ideological pursuits over the everyday needs of the Iranian population. In the aftermath of this event, the likelihood of the Iranian state having to reassess the cost of its proxy model has become stronger. Nor should rising international concerns be underestimated. President Trump's decision on May 8, 2018, to pull out of the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, was strongly influenced by—among other things—Iran's unwillingness to curb its practice

of fomenting Shi'i militancy in the Middle East. European countries such as France, Britain, and Germany share this American concern, which can only mean it will remain a topic of contention in the foreseeable future.

Fundamentally, this is a question about the political future of the Islamic Republic and whether it will remain dedicated to being a revolutionary Shi'i Islamist model. When Iran's relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani was re-elected in a landslide on May 19, 2017, many in the West hoped it was an event that might herald a new era in Tehran's posture toward the outside world. Following Tehran's successful signing of a nuclear deal with world powers in 2015, Rouhani's continued statements in support of policies aimed at bringing about further détente were interpreted in the West as signifying a moment of Iranian introspection.

In this reading of possible Iranian transformation, Tehran might have expanded its capacity to compromise on non-nuclear issues such as its controversial support for militant Arab proxies in various theaters in the Middle East. In Iran's labyrinthine political setup, however, the highest elected office is not the pinnacle of power. That role belongs to the unelected supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and he acted swiftly to counter such expectations.

In his capacity as the voice that frames the overall trajectory of Iranian foreign policy, Khamenei was quick to move against unwarranted notions that Rouhani's re-election was somehow a harbinger of a new dawn. In a speech on Jun. 4, 2017, Khamenei stressed the need for policy continuity and re-emphasized pillars of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy creed.<sup>29</sup>





In Khamenei's worldview, Tehran's ideological and financial investments in its Arab proxies cannot be separated from its long-standing conflict with the U.S. As he put it, compromising with America will not be possible because Washington's intrinsic objective is the overthrow of the Iranian political system. Instead, Khamenei urged, Tehran should remain a "revolutionary" state and challenge American supremacy in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>30</sup>

Iran's continued support for Arab proxies must be seen in this context. The Islamic Republic does not see its relations with smaller subordinate militant groups as an end in and of itself. Rather, they are a mechanism to advance Tehran's broader agenda in a zero-sum competition where Tehran faces multiple neighbors that are in the American orbit and seen as inherently hostile to Iran.

In the same spirit, Khamenei pointed to the 1980s as a good "revolutionary" decade. This was the period when Iran's then newly ascendant Shi'i Islamist leaders were at their peak ideological fervor and hell-bent on spreading the message of Iran's 1979 revolution that had created the modern world's first theocratic system.

Khamenei's speech was therefore not just a reminder to Rouhani and his supporters about the finite mandate they had reaped from the May 2017 election. With an eye on his legacy, it was also arguably a call to return to the basic principles of the revolution and an attempt by the 78-year-old Iranian supreme leader to map out a vision for the future. By ostensibly making himself into the ultimate arbiter, Khamenei stated that to be "revolutionary" is to be for "original Islam" versus so-called "American

Islam." In his words, this perceived "American Islam" has two branches: "reactionary Islam" and "secular Islam."<sup>31</sup>

In Khamenei's lexicon, the two labels are interchangeably applied to both his domestic opponents and to many of Iran's neighboring states that have taken a different approach to the practice of Islam. No doubt, the energy-rich Arab states of the Persian Gulf that are aligned with the U.S. are considered by Khamenei to be deluded at best or complicit at worst in American policies aimed at subduing the Islamic world.

In that sense, Khamenei's full support for Iran's use of Arab proxies in battling it out for influence in conflict zones such as Syria against the U.S. and U.S.-allied states such as Saudi Arabia is a logical extension of his judgment and his preferred prescription for an Iranian triumph.

In his speech on Jun. 4, 2017, Khamenei said:

"What we are saying is that America is the enemy of the [Iranian] Revolution. It is in the nature of global imperialism to show enmity towards a system such as the Islamic Republic. Their interests are 180 degrees different from [Iran's]. Global imperialism is after showing treachery, waging wars, creating and organizing terrorist groups, suppressing freedom-seeking groups and exerting pressure over the oppressed—such as the oppressed in Palestine and countries like Palestine. This is in the nature of global imperialism."

One could explain away that speech as nothing but Khamenei pandering to his hard-line domestic support base. The speech was given on the anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic

Republic. It can also perhaps be dismissed as tokenism, especially from a man who had just approved a historic nuclear compromise deal with the archenemy, the U.S. If, however, the speech is to be interpreted in its fullest possible meaning, Khamenei seemingly foresees Iran to be in an open-ended conflict with the United States.

The truth is probably somewhere between the two interpretations. Khamenei, a man who as the supreme leader since 1989 has carefully avoided any direct confrontation with the U.S., speaks loudly but appears unwilling or unable to ultimately carry a big stick vis-à-vis his American foe. And yet, his enunciations on the need to vie for power against the U.S. in the Islamic world are hardly empty words.

## THE PROXY MODEL IN CONTEXT OF KHAMENEI'S FEARS ABOUT THE U.S.

In his first major post-Arab Spring speech on Feb. 21, 2011, Khamenei argued that two simple solutions are needed to solve the problems that trouble the Islamic world. According to Khamenei, "unity among Muslim [states]" and "the weakening of America" are the two necessary steps that all Muslims must take to secure a "bright" future for the umma, or the worldwide Muslim nation.

It is easy to dismiss such rhetoric as wishful thinking masquerading as strategy. A closer examination, however, shows that broader Iranian strategizing and investment is underway to at least become the indisputable vanguard of the global Shi'i community, with





an appropriate capacity to engage in armed campaigns. In April 2018, following Israeli missile strikes against Iranian targets in Syria, and after American pronouncements that Iran should leave Syria and other Arab countries where it has a presence, Khamenei again focused on the role of the U.S. in the Middle East. Viewing the U.S. as the enabler of Israel, Khamenei said: "The one who must leave is the U.S., not the Islamic Republic. We are from this region: the Persian Gulf is our home; West Asia is our home."<sup>32</sup>

The militia model should, therefore, be viewed as an increasingly integral part of this broader Iranian blueprint that has been in use since 1979. There are different parts to this design, including an ostensibly theological campaign that amounts to ideological indoctrination. For example, in 2009, on the orders of Ayatollah Khamenei, the al-Mustapha International University was launched in the holy city of Qom. A brainchild of Khamenei, the university has two core objectives: to focus on "Islamic" propagation (as per the official ideology of the regime), and to train non-Iranians to become Shi'i clerics. The university is the result of the consolidation of a number of existing initiatives that had since 1979 engaged in educating non-Iranians to become Shi'i clerics.

However, as Khamenei matured politically and as older, senior ayatollahs died—who had historically been independent of the state—he set out to streamline, modernize, and impose central control over the activities of the seminaries in Qom and elsewhere in the country in cities such as Mashhad and Esfahan. This was both extremely sensitive—as many existing ayatollahs resented relinquishing their financial and theological independence to

the office of the supreme leader—but also of paramount importance to Khamenei's vision to cultivate a modern bureaucratic clerical class that could act as the political commissary of the regime. Today, al-Mustapha University has many dozens of seminaries and religious centers in Iran and outside of the country. It is perhaps not a surprise, therefore, that many non-Iranians who joined pro-Iran militias in Iraq and Syria reportedly came from the ranks of the student population from this same university system.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, the man Khamenei appointed to head the university, Ali-Reza Arafī, shares Khamenei's key concerns: to combat anti-Shi'i militant Sunni Islam; to combat traditional—non-revolutionary—Shi'i Islam; and to take the fight to the U.S. and its Arab allies such as Saudi Arabia. The potential scope for such efforts should not be underestimated. Based on Arafī's statements, there are some 40,000 non-Iranian seminarians studying in Iran today, and a further 80,000 have graduated from al-Mustapha University in recent years. His political philosophy, as he put it, is that "Seminaries [in Iran] need to be from the people, in solidarity with the downtrodden, be political [Islamist], revolutionary, and international [in approach]."<sup>34</sup> This clearly amounts to the mindset of an ideologue and one who Khamenei handpicked. Meanwhile, even Iran's efforts to spread the religious Shi'i message have been bothersome for a number of Arab states. In 2009, Morocco broke diplomatic ties over alleged Iranian conversion attempts in the country. The issue has also been a bone of contention in Tehran's relations with Sudan, Comoros, and Egypt.

In other words, to fully understand Iran's present-day ideological and financial investment in the militant proxy model, one has to push deeper into the larger world outlook of the elite in the Islamic Republic, particularly of the hard-line faction around Khamenei. Meanwhile, from the perspective of IRGC military planners, the use of foreign proxies is both relatively inexpensive but also provides considerable scope for deniability for their often-controversial actions both in Iran and outside.

Still, there are potential drawbacks. There is always an inherent danger that proxy groups may act unilaterally or even against Tehran's wishes. The cases of Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel—which Iran had initially opposed—or Hamas's 2011 decision to abandon Bashar al-Assad are two good examples of Tehran being outmaneuvered by its proxy allies. While the Iranian state has demonstrated strategic patience in many of their regional military operations, there is always a danger of overreach by undertaking too much too fast amid the multiple fronts that have opened up in the Middle East since 2011.

The winding down of the conflict in Iraq also raises difficult questions for the Iranian leadership. What, for example, will Iran-backed proxies do after their action in Iraq is concluded? What would Tehran like to see become of them? Among the local recruits, will they become part of a state-within-a-state, as is the case with Hezbollah in Lebanon? Among non-local recruits, is it plausible for Afghans, Pakistanis, and other non-locals under Iranian command in Syria to become a lasting feature in these countries? Alternatively, perhaps they can move back to native countries to continue the fight. In the case of Shi'i Afghan militias,

there is already much talk in Iran about the need for them to transfer from Syria to Afghanistan to contain the rise of ISIS in that country. If not, how else can Iran politically preserve its military victories? Finally, pro-Iranian militant proxies are not monolithic and it is likely that Tehran might encounter unforeseen challenges to exercise control over them in the longer term.

Despite such potential drawbacks, the Iranians are for now committed to this model of operation. Tehran's cultivation of Arab proxies is also a way of creating political leverage inside state institutions in targeted countries such as Iraq and Syria. These proxies have a proven record to eventually become mouthpieces for Iran's regional agenda and the implications of such political linkages will last much longer than Iran's present-day military agenda. The evolutionary path of Hezbollah in Lebanon is a prime example. Another recent trend is Tehran's forceful lobbying in Baghdad for Iraqi militias to be able to enter the formal legislative politics of the country.<sup>35</sup>

In short, there is no doubt that Iran has been, in the post-Arab Spring period, highly successful in internationalizing its "Axis of Resistance," its purported front against the U.S. and its regional allies in the Middle East. In the foreseeable future, as the region remains in flux, these armed militias will remain some of the most formidable and organized political-military entities to be reckoned with.



## PART FOUR: POLICY TAKEAWAYS

As the above discussion about the Iranian policy process makes clear, the creation of the militant proxy model has been long in the making and has been shaped as much by the Islamic Republic's ideological prerogatives as regional developments outside of Iran's control. As a trend, therefore, the model can hardly be said to be irreversible. It is evident that broader Iranian public opinion is disillusioned by the regime's pursuit of foreign policy adventurism under the guise of securing national interests. Meanwhile, Washington's May 2018 decision to pull out of the nuclear agreement with Iran, citing among its reasons Tehran's continued support for militants in the Middle East, can revive painful international economic isolation

that Tehran has desperately sought to put behind it. Should the Iranian nation have to pay a greater price for Tehran's controversial regional interventions—for example, in the shape of more international pressure that in turn squeezes the already beleaguered economy and therefore the average Iranian—there is a real possibility for severe popular backlash inside Iran.

Such a scenario is bound to shape the calculations of Khamenei and the IRGC, the regime's armed custodian that has spearheaded the physical implementation of the proxy model across the Middle East. After all, as the Islamic Republic's ebbs and flows in commitment to exporting its ideology shows, the utility of the proxy model is only advantageous to Iran while its benefits outweigh the costs. In order to roll back or weaken Tehran's appetite to deploy its proxy model going forward, it is imperative that a more systematic effort is put into probing the

cost of maintaining the long list of proxies that are today linked to Tehran. On the home front, further information and publicity in this context will not favor the Revolutionary Guard, which always prefers to downplay its operational costs. One of the notable causes of the December 2017 mass protests in Iran was the Rouhani government's intentional release of financial data showing the cost of maintaining various religious and ideological institutions.<sup>36</sup>

For the West, the U.S. in particular, and Iran's regional rivals, a number of key factors are critical to take into account as future policy toward Iran is devised. First, the Iranian nation as a whole is highly dubious about the Islamic Republic's costly commitment to its ideological mission to be the self-appointed vanguard of Shi'a in the world. In particular, Tehran's drive to become a dominant actor in the Arab world rests on fragile political and economic rationale. As Mahmoud Sariolghalam, a former foreign policy advisor to Rouhani put it at the height of the power of ISIS, "for some [in Tehran] developments in Iraq are the most significant national security issue for Iran."<sup>37</sup>

The remark was intended to show the distance between the agenda of the ruling class in Tehran and the people of the country. The economic rationale is even less clear: since 1979, Iran's key Arab partners—ranging from Lebanon's Hezbollah to Hamas to the Assad regime in Syria—have cost Iran countless of billions of dollars in financial support. It is questionable if such financial drain can be sustainable. With mounting problems in various fields on the home front, the average Iranian longs for policy that prioritizes tackling domestic challenges.

This, of course, does not mean that Iran does not have genuine defensive needs. Any Iranian government irrespective of its ideological makeup would have needed to prepare to stop the spread of ISIS given its genocidal anti-Shi'i agenda. Where the international community needs to push back is on the question of Tehran's methods to deal with threats to its national security. Above all, it is important to demonstrate to Tehran and the Iranian people that the Islamic Republic's ideology and tactics have often fueled extremism and violence in the region. Iran should not be prevented from sitting at the regional table as part of any political process to find solutions to the array of security challenges inflicting the Middle East, as long as it is prepared to act as a nation-state with defined interests and not in pursuit of an open-ended ideological agenda.

Finally, Iran's Sunni Arab neighbors, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have to continue to appeal to non-Islamist Shi'i Arabs. The policy of treating all Shi'a, regardless of their political persuasions, as Iranian proxies badly backfired and forced many from Arab Shi'i communities into Tehran's arms. Events since 1979 show elevated sectarianism in the Middle East makes Tehran's Islamist message—and hence its ability to form Arab surrogates and sustain its proxy model—far more alluring than would otherwise be the case.

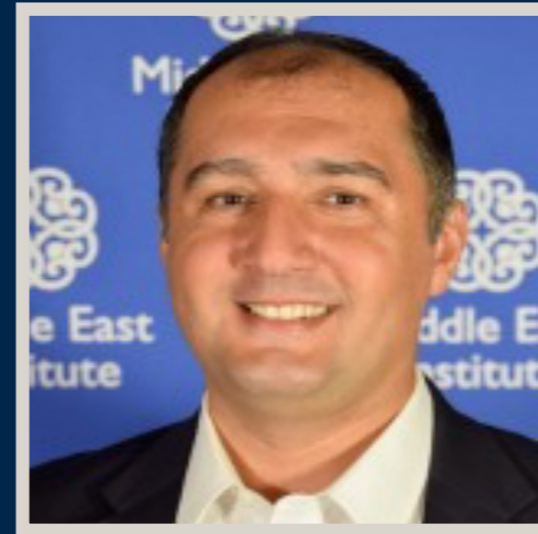




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