Iran's Proxy Wars: Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories/Gaza, Syria, Yemen

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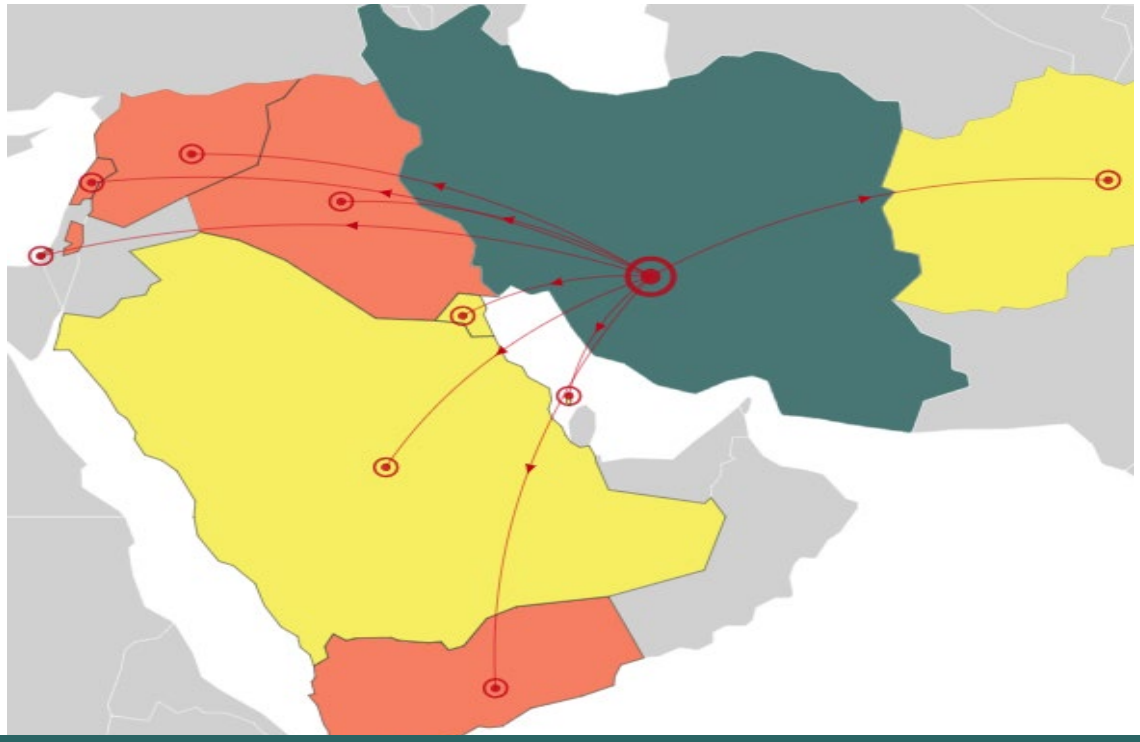

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

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Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has aggressively sought to export its Islamic Revolution and remake the Middle East under its dominion. Iran's primary method to empower itself has been to anchor loyal proxies in the region, which it has done most successfully with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and more recently in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Gaza.

Where its proxies have failed to take root, Iran has engaged in subversive activities to undermine its rivals and enhance its influence, as in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Afghanistan.

Iran's quest for regional dominance has triggered immense suffering and instability throughout the Middle East, inflaming sectarian divisions and triggering devastating wars that have left hundreds of thousands dead.

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Introduction

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iran has waged proxy warfare in Iraq as it has sought to significantly increase its influence and oust America's military presence from the country. Iran's quest for primacy in Iraq is an important component of its hegemonic regional project to export the Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East. Iraq is also an important link in Iran's efforts to establish a "Shi'a crescent" that functionally serves as a land bridge linking Tehran to Lebanon and the Mediterranean, enabling Iran to more efficiently and lethally arm Hezbollah and its other regional proxies.

Sharing a 900-mile border with Iran, Iraq under the Sunni Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein was Iran's primary geostrategic adversary. Iran viewed the U.S. invasion in 2003 as an opportunity to transform its foe into a client state and base from which to direct revolutionary activities around the Middle East. To that end, Iran has sought to cultivate loyalty among Iraq's Shi'a majority population, seeking to leverage shared sectarian identity to justify its meddling and anchor its influence in Iraq. Over the years, Iran has replicated the Lebanese Hezbollah model, which fuses militant and political power, in Iraq to conduct a hostile takeover of the Iraqi government and its security apparatus.

In order to bolster its influence, Iran aims to keep Iraq weak and dependent on Tehran for its security. Iran has stood up and controls a vast network of Shi'a militant groups in Iraq, and uses these proxies to "stoke sectarian tensions and to foment political violence… thereby ensuring for itself a role as mediator in Iraq." This "two-faced" strategy has enabled Iran to establish itself as the "key power broker" in Iraq.

Support for Shi'a Militias

Since the 2003 onset of the Iraq War, Iran supported, trained, and funded Shi'a militias and Shi'a insurgents in order to "work toward a humiliating defeat for the United States." In some cases, these Shi'a militias fighting against the U.S. had a long history of cooperating with the IRGC, reaching back to their insurgency against the Saddam Hussein regime throughout the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

Until his death in a U.S. drone strike targeting his convoy at Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani served as Iran's primary agent of influence in Iraq. He oversaw the training and arming of numerous Shi'a militias in Iraq, some of which today are key members of the Iran-helmed Axis of Resistance that continue to attack U.S. forces stationed in Iraq in a bid to pressure them to withdraw from the region. Further, he coordinated their battlefield activities in Iraq and across the region. Through a combination of military aid, cash, favors, bribes, and intimidation, Soleimani came to wield tremendous personal influence over the country's Shi'a militias and their political parties. Iraqi politicians were effectively held hostage to Soleimani's demands, as he could call on the militias under his command to make trouble if they tried to cross him.

Iran supplied these groups with weapons such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which were the "top killer of U.S. troops" in Iraq throughout the Iraq War. In order to move these weapons into Iraq, Iran controlled a number of arms smuggling rings. By 2006 the Quds Force, the extraterritorial military arm of the IRGC, had developed "a widespread network for transferring and distributing arms from Iran into Iraq through the Ilam region in western Iran."

Iran's imprimatur over the militias was most vividly borne out with the evolution from primitive IED attacks on U.S. service members to more lethal explosively formed projectile (EFP) attacks, whose sophistication U.S. military officials insist point to Iranian origins. In total, the US Pentagon found that Iran-backed militias were responsible for 603 U.S. servicemember deaths between 2003-2011, accounting for roughly one in six U.S. casualties during that period.

Iran was also responsible for unleashing sectarian violence, as the Shi'a militias it supported engaged in brutal attacks against the Iraqi Sunni minority. The Iran-sponsored violence provoked Sunni reprisals and spiraled into a bloody sectarian civil war in Iraq, which claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians in the years following the invasion. By 2014, radical Sunni groups had formed the Islamic State (ISIS) and conquered large swathes of Iraqi territory.

According to the U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, Iran-backed Shi'a militia groups are believed to be responsible for more than a dozen rocket or indirect fire attacks targeting U.S. or Coalition targets in Iraq in 2019, including the December 27 attack in which Kataib Hezbollah (KH) launched more than 30 rockets at an Iraqi base hosting U.S. forces in Kirkuk, killing one American

contractor and wounding several American and Iraqi service members. This assault provoked a strong U.S. retaliatory strike on KH targets in Iraq and Syria and set in motion a series of events that would lead to the demise of the IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and KH founder Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

On March 5, 2019, the U.S. Department of State designated Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), an Iranian proxy group established in 2013 with direct support from the IRGC. HHN is an Iran-backed Iraqi militia funded by but not under the control of the Iraqi government. HHN has openly pledged its loyalties to Iran and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The group's founder, Akram al-Kaabi, was one of the cofounders of the IRGC-backed militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and many of the group's fighters are former members of AAH and Kataib Hezbollah (KH). Kaabi openly admitted in 2015 that "technical and logistical support comes from the [Iranian] Islamic Republic." The group has been active in Syria as well, and is alleged by Iraqi officials to be "helping Tehran create a supply route through Iraq to Damascus."

Like AAH and KH, HHN supports Iranian regional objectives. Its attacks against the U.S. appeals to the more radical elements of AAH and KH. HHN has, for example, claimed attacks against Israel from Iraq and was implicated in planning and coordinating attacks against U.S. bases in Iraq since tensions escalated in the aftermath of Hamas' October 7 terrorist assault against Israel. For that reason, U.S. airstrikes on January 4, 2024 neutralized one of its commanders in Iraq, Mushtaq Jawad Kazim al-Jawari, who was also a senior member of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

AAH has been designated under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act by the U.S. Department of State since January 3, 2020. The group's leaders Qais and Laith al-Khazali were also designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order 13224. In a statement, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo alleged, "AAH and its leaders are violent proxies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Acting on behalf of their masters in Tehran, they use violence and terror to further the Iranian regime's efforts to undermine Iraqi sovereignty."

Fight against ISIS

Iran's hostile takeover of Iraq stoked sectarian backlash, catalyzing the rise and potency of the Islamic State (ISIS). In 2014, at the apex of ISIS's power, the group took Mosul with little resistance from Iraqi government forces and began advancing toward the outskirts of Baghdad. At the time, Iran's primary focus had shifted to Syria, and Iran had diverted much of its Shi'a militia personnel to the effort to rescue the Assad regime. When the ISIS situation demanded action, Soleimani ordered the Iraqi militias to cross back over Syria's border to rescue Iraq.

Iran has used the war against ISIS as a pretext to embed IRGC officials in Iraq and increase support for Shi'a militant groups loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei. In conjunction with the Iraqi government, Soleimani helped stand up the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organization of predominantly Shi'a militia groups that coordinated with Iraq's central government in the fight against ISIS. While not all the PMF forces are aligned with Iran, about 50 Shi'a militia groups are backed by Iran including some of the largest, best-funded, and most heavily-armed groups.

The creation of the PMF command structure and its integration within the Iraqi central government led to unprecedented coordination among the Iran-backed Shi'a militias and has helped entrench Iranian control over Iraqi affairs. The PMF is formally under the command and control of Iraq's prime minister, and as a state entity it receives state funding from a military budget that is supported by U.S. military aid. However, most of the militias that formed to fight ISIS and were incorporated into the PMF retain their loyalty to Tehran rather than the prime minister.

According to a report from War on the Rocks, the PMF forces are divided in their loyalties; none of them answer to the prime minister. They respond to either the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei; Grand Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq, who called for the formation of militias to fight ISIS; and Muqtada al-Sadr, a former ally of Tehran throughout the Iraq War who has since become more nationalist and opposed to Iranian meddling. The report adds that "the most powerful groups and leaders in the PMF come from a network of conservative Shia Islamists who enjoy good relations with Khamenei and the regime in Tehran."

Reports on the number of IRGC soldiers killed fighting in Iraq further demonstrate Iran's intense interventions in the area. Additionally, as of 2015, Iran had supplied Iraq with $10 billion worth of weaponry, likely including T-72S tanks, Safir jeeps, and Sayyad sniper rifles.

Iran's regime leaders sold the intervention in Iraq as a counterterrorism operation against ISIS, but there was also a perception among Iran's hardline leaders that Baghdad would gradually fall under Tehran's political control. According to Ali Younusi, an adviser to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, "Iran is an empire once again at last, and its capital is Baghdad." A member of the Iranian parliament made a similar claim, declaring that Baghdad has "fallen into Iran's hands and belongs to the Iranian Islamic Revolution." Soleimani also echoed these sentiments boasting, "We are witnessing the export of the Islamic Revolution throughout the region… From Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen and North Africa."

The Iran-backed Shi'a militias engaged in systemic human rights abuses and brutality that rivaled ISIS as they cleared ISIS territory. Iraqi Shi'a militias were alleged to have engaged in extrajudicial assassinations, summary executions, kidnappings, and torture of both combatants and civilians, including children.

Due to the armed strength and brutality of the Shi'a militias within the PMF, their power has come to eclipse that of the central government. Iraqi officials are often strongarmed into doing the bidding of Tehran. They are often faced with surrendering to and appeasing the PMF or incurring reprisals. As a result of this pressure campaign against Iraqi political officials, successive Iraqi prime ministers have sought to keep cordial relations with Tehran. For example, Iraq's former prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, praised Iran at Davos in 2015 for springing to Iraq's defense and even singled out Qassem Soleimani as an ally in the fight against ISIS.

There are reportedly around 80,000 to 100,000 Iran-aligned Shi'a fighters inside Iraq today, and the government has little recourse to bring them under its command against their desires to retain their independence. It's this Shi'a militia infrastructure that provides Iran a vehicle to threaten U.S. interests. At Tehran's behest, these militias were operationalized to push back against the Trump administration's

"maximum pressure" campaign, attacking U.S. personnel and energy interests in Iraq, and continued attacking U.S. military bases on a regular basis during the Biden administration despite intense diplomacy through European intermediaries, first seeking a revival of the JCPOA and then, when that failed, "informal understandings" aimed at convincing Iran to deescalate on nuclear and regional files.

While these arrangements were in the making, Iran appears to have exercised its control over the militias in Iraq to reduce the frequency of their attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq. Between the initial report of these "understandings" in June 2023 to October 17, there were few if any attacks against the U.S. military in the region. Since October 17, Iran-backed Iraqi militias, coordinated under an umbrella group known as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, resumed their aggression against the U.S. and Israel, deploying one-way attack drones, rockets, and even ballistic missiles provisioned by Iran.

Reuters reported in August 2018 that Iran had recently transferred short-range ballistic missiles to its allies in Iraq. These kinds of missiles include the Zelzal, Fateh-110, and Zolfaqar, which can all travel from 200-700 km. This range places U.S. allies—Israel and Saudi Arabia—within reach. Indeed, the U.S. government was forced to shutter its consulate in Basra in September 2018 after Iranian-supported militias fired rockets at the compound.

Iran has subverted Iraq's security for its own nefarious ends. Iran's transfer of ballistic missiles to its proxies, the establishment of weapons depots in Iraq, and the transformation of the country into a transshipment route for arms to the Assad regime and Hezbollah have further undermined Iraqi sovereignty, imperiling the central government's monopoly on the use of force. These provocations have invited reprisals from Israel to disrupt Iranian arms proliferation.

Political and Economic Influence

The kinetic power of these militias buys influence in Iraqi politics. The Iranian embassy in Baghdad is a hub of the mullahs' machinations in Iraq—specifically because Iran's former Ambassador to Iraq Iraj Masjedi is himself a former general in the Quds Force and had served as a top advisor to former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. It's from this platform that Tehran wields powerful influence over the direction of Iraqi politics.

After the May 2018 parliamentary elections, which saw the Iran-backed Fatah alliance finish second in the vote tally, Iran and its allies were intimately involved in the negotiations over government formation. For example, Muqtada al-Sadr, whose nationalist Sairoon coalition came in first in the elections, traveled to Lebanon in September 2018 where he was hosted by Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and Qassem Soleimani to forge a consensus on who would become the next prime minister of Iraq. The trio settled on Adel Abdul-Mahdi, a former oil minister and vice president of Iraq. According to leaked Iranian intelligence cables obtained by the Intercept, Abdul-Mahdi worked closely with Iran dating back to his time in exile as an opponent of Saddam Hussein's regime and as oil minister and had a "special relationship with the IRI."

Abdul-Mahdi was hailed as a compromise candidate palatable to the U.S. and Iraq, but his selection highlighted that no Iraqi prime minister could assume power without Iran's backing. While Mahdi has been described as an independent-minded technocrat, after taking office, he granted Iran preferential

access to his inner circle. In October 2018, only 24 hours after announcing he would not meet with delegations from foreign embassies as his cabinet was in the process of being formed—out of fear of an appearance of impropriety in the decision-making process—he hosted the Iranian Ambassador Iraj Masjedi for a discussion.

Iran also maintains economic leverage over Iraq, which translates into political influence. According to Ambassador Masjedi, Iran's second-largest export market is Iraq. Bilateral trade was set to reach $8.5 billion in 2018, with Iran hoping to increase the trade volume to $22 billion annually. Indeed, the United States has had to continually grant Iraq a periodic waiver from U.S. sanctions that the U.S. government re-imposed on Iran following its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, allowing it to import gas and electricity from Iran. The Biden administration most recently issued a sanctions waiver to allow Iraq to pay an estimated $10 billion to Iran for electricity in November 2023.

Religious Influence

An additional node for Iranian influence is its development of Shi'a shrines in Iraq. According to a December 2020 *Reuters* report, Iran has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the construction and upgrading of religious sites in Iraq, hoping to displace popular Shi'a leaders like Grand Ayatollah Sistani and inculcate loyalty to Supreme Leader Khamenei. Construction companies linked to charitable foundations owned by the IRGC are behind the construction bonanza. The primary organization overseeing the development of shrines is called the Holy Shrines Reconstruction Headquarters.

This organization serves multiple purposes for the regime. It was set up by Supreme Leader Khamenei and is run by IRGC appointees. Such arrangements are part of Khamenei's efforts to establish patronage links to the IRGC, enriching Guardsmen and ensuring their fealty to the Supreme Leader. In March 2020, the organization was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury which alleged it was controlled by the Quds Force and served as a front for funneling lethal aid to Iran-backed proxies, intelligence activities, and money laundering.

Millions of religious pilgrims pass through Iraq's shrines each year, giving Iran the opportunity to proselytize its Khomeinist ideology. Iran is seeking in the long term to influence the selection of a successor to Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Iraq's most powerful Shi'a cleric and a rival source of emulation for Shi'a Muslims to Khamenei. A successor more favorable to its state ideology in Najaf would cement Iranian cultural and political influence in Iraq in the long term. Thus, even at a time when it faces massive economic pressures due to sanctions, Iran has seen fit to divert massive amounts of funds to shrine development in Iraq.

In moves showcasing Iranian influence in Iraq, the U.S. Department of Treasury sanctioned Iran's Ambassador to Iraq Iraj Masjedi as a Specially-Designated Global Terrorist and later the Chairman of the Popular Mobilization Committee and Iraq's former National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh under the Global Magnitsky Act for human rights abuses. The designation of Masjedi was significant, especially for shining a light on Iran's embedding of Quds Force generals in Iran's diplomatic postings. The sanction on al-Fayyadh was also important given his history and the fact that al-Fayyadh had visited Washington in

the past in order to discuss Iraqi stability. But al-Fayyadh has long been close with Iran, recently traveling to Tehran for the commemoration of the first anniversary of Soleimani's death.

Backlash

Iran's control over Shi'a militias has made it the dominant military, political, and diplomatic power broker in Iraq, but its quest for domination and subordination of Iraqi interests to its own has weakened Iraq's central government and impeded its ability to provide for the welfare of its citizens. Meanwhile, Iran's project to cultivate patronage links among Iraq's Shi'a population through its militias, which provide social services in addition to security, has failed to take root, as widespread unemployment and economic privation remain the norm. Iran's revolutionary bravado has proved insufficient to override its ineptitude at basic governance, and the result has been a backlash against Tehran that has metastasized into a mass protest movement ongoing since October 2019.

The protests that gripped Iraq during the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi witnessed tens of thousands of demonstrators taking to the streets to vent their dissatisfaction with an out-of-touch class of political elites and Iran-backed militias. The militias have acquired substantial political power and often place Iran's interests over the public good, for instance steering Iraq's oil resources to benefit Tehran as well as the political elite and the militias themselves, while Iraq's own citizens lack healthcare, jobs, educational opportunity, consistent electricity, and clean drinking water. The Iraqi protesters that took to the street in late 2019 were almost exclusively Shi'a, which underscores how Iran's political and military maneuvering failed to translate to winning over the hearts and minds of a large constituency it needs to continue projecting influence in Iraq. Calls for more inclusive governance were high among the protesters' demands, highlighting the unpopularity of Iran's explicitly sectarian approach.

Iran responded to the Iraqi protest movement with repression, dispatching former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani to Baghdad immediately after protests began to advise Iraqi politicians and security officials on his best practices for quelling unrest. According to Iraqi security officials present at the meeting, Soleimani, who chaired the meeting in place of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi, told those present, "We in Iran know how to deal with protests. This happened in Iran and we got it under control."

After Soleimani's ominous proclamation, PMF and Iraqi security forces responded with excessive and deadly force to quell demonstrations. By the end of December 2019, nearly 500 protestors had been killed, thousands more injured, and about 2,800 were arrested. The directive to respond to protests with live fire clearly emanated from Tehran, and numerous reports indicate that Iran-backed forces have been behind the deadliest clashes. For instance, *Reuters* reported that PMF elements close to Iran, reporting directly to their militia commanders rather than the commander in chief of the Iraqi armed forces, deployed snipers on Baghdad rooftops overlooking demonstrations just days after the unrest began, killing several dozen.

While directing the suppression of the Iraqi protests, Soleimani also ordered the Iran-backed militias under his control to undertake a concerted campaign of rocket attacks targeting U.S. military targets in

the country. According to a U.S. military official, forensic analysis of the rockets and launchers used during the spate of at least ten attacks indicated the involvement of Shi'a militias, most notably Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Katai'b Hezbollah (KH). On December 27, 2019, more than 30 missiles were fired at an Iraqi military base near Kirkuk, killing a U.S. contractor and wounding four U.S. troops as well as two members of the Iraqi security forces. The U.S. accused KH of being responsible for the attack, and retaliated by launching strikes against five KH targets in Iraq and Syria including weapons depots and command and control centers. The U.S. strikes reportedly killed at least 25 KH militants.

On December 31, 2019, members and supporters of KH and other protesters attempted to storm the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Demonstrators threw stones and torched a security post, prompting embassy guards to respond with stun grenades and tear gas. The militia supporters withdrew from the embassy after prominent commanders reportedly spoke to them. On January 1, 2020, following orders from Mohammed Mohyee, KH's political spokesman, thousands of protestors dispersed from the American Embassy in Baghdad.

In the early morning hours of January 3, 2020, President Trump greenlit a drone strike targeting Soleimani's convoy shortly after his arrival in Baghdad. The head of KH, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, who also served as deputy head of the PMF, was killed in the strike as well. Despite their deaths, the powerful network of Iran-backed Shi'a militias will continue to remain a fixture in Iraq, upholding Iran's influence increasingly through repression.

Iran's leadership has vowed devastating reprisals against the U.S. for the operation that killed Soleimani, and they followed up on this threat by firing a salvo of over a dozen ballistic missiles at two Iraqi air bases housing U.S. troops in the early morning hours of January 8, wounding 11 U.S. soldiers.

Following the attack, a period of calm prevailed, although Iran signaled that it is likely to strike U.S. interests again at a future time of its choosing. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, intoned that while the ballistic missile attack represented a "slap on the face" for the U.S., "military action like this (ballistic missile) attack is not sufficient," vowing to refuse to enter negotiations and to continue to confront the U.S. until its influence is expelled from the region. In the intervening period, Iran's leaders maintained a steady drumbeat of threatening rhetoric aimed at the U.S., with Soleimani's successor, Esmail Qaani, for instance vowing to "hit his enemy in a manly fashion."

On March 11, 2020, the calm was broken as what were presumed to be Iran-backed militia forces launched a Katyusha rocket salvo targeting U.S. and Coalition troops stationed at Camp Taji, 17 miles north of Baghdad. Two U.S. soldiers and one British soldier were killed in the attack, and an additional twelve soldiers were injured. The attack crossed a U.S. red line as it killed U.S. servicemembers, once again raising U.S.-Iran tensions. The attack coincided with what would have been Qassem Soleimani's 63rd birthday, but it is unclear whether the attack was ordered directly by Iran, as the assassination of Soleimani likely has affected command and control between Tehran and its proxies in Iraq. Following the attack, airstrikes were carried out around the Abu Kamal Syria-Iraq border crossing, where Iran-backed militias are known to have a strong presence. The U.S. has not claimed credit for the airstrikes.

On each years' anniversary of Soleimani's assassination, Iran-backed militias escalate their attacks against U.S. military positions. On January 2, 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed almost a dozen attacks against U.S. forces.

Soleimani's Death Weakens IRGC Command Over Militias

In the aftermath of Soleimani's death, Iraq's protest movement has continued to gain steam, with demonstrators venting their frustration that Iran's disregard for Iraqi sovereignty has increasingly ensnarled their country as a staging ground for proxy warfare between Iran and the U.S. Soleimani's successor as Quds Force commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, initially struggled to wield control over Iraq in the same manner as Soleimani. Qaani, who previously focused primarily on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, lacks the relationships with Iraqi political and militia leaders of all stripes that Soleimani, who was universally feared if not respected, had cultivated.

Hezbollah filled part of the void created by Soleimani's death, taking a more central role in the coordination of militia operations in Iraq. In April 2020, the U.S. Department of State announced a $10 million reward for information on Hezbollah operative Sheikh Mohammad al-Kawtharani, alleging he had "taken over some of the political coordination of Iran-aligned paramilitary groups" that had previously been under Soleimani's purview. Tehran's command and control over the various militia groups it backs was degraded, and its ability to dictate outcomes in Iraq's political affairs was set back as a result of Soleimani's death.

In late March 2020, Qaani made his first visit to Baghdad seeking to establish continuity with his predecessor and reassert the Quds Force's influence. His visit was widely seen as a failure. He sought to unite Iraqi militia and political factions in supporting an anti-American, pro-Iranian prime minister, but Iraq ultimately selected former intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is viewed as supportive of U.S. interests. Qaani was snubbed on his visit by Moqtada al-Sadr, who refused to meet with him. Such a snub would have been unheard of for Soleimani, and demonstrated that Tehran no longer commanded the fear and respect it previously engendered.

In the final months of the Trump administration, Iran sought to restrain the Iraqi militias it backs from attacking the U.S., seeking to wait out the clock and avoid any escalations. In November 2020, Qaani reportedly visited Beirut to meet with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to secure his assistance in reining in Iran-backed Iraqi militias. Qaani then went to Baghdad to meet the prime minister and several militia leaders to urge restraint.

While some militias have followed Tehran's orders, most notably Kataib Hezbollah, others have openly defied Tehran. Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali gave a TV interview after Qaani's visit in which he vowed to continue confronting the U.S., declaring, "The Americans occupy our country, not yours. We will not listen to you anymore because our motives are 100 percent nationalist. The truce with the Americans has ended due to its conditions not being met."

Notwithstanding Qaani's visit, Iraqi militias continued to carry out attacks on U.S. interests. On November 17, 2020, militants targeted the U.S. embassy with a volley of rockets. On December 10, two convoys carrying logistical equipment to the U.S.-led coalition were attacked by roadside bombs. On

December 20, the embassy was targeted with another salvo of 21 rockets, in the largest attack on the Green Zone in a decade. These attacks constituted repeat violations of the tenuous cease-fire that had been reached between the U.S. and Iraqi militias in October and were condemned by Kataib Hezbollah and other factions close to Iran, showing that the Iran-backed militias remained divided in their approach to confronting the U.S. and that under Qaani, the Quds Force could no longer enforce discipline among their ranks. Qaani made another visit to Iraq in December, with *Al-Alam news* network claiming it was unrelated to the December 20 attack.

As the Quds Force's ability to direct and maintain unity among its Iraqi proxies has weakened, it has lost control over the flow of revenues from illicit activities. In May 2021, when Qaani informed the supreme leader that over $4 billion generated through arms and drug smuggling had disappeared, the supreme leader reportedly responded by calling the militias "thieves." Further underscoring the post-Soleimani reality, IRGC general Haider al-Afghani, a former aide to the former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, requested to be transferred out of Iraq, reportedly complaining that the militias were not obeying his orders. But the link between Iran and violence in Iraq remains intact, particularly given that the Quds Force has restored the control over the militias it had at first lost.

Despite reports of Iran's weakening command and control over the militias, Iran continued to provision arms and funding to the extremist groups. U.S. commander of Central Command Kenneth F. McKenzie testified before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on March 15, 2022, that Iran continues to "enable its proxies to conduct implausibly deniable attacks on deployed U.S. forces," even as it conducts diplomacy with the U.S.

Iran's proxy campaign to evict the U.S. military from the region increases the risk of miscalculation and escalation, General McKenzie explained, in part because Iran's command and control over its proxy network has diminished. Iran may be unable to "govern the initiation and escalation of violence directed at U.S. and Coalition Forces."

Iranian-backed militias ramped up attacks against the U.S. military in Iraq after Joe Biden was elected president, presumably as part of Tehran's strategy to increase its leverage and compel the U.S. to make up-front concessions ahead of the resumption of nuclear negotiations. Attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria drastically increased, yet the Biden administration has been reticent to conduct kinetic responses to deter the proxy attacks.

On February 15, 2021, suspected Iran-backed militants thought to belong to the group Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada launched a salvo of 14 rockets against a heavily fortified U.S. military compound in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, with three rockets hitting the base. A civilian contractor to the U.S. military with Filipino nationality was killed, and an Iraqi civilian died a week later due to injuries sustained in the attack. At least eight others were injured in the attacks, including a U.S. soldier and five military contractors. After further attacks, including one against the U.S. embassy on February 22, 2021, the U.S. hit Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada installations and a weapons convoy crossing at the border of Iraq and Syria. It was the Biden administration's first use of military force.

On March 3, Kurdish counterterror authorities released a confession from one of the perpetrators of the February 15 attack, who said he attacked along with other individuals who belonged to the Iran-backed militia Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), which is part of the PMF. The video disconfirmed the claims of a little-known group named Saraya Awliya al-Dam, who initially said they had committed the attack. The suspected attacker further claimed to have used Iranian-made rockets in the attack. KSS is believed to be an offshoot with operational links to the Badr Organization. The group's propaganda frequently features images of Supreme Leader Khamenei, indicating the group's fealty to the Iranian regime.

On March 3, 2021, U.S. forces were targeted again by a rocket barrage that U.S. defense officials believe was launched by Kataib Hezbollah or an affiliated Iran-backed militia. A U.S. contractor suffered a fatal cardiac episode during the attack.

On October 20, 2021, Iran launched a drone attack against a base housing U.S. forces in al-Tanf in Syria, prompting a non-kinetic response from the United States. After that attack, rocket and drone strikes against U.S. personnel increased, which showed that the U.S.'s non-response undermined deterrence and increased the risk-readiness of Iran-backed proxies. There were reportedly 29 such attacks between October 2021 and June 2022, none of which provoked a kinetic response from the U.S. In fact, the U.S. did not respond with force until August 2022, when the U.S. struck a weapons depot, known as Ayyash, belonging to IRGC-backed militias in Deir Ezzor province, Syria.

The IRGC itself also became increasingly risk-ready at this juncture, recruiting elite units and training them in advanced asymmetrical warfare tactics and strategy. The IRGC maintains operational control over an array of newly formed and highly secretive militias. According to a May 2021 *Reuters* report, Iran has begun forming smaller, more loyal groups and training them in core capabilities such as drone and information warfare and surveillance operations. This tactical shift partly owes to the recalcitrance of some of the larger groups upon which Iran has built its influence and leverage in Iraq.

Iraq's continuing political instability and protests and the sporadic hostilities between Iran-backed proxy forces and the U.S. pose formidable challenges to those wishing to restore sovereignty and democracy to Iraq. Iran will continue to exploit this situation. While Soleimani's death posed a setback to Iran's ability to project influence in Iraq, it still wields considerable power over the key militias in the PMF. It can marshal groups to confront the U.S. at the time of its choosing.

The Rise of Prime Minister Sudani

Iraq held parliamentary elections in October 2021, as the proxy militia attacks against the U.S. military were ramping up. Several political analysts, including Michael Knights of the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, pointed out that a court ruling in August 2022 changed parliamentary rules for voting a president into office. Before the court ruling, if the two-thirds majority could not be reached when voting for the president in the first round, then a simple majority (165 seats) would be required in the second round of voting. Now, however, a two-thirds quorum is necessary to select the president.

As a consequence of this court ruling, a political stalemate ensued for months after the parliamentary elections, while many Iraqis went without water and electricity. Poverty rates and unemployment are high, despite enormous oil wealth. Many Iraqis blame these circumstances on the mismanagement and

corruption of an out-of-touch political elite. Muqtada al-Sadr, a powerful Shi'a cleric turned populist, is one political figure who has capitalized on wide-spread nationalist sentiment opposed to Iran's meddling in Iraq and its violation of Iraq's sovereignty.

Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon ("Alliance for Reform") coalition won the most seats (74 out of 329) in the October 2021 parliamentary election, threatening to push the pro-Iran parties into the opposition. Sadr, a Shi'a, then joined a coalition with Kurdish and Sunni parties. This tripartite alliance, known as "Saving the Homeland," sought to form a majority government that would have excluded the pro-Iran parties.

In June 2022, Iran-backed parties were obstructing the parliamentary vote for a president, so Sadr told his coalition to resign en masse from parliament. When they obliged, the candidates who received the second-most votes for those now-vacant parliamentary seats became MPs. Because many of the second-place finishers were members of pro-Iran parties, Sadr's resignation resulted in a major shift in the distribution of seats, ultimately culminating in the parliament's approval of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani for prime minister in October 2022, approximately one year after the parliamentary elections took place.

A pro-Iran coalition, known as the "Coordination Framework," held the largest number of seats, putting it in a powerful negotiating position. The Coordination Framework had nominated Mohammad al-Sudani—an ally of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki—to become the next prime minister.

Maliki, who has close ties with Iran, leads the Dawa ("State of Law") party and is part of the Coordination Framework, which is a coalition of Shi'a parties, including Maliki's party, Hadi al-Amiri's Fatah Alliance (which is itself made up of AAH's political wing, Kataib Hezbollah, and several other prominent Iran-backed militias), former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Nasr Alliance, and the Hikma Party.

Sadr attempted to form a "national majority government" in opposition to the Coordination Framework's proposed "national consensus government." Sadr's coalition would have included Parliament Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi's Sunni Taqaddum bloc, and Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party, and excluded the pro-Iran Shi'a parties. If a "national majority government" came to power, it would have undermined Iran's interests in the Iraqi state.

The current Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani traveled to Baghdad on multiple occasions since the contested October 2021 election to advance Iran's interests. According to some officials involved in the negotiations that he led, his mission was to motivate "the [Shi'a] parties to stay united and agree on a premier candidate." As the Fatah Alliance was engaged in a legal battle to nullify the results of the election based on claims of fraud and still had not accepted the results of the election, Qaani reportedly rushed to Baghdad to tell leaders of the Iran-backed militias, including Hadi al-Ameri of the Badr Organization and Qais al-Khazali of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, to accept the results of the election and control their militias.

Iran-backed militias in Iraq subsequently increased their violent activities to intimidate and coerce their political opponents. In November 2021, an unknown terrorist group attempted to assassinate Iraqi

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in a drone strike. AAH claimed that the attack was "fabricated." However, Reuters reported that two Iraqi security officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the attack was carried out by both Kataib Hezbollah and AAH.

The statements of these officials indicated that Iran probably supplied the weapons used in the assassination attempt. Ambassador Nathan Sales of the *Counter Extremism Project* claimed that the failed drone strike "appears to have Tehran's fingerprints all over it."

On March 13, 2022, the IRGC launched a barrage of missiles from Iranian territory on a private villa in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The owner of the villa, Baz Karim Barazanji, is closely associated with the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). On March 28, pro-Iran militiamen allegedly burned down the KDP's Baghdad office with impunity. Again in early May, six rockets were fired at the Kawergosk refinery, which is owned by Barazanji. The attacks on Erbil continued in June in what appeared to be a concerted Iranian effort to pressure the KDP to stop cooperating with Sadr and make concessions to the Iran-backed groups. There have also been several targeted assassinations against Sadrists across Iraq.

The KDP also suffered the wrath of Iran in the Iraqi legal system. Dr. Faiq Zaidan, a longtime supporter of Iran who is also believed to be affiliated with Hezbollah, issued a ruling as president of Iraq's Federal Supreme Court that targeted Kurdish control of oil revenues from the refineries in its semi-autonomous region. (This court was the same one that issued the above-mentioned ruling to require a two-thirds parliamentary quorum to elect the president). Furthermore, the court blocked Kadhimi's caretaker government from passing a new budget, enabling PMF militias to maintain their budget of $2.7 billion. Iran's interests are clearly represented by high-ranking judges within Iraq's judicial system.

Iran-Backed Militias Consolidate Political Power

Iran has sought to expel the U.S. military from its neighboring territory since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. In 2011, the Obama administration completely withdrew all forces, only to be forced to return three years later because of the rise of ISIS. The Iran-backed militias that came to dominate the PMF, which formed in response to ISIS, and that have leveraged their military capabilities to increase their political power have long demanded the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops, which remain stationed in the country on a counter-ISIS mission. Sudani, who is aligned with the Coordination Framework of the political wings of the militia groups, has sought to assuage these demands by issuing public statements against the U.S. military presence.

Nevertheless, other reports indicate that Iraq's prime minister has privately conveyed to the U.S. his interest in renegotiating the U.S.-led coalition's presence in Iraq. Iraq depends on U.S. security assistance, military aid, and financial support, so Sudani may appease the hardline elements of his political coalition while not acceding to their maximalist demands, which would damage relations with the U.S. As of late January 2024, over 65 separate attacks have occurred against U.S. military or diplomatic installations in Iraq and several attacks have been launched against Israel from Iraq. The U.S. embassy in Iraq was targeted by mortar fire on December 8, 2023, and Ain al-Asad airbase came under ballistic missile attacks from Kataib Hezbollah on two occasions, one of which in November resulted in eight Americans injured.

The U.S. has struck targets in Iraq on several occasions in an effort to degrade and deter the militias. Yet, they are not deterred. They appear emboldened, as Tehran, their patron, has not faced consequences from the U.S. The U.S. has instead focused on striking the proxies in Iraq, including leadership figures, such as Mushtaq Jawad Kazim al-Jawari, a leader of the Iran-backed Harakat al-Nujaba terrorist group and a senior commander in the PMF; as well as Wissam Muhammad Sabir Al-Saadi, a Kataib Hezbollah commander that played a major role in the group's operations in Syria.

Lebanon

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- Hezbollah

Lebanon's Political Dynamics

Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943. Responding, in part, to Maronite nationalist aspirations, France—then the mandatory power in control of the lands that would become Syria and Lebanon—created what would be known as the State of Greater Lebanon, combining the Mount Lebanon Mutassarifate, the locus of Maronite settlement, with adjacent predominantly Muslim areas. While this made the Maronite enclave viable, it also included in the would-be state population groups with identities and affiliations strongly at odds with that of the Maronites. This would become the source of Lebanon's regionally unique diverse social fabric, but also the cause of its chronic domestic instability.

Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah (L) embracing and showing deference to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (R)

Maronite preeminence was built into Lebanon's early system. The 1943 National Pact—an informal agreement divvying up sectarian political power in the country—afforded the Maronites primacy of place based on the 1932 census, when the Eastern Christian sect formed a majority, and gave Christians the country's most powerful political offices and a 6:5 majority in parliament. This census was the last Lebanon would ever conduct, in order to maintain the fiction of sectarian balance and avoid religious conflict.

Lebanon's Christian-Muslim divide had broader political implications. Maronites and many smaller Christian sects were oriented towards Europe and the West. Generally, they rejected Pan-Arabism and denied that Lebanon was an Arab country. For many Lebanese Muslims, however, their country was still an integral part of a greater Syria and the wider Arab and Muslim world—and if the countries comprising greater Syria could not reunite as one state, they should at least be closely tied together culturally and politically.

Sectarian tensions over Lebanon's identity intensified because of the influx of Palestinian refugees after the 1948 Arab–Israeli War and after the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Jordan in the early 1970s. Maronites vehemently opposed the refugees' naturalization, which would have tipped Lebanon's delicate sectarian scales against them. The 1969 Cairo Agreement, which removed Palestinian refugee camps from under Lebanese state authority, was meant to alleviate Lebanese-Palestinian tensions. Instead, the pact ended up heightening sectarian conflicts by allowing

the PLO to establish a state-within-a-state in Lebanon, soon leading to violent clashes with Maronite militias. In 1975, these skirmishes sparked the bloody Lebanese Civil War, which lasted until 1990.

Lebanese Sunnis and Druze, resentful of continued Maronite dominance, sided with the Palestinians against their Christian compatriots. Lebanon's army fractured along sectarian lines, and an alphabet soup of sectarian militias soon emerged, each inviting the assistance of one foreign backer or another—most critically, Syria and Israel

Syria never properly recognized Lebanon's independence and saw the civil war as an opportunity to reassert control over that country and reverse the effects of the French mandate. Israel, allied with the Maronite Phalangist party, invaded to expel the PLO from the country and create the conditions for Lebanon to sign a peace agreement with Israel.

Israel would succeed in expelling the PLO, but its political aspirations ended in failure. Syria, by contrast, emerged as Lebanon's new hegemon due to the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended the civil war.

Now, only vestiges remain of Maronite preeminence in Lebanon. The Taif Agreement gave Sunni and Shiite Muslims parliamentary parity with Christians and increased the powers of their allocated key offices—prime minister and parliamentary speaker—at the expense of the Maronite-controlled presidency.

Iran supplies the rockets to Hezbollah which threaten Israel.

Lebanese Sectarianism

Sectarianism is built into Lebanon's national DNA. While it accounts for Lebanon's much-touted multi-religious tapestry, it is also an outgrowth of the country's lack of a supra-religious, unified national identity and prevents the creation of such an identity. Per Lebanon's National Pact, the country's highest political offices are apportioned not based on merit, but sect: the president must always be the most powerful Maronite Christian figure, the prime minister the most powerful Sunni, and the speaker of parliament the most powerful Shiite. Similarly, political parties primarily coalesce around and represent religious sects, or familial/geographic divisions within each sect, rather than agreement over issues or political philosophies.

The 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended Lebanon's civil war, ameliorated the effects of sectarianism by dividing parliament equally between Muslims and Christians and gave some of the Christian president's powers to the Sunni prime minister and Shiite speaker of parliament. However, it did not eliminate old sectarian hatreds and suspicions, nor resolve the struggle over Lebanon's

identity that led to the country's civil war. To the contrary, this cosmetic change, by ameliorating the worst effects of Lebanon's sectarianism, arguably further entrenched this system.

Lebanon is thus a country that lacks a unified national identity, and foreign powers, like Iran, divide and conquer in this vacuum by stoking or exploiting sectarian grievances or hatreds.

Hezbollah: Iran's Long Arm in Lebanon

For over three decades, Iran has exploited this sectarianism—particularly the Lebanese Shiite community's grievances and disenfranchisement—to establish a solid foothold in Lebanon. The chaos of Lebanon's civil war and the violence wrought upon Shiites during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon enabled Tehran to catalyze the rise of the first foreign extension of its Islamic Revolution: Hezbollah.

Hezbollah has grown into a powerful force in Lebanese politics and society. With Iranian assistance, but also through its own increasingly independent efforts, the group has spawned a vast social apparatus in Lebanon catering to its community's needs; a growing military arm that has withstood three decades of conflict with the Israeli military; and achieved a global reach and ever-growing political power in Lebanon's government.

Lebanon and Hezbollah may not yet be synonymous—though the group is gradually aspiring to achieve that goal—but Hezbollah has asserted its control over critical parts of Lebanese decision-making. At Iran's orders, or to serve its interests, the group de facto decides when Lebanon will go to war or enjoy peace, as with its several rounds of conflict with Israel or unilateral decision to enter the Syrian Civil War. Notably, that decision was made not to defend Lebanon from Sunni jihadists, as is claimed, but rather to rescue the regime of Iranian ally Bashar al-Assad.

On August 6, 2021, Hezbollah militants launched rockets into Israel for the first time since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. The rocket attack took place on Shebaa Farms, a location adjacent to the Golan Heights claimed by Israel, Lebanon, and sometimes Syria. Hezbollah claimed that the attack was retaliation for an Israeli airstrike in southern Lebanon. *The New York Times* described the hostilities as an escalation in a "shadow war" between Iran and Israel. Both Iran and its proxy Hezbollah are ideologically opposed to the existence of Israel; they vow to destroy the nation.

Hezbollah's Financing

A U.S. Department of State report from 2020 estimated that Iran provided Hezbollah with $700 million annually. Hezbollah spent this money on everything from benefits for its fighters to social services for its constituents. Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, which introduced harsh sanctions on the Iranian regime, reduced the amount of Iranian funding made available to Hezbollah. As a result, Hezbollah fighters received less benefits, and many were furloughed or placed on reserve. Less money went to social services for the Shi'a community. And Hezbollah had less money to finance its foreign operations, such as its support for President Assad in Syria, and its acquisition of arms.

In December 2021, Hezbollah Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, interviewed with Beirut-based *al-Mayadeen TV*, and bragged about the quantity and capability of Hezbollah's arsenal of precision-guided missiles. He claimed that "the number of precision missiles at the resistance's disposal has now doubled

from what it was a year ago," and that Israel failed to stop the importing of arms. He furthermore stated that these missiles have the capability of reaching anywhere in Israel. And he levied more direct threats against Israel in vowing to avenge the death of a Hezbollah fighter killed by Israel in Syria.

In October 2021, Hezbollah claimed to have 100,000 fighters, but experts said the real number is somewhere between 25,000 and 50,000. Israeli security officials claimed that Hezbollah possesses somewhere near 130,000 rockets and missiles, some of which have the range to reach anywhere in Israel. Many of these munitions, though, cannot be guided to hit specific targets in Israel. That is why Hezbollah is trying to convert unsophisticated rockets into precision missiles and drones. In February 2022, Hassan Nasrallah explicitly touted the help and cooperation of "experts from the Islamic Republic of Iran" on this project. Hezbollah also imported dual-use technologies, such as computer programs, laser range finders, and night vision goggles.

In October 2020, the U.S. Department of State's "Reward for Justice" identified Muhammad Qasir, Muhammad Qasim al-Bazzal, and Ali Qasir as the main actors in Hezbollah's illicit financing, much of which comes from Iran, and offered to pay up to $10 million for information leading to the disruption of Hezbollah's financial networks. The U.S. Department of State designated all three actors as Specially Designated Global Terrorists. In the offer, the State Department mentioned how Muhammad Qasir and other Hezbollah officials set up front companies to hide the IRGC-Quds Force's role in the sale of crude oil. On the other hand, Ali Qasir ran a front company called Talaqi Group to deliver shipments by sea to the terrorist network. A 2018 U.S. Department of the Treasury designation of Qasir (head of Hezbollah Unit 108) described him as responsible for "facilitating the transfer of weapons, technology, and other support from Syria to Lebanon." In January 2022, the Biden administration enacted additional sanctions on several Hezbollah operatives and front companies to "disrupt Hezbollah's illicit activities and [its] attempts to evade sanctions."

In March 2022, a U.S. Department of the Treasury delegation held talks in Beirut with the Lebanese president and other high-ranking officials. The talks were focused on Lebanon's efforts to combat corruption, money laundering, terrorism financing, and drug and smuggling operations. U.S. officials clarified that sanctions against Hezbollah should be enforced through financial and banking authorities.

Smuggling Drugs and Arms

In April 2021, five million Captagon pills were discovered at Jeddah Islamic Port in Saudi Arabia in what was supposed to be a shipment of pomegranates. In a separate shipping container discovered at Dammam's King Abdulaziz Port, amphetamine pills were found and seized. Saudi officials accused Hezbollah based on the fact that the organization controls the flow of drugs out of Lebanon. This attempt to smuggle narcotics into Saudi Arabia led Saudi Arabia to ban all imports of fruits and vegetables from Lebanon. This was not an isolated event; over the past six years, over 600 million illegal pills were smuggled into Saudi Arabia, the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon alleged. This incident shows how the actions of Hezbollah can isolate the entire country.

The diplomatic fallout from this drug smuggling incident worsened in October 2021, when a Lebanese minister, George Kordahi, made public statements critical of Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. Moreover,

Lebanon's increasing power in Beirut also contributed to the cooling of relations. In what some saw as an effort to ease tensions with the Gulf States, Lebanon's interior minister ordered the deportation of members of al Wefaq, an outlawed Bahraini Shi'a party opposed to the Bahraini monarchy, in December 2021; the political party was gathering in Beirut for a conference in order to criticize Bahrain's human rights record.

In January 2022, Lebanon's foreign minister met with his Gulf Arab counterparts, hoping to further thaw relations. The Gulf Arab ministers have sought the demilitarization of Hezbollah. In response to their requests, Lebanon's foreign minister agreed to issue a statement that his country will not be "a launchpad for activities that violate Arab countries," but he also said that "[he] is not going to Kuwait to hand over Hezbollah's weapons… [that] is out of the question in Lebanon."

In addition to smuggling drugs, Hezbollah smuggles weapons into and out of Lebanon. In July 2021, Israeli security forces foiled an attempt to transport 43 guns and ammunition worth around $800,000 across Israel's northern border with Lebanon. In one case, the weapons were concealed in a tractor ostensibly engaged in agricultural activity. Hezbollah has long controlled the area in southern Lebanon from where the weapons were moved, so Israeli police followed up by investigating the militant organization. It is unlikely that the group did not at least know about the smuggling operations.

Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, wrote in March 2022 that "allegations of arms transfers to non-state actors [ie. Hezbollah] continue and remain of serious concern." He wrote this statement before a U.N. Security Council meeting on Hezbollah's violation of U.N. Resolution 1701, which provided the terms of a ceasefire that brought the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel to an end. U.N. Resolution 1701 stated that there should be "no sales or supply of arms and related material to Lebanon except as authorized by its government."

But notwithstanding the pressure on Lebanon's government from Gulf Arab states and statements distancing the Free Patriotic Movement from Hezbollah for domestic political consumption, recent comments by Lebanese President Michel Aoun on his trip to visit the Pope suggest that he is siding with Hezbollah—in a nod to his traditional alliance with the group. In an interview for *La Republica*, the president stated that Hezbollah's military power "does not affect the security of the Lebanese in any way." He went on to say that Hezbollah "cooperates" with the Lebanese Army with regard to the "situation at the southern border," i.e., vis-à-vis Israel. These statements drew the ire of Christian groups in Lebanon.

In April 2021, *Breaking Defense* reported that Iran was transporting weapons to its Lebanese proxy via the Mediterranean under the cover of Russian ships, given Israel's increasing effectiveness in striking land shipments through Syria. More recently, in March 2022, two Arab-Israeli citizens were indicted after allegedly being recruited by Hezbollah to hide weapons inside Israel so that they could be picked up and used against Israeli citizens. The man in charge of executing this plot was said to be Hajj Khalil Harb. He works with Hezbollah's Unit 133—some accounts suggest he is its commander—which is responsible for recruiting operatives in Israel and the West Bank. He was also allegedly running a drug smuggling operation across the border between Israel and Lebanon.

Hezbollah in Lebanese Politics

Hezbollah also asserts outsize influence over Lebanon's political decision-making. The group has become adept at crippling Lebanon's political system to serve its interests. When political maneuvering fails, Hezbollah has resorted to force. Despite its promises to never turn its weapons on its fellow Lebanese, in May 2008, the group invaded and seized Beirut in response to the government's decision to shut down its telecommunications network and remove the pro-Hezbollah security chief from Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport. Evidence also implicates Hezbollah in a campaign of assassinations against its political opponents—most infamously, the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri. In February 2021, another political opponent of Hezbollah, known to be a prominent critic of the group, was assassinated in his car in an area known to be controlled by Hezbollah.

Hezbollah also can draw on its social support among Shiites to mobilize members of that sect to carry out street violence or simply shut down whole sections of the country—as with the December 2006 political protests, which led to the resignation of the U.S.-backed government.

Hezbollah also prevented Lebanon from electing a president for two years until its opponents caved and appointed its ally Michel Aoun in 2016. In 2018, the group prolonged Lebanon's efforts to form a new government by backing the demands of pro-Hezbollah Sunnis to be represented in Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government to weaken the premier and force him to concede the legitimacy of pro-Hezbollah voices within his sect.

Hezbollah has been a force since that time. For example, it backed two consecutive health ministers—Jamil Jabaq in January 2019 and Hassan Hamad. Jabaq, in particular, was close with its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, who served as his physician. The health ministry is not an insignificant position in the cabinet—it has had the fourth-largest budget, which, according to the *Washington Institute*, was worth nearly $338 million annually in October 2018. This position gave the group access to funds that it could use to bolster its image among the local Shi'a population.

That's not to mention the other ministries its allies or members have occupied in the last two governments, for example, the Industry and Sports and Youth Ministries. The former prime minister, Hassan Diab, whose government collapsed after less than a year in office amid the massive explosion of ammonium nitrate at the Beirut port in August 2020 and an economic crisis, was also backed by Hezbollah. His nomination was only supported by March 8 parliamentarians. By October 2021, the group and its allies are believed to have gained control over "two-thirds of the governing portfolio."

Yet those positions of responsibility contrast with how Hezbollah sees its role in Lebanon. It has disclaimed any responsibility for incidents like the one at the Beirut port, despite the Party of God's reported dominance over Lebanese ports. In fact, Nasrallah indicated that his organization was more focused on the port of Haifa in Israel than the port of Beirut in Lebanon. It's Iran's transnational revolutionary movement that remains Hezbollah's priority. The Lebanese system's persistent failure erodes popular support for it and furthers Hezbollah's ultimate goal—replacing the Lebanese secular system with an Islamic republic based on the Iranian model.

In October 2021, hundreds of armed Hezbollah supporters took to the streets to protest and call for the removal of Judge Bitar, the lead prosecutor investigating the Beirut port explosion. In the investigation, the judge summoned former minister Nohad Machnouk and two senior security officials, leading some to believe that politicians would no longer be immune from the legal system. However, the officials, with the backing of the Ministry of Interior and Higher Defense Council, did not show up for interrogations, and they have filed legal complaints against the judge.

Hezbollah was the most vehement voice to speak out against the judge. This suggests that the group supports the accused political elites. The investigations into the port explosion have been polarizing. At the October protest, snipers fired from a rooftop, and a gun battle ensued, killing seven civilians and combatants. This violence renewed fears of a civil war, given that all seven of the people allegedly killed by the primarily Christian Lebanese forces were Shi'a supporters of Hezbollah. And these fears remain as both sides continued to stoke sectarian sentiments as a way of gaining public support amid a largely dysfunctional state and failing economy.

Owing to the investigations into the port explosion, which destroyed Beirut's port and half of the capital, killing over two-hundred people, injuring thousands, and leaving up to 300,000 people homeless, Hezbollah boycotted cabinet sessions for the newly-formed government, leading to a three-month period without cabinet meetings. The boycott only worsened Lebanon's deep economic crisis. In January 2022, Hezbollah, along with its allied political party, Amal, agreed that they would end the boycott, claiming that they were doing so in order to pass a budget. This episode showed the group's influence over Lebanese politics.

Lebanon's parliamentary elections took place on May 15, 2022. The elections, which were expected to be hotly contested because the victorious party would select the next head of state after the end of President Michel Aoun's six-year term in October 2022, led to gridlock. Aoun stepped down in October, though no successor could replace him. Many hoped this election would lead to a turn-around in the country's current domestic issues, including corruption and mismanagement. Notably, Hezbollah faced opposition from those who view the group as subservient to Iran's interests. However, one expert argued prior to the parliamentary elections that "Hezbollah and its allies will sweep the majority of districts as the opponents are engaged in fragmenting internal side battles."

The former president of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, has political allies in Hezbollah who are against normalizing relations with Israel; they say that they will never accept peace with Israel. This contrasts with the president's statements opening the possibility of a peace process that resolves Lebanon's territorial claims. Hezbollah opposes cooperation between the Israeli and Lebanese governments, including ongoing U.S.-led efforts to resolve a dispute over maritime boundaries.

In January 2022, Sunni Muslim leader and three-time former prime minister, Saad al-Hariri, said that he was ending his engagement in Lebanese politics, and he called on his party, the Future Movement, to boycott the upcoming elections in May 2022. Hariri cited Iranian influence in Lebanon as a reason for the country's political and economic stagnation and why he was removing himself from Lebanese politics. "I am convinced that there is no room for any positive opportunity for Lebanon in light of

Iranian influence, international confusion, national division, flaring sectarianism, and the withering of the state," Mr. Hariri said.

Hezbollah holds considerable sway over Lebanon's political system to the detriment of the Lebanese people. Hezbollah puts its interests before the people of Lebanon through corruption, weakening state institutions, illicit drug production, smuggling, sex trafficking, and military buildup. One analyst says that Hezbollah benefits from a poor Lebanon, partly because poverty increases dependence on Tehran and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah fosters this dependence in many ways, including holding up government processes, and exploits it by providing services that the central government fails to provide. For example, Hezbollah builds schools, runs hospitals, and charitable organizations. But an analyst at *Brookings Institution* views Hezbollah's role in corruption and its defense of the status-quo as hampering its political prospects. In addition to opposing government accountability, Hezbollah is fundamentally opposed to Lebanon's national sovereignty as it acts on Iran's behalf.

Hezbollah's Economic Influence

Hezbollah receives significant economic support from Iran, which it uses to prop up its image. At the same time, Lebanon is suffering one of the worst economic crises in its history. Flouting U.S. sanctions, Hezbollah imported millions of gallons worth of diesel fuel into Lebanon from Syria in October 2021. In a country experiencing a fuel shortage, this came as a relief and boosted public sentiment toward the extremist group. Hassan Nasrallah claimed that the fuel would be donated to "hospitals, nursing homes, [and] orphanages." Hezbollah's efforts to propagandize this fuel shipment were extensive, notwithstanding the fact that it did little to alleviate the country's shortage.

Given Lebanon's shortage of fuel, the World Bank has offered to finance a project to provide the country with Egyptian natural gas. The U.S. endorsed this deal that is meant to counter Iran's attempts to export fuel to Lebanon. The deal would ship natural gas from Egypt through Jordan and Syria to Lebanon. Both Egypt and Lebanon sought assurances from the U.S. that such a shipment would be allowed under U.S. law. The countries wanted to be sure that they did not need a sanctions waiver from the US, because entities that do business with Syria can be sanctioned under U.S. law. In January 2022, the office of Lebanon's prime minister issued a statement saying that the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon provided further assurances that the imports would not contravene U.S. sanctions. Egypt was still seeking those assurances as of January 2022. A senior U.S. Department of State official, Victoria Nuland, said that the deal "falls under the humanitarian category, [so] no sanctions waiver would be required."

Iran is also attempting to be a patron of the Lebanese government. In March 2022, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian made an official visit to Lebanon where he met with Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah as well as high-ranking Lebanese officials, including the president, prime minster and speaker of parliament. Iran's foreign minister discussed political developments in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan with Hezbollah's leader. Iran's Foreign Ministry website said that Iran was prepared to provide wheat to Lebanon and assist in the engineering, industrial, and energy sectors.

Amid the devasting economic crisis in Lebanon, Hezbollah delivers services that the government is not able to provide. For example, Hezbollah makes regular charity donations to Shi'a communities and has even developed its own parallel banking system. Hezbollah's financial arm, known as al-Qard al-Hasan Association, reportedly stayed reliable for cash withdrawals when other Lebanese banks were implementing capital controls to stanch a run on the banks. The Hezbollah-run banks also reportedly provide interest-free loans. In May 2021, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) at the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned several members of Hezbollah who were using "shadow banks," like al-Qard al-Hasan, to evade sanctions and gain access to the international financial system.

Further contributing to its status as a "state within a state," Hezbollah supports poor people, especially those in Shi'a communities, by funding a low-income grocery store chain, known as Makahzen Nour. The group supports agricultural projects, implements residential construction projects through its charity organization, Jihad al-Bina, and builds schools and hospitals. They also took a hand in mobilizing a COVID-19 response, with up to "1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and paramedics, and 20,000 more activists", according to the group's executive council.

Hezbollah even competes with the U.S., a major provider of economic aid to the country, for influence through its own provision of aid. In 2015, the Obama administration pared back these programs, some of which were designed to foster alternative Shi'a political parties, choosing instead to funnel money to a political elite that is widely viewed by the population as incompetent. It is unclear whether the Biden administration has taken the same approach in order to appease Iran in the nuclear negotiations.

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The Shia areas of southern Lebanon, the Beqaa valley, and the suburbs of Beirut is where Hezbollah's political and military power is concentrated. Currently in violation of UNSCR 1701, which ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Hezbollah forces are stationed close to the border with Israel and have been launching daily rocket and drone assaults on Israeli positions in northern Israel, as it claims to be acting in solidarity with Hamas, another member of the Iran-helmed Axis of Resistance.

Israel's political leadership has vowed to completely eradicate Hamas in the aftermath of the vicious terrorist assault against Israel on October 7, 2023 and hunt their leadership worldwide, including in Lebanon, Turkey, and Qatar. Israel established a special unit, called 'Nili,' comprised of security and intelligence officials, to track down and kill Hamas leaders worldwide, not unlike the special operations teams formed in 1972 after Palestinian militants murdered 11 Israelis at the Munich Olympics.

Israel has shown its willingness to strike in Lebanon, including against senior Hamas and Hezbollah operatives. A targeted strike neutralized Wissam Tawil, a member of Hezbollah's elite special forces Radwan unit, and it eliminated Hezbollah air force commander Ali Hussein Burji, who was operating near the border and responsible for numerous cross border rocket and drone attacks. Israel also killed Hamas chairman Ismael Haniyeh's deputy and a founder of Hamas' military wing, Saleh Arouri, in a targeted strike in the southern Beirut suburbs in early January 2024.

Palestinian Territories/Gaza

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- Hamas
- Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei embracing Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in 2012.

A key ideological pillar of the Islamic Republic of Iran is its struggle to "liberate" the Muslim lands of Palestine and the holy city of Jerusalem from what it disparagingly refers to as the illegitimate "Zionist Regime." To help achieve these ends, Iran has armed, trained, and funded –often working indirectly through Hezbollah—Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), despite the Sunni-Shi'a divide between them.

Iran's primary goal in supporting various militant Palestinian factions is to foment continuous armed struggle against Israel, weakening a key regional foe and enhancing Iran's image among Muslim and Arab publics. Arming the Palestinians enables Tehran to play one faction against another, allowing Iran to maintain leverage over the various Palestinian groups and thereby the Palestinian nationalist movement as a whole, bringing them into line with the regime's foreign policy objectives.

Iran has been a leading sponsor of Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and PIJ, building up their capabilities and enabling them to threaten and attack Israel. Without Iranian financial largess and material support (not to mention the extensive financing the group receives from Qatar, other foreign powers, and allegedly even U.N. coffers), Hamas would not have been able to carry out its devastating October 7, 2023 terrorist attack against Israel. The air, land, and sea assault that claimed over 1,200 lives including dozens of Americans, was likely known to the regime. Evidence shows that in the months and weeks leading up to the multifront attack, Hamas sought training in Tehran, which included university-level education in physics and explosives and tactical combat instruction. Additionally, several well-documented meetings in Beirut with Quds Force commanders, including its top commander Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, and senior Hezbollah and Hamas leadership, are suspected to have been operational planning meetings for escalation by the Axis of Resistance against Israel.

Iran has also been the leading sponsor of Gaza-based PIJ, which was founded in 1979, inspired by the success of the Islamic Revolution. Iranian funding of PIJ has been in place since 1987. During the early 1990s, much of PIJ organizational and operations-based support came from the Iranian sub-group Hezbollah. The PIJ is extremely open about Iran being its main supporter: "All of the weapons in Gaza are provided by Iran… the largest share of this financial and military support is coming from Iran."

Given its major support to Hamas, Iran exerts considerable influence over Hamas, the Sunni Islamist terror group that has controlled the Gaza Strip since it took over after winning elections in 2006. In 1993, Iran pledged $30 million in annual support for Hamas' anti-Israel operations. Hamas received consistent funding from Tehran in addition to military training until disagreements over Iran's role in Syria created a rift between the two parties, leading Iran to temporarily curtail its support for the group. However, Iranian favor once again returned to Hamas to the tune of "tens of millions of dollars" and has since then expanded to over $100 million annually. Other estimates indicate that yearly funding may be as high as $350 million. This money has been used to build hundreds of miles of tunnels, costing billions of dollars, which have been used for sheltering leadership under civilian areas and infrastructure, storing and producing weaponry. In August 2019, Israeli media reported that Iran offered to increase its funding of Hamas to $30 million per month in exchange for intelligence on Israel's missile stockpiles.

Iran's rapprochement with Hamas was part of an effort to restore Tehran's image in the Arab and Sunni world, which was damaged due to its brutality in propping up the Assad regime and helping him quell a democratic protest movement after the 2011 Arab Spring. Iran deployed the IRGC-Quds Force and later the IRGC Ground Force, the Basij, and the Artesh, and several IRGC-directed Axis of Resistance militias, including Hezbollah, and Pakistani and Afghani recruits, to ensure that Assad was not overthrown.

In an effort to repair the reputational damage from backing the brutal Syrian dictator, Iran sought to take back the mantle of anti-Zionist resistance and again sought to shore up relations with the Gaza-based terrorist organization. Restoring ties with Tehran has helped Hamas weather diplomatic isolation as well. In recent years, Hamas has faced a hostile Egyptian government on its Gaza border and fallen out of financial favor with Gulf monarchies, which have quietly aligned their regional policy with Israel and backed more moderate Palestinian forces in response to the Iranian threat.

Hamas' relations with the Assad regime and Hezbollah also fractured over the Syrian Civil War. At Iran's behest, however, the Assad regime and Hezbollah have mended ties with Hamas in an effort to rebuild the Axis of Resistance and coordinate its activities against the U.S. and its regional ally Israel. The effort to reintegrate Hamas into the Iranian sphere of influence furthers Iran's hegemonic regional ambitions and gives Iran an ongoing outlet to focus on "resistance" activities against Israel.

Hamas's second in command Saleh al-Arouri, who was assassinated in a presumed Israeli strike in southern Lebanon in early January 2024, led a Hamas delegation to Tehran in October 2017 that met with former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani assured Arouri that "Iran's support to the resistance is the main priority now." Arouri, who vacated his safe haven in Qatar and set up shop in Hezbollah's Beirut stronghold, subsequently met with Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on

November 1, 2017. According to media reports of the meeting, both sides stressed their willingness to place their "misunderstandings" over Syria in the past and form a united resistance front against Israel.

In June 2018, Israel alerted the U.N. Security Council that it had obtained intelligence showing Hamas was working with Hezbollah to establish missile factories and training camps for thousands of Palestinian fighters in southern Lebanon. Some of those factories were dedicated to the production of precision-guided munitions to upgrade Hamas' rocket arsenal. Iran has been involved in enhancing the targeting capabilities of its proxies and partners, not only in Lebanon but at weapons manufacturing sites in Syria tied to the Assad regime.

Hamas and Hezbollah mended ties and subsequently increased their cooperation and coordination based on their shared objective to threaten and destroy Israel. That is where the popularized Hamas slogan "From the [Jordan] River to the [Mediterranean] Sea" comes from; it is a call for violence against Israel and its erasure from the map. Claiming the mantel of anti-Zionist resistance, Iran has fueled hate-filled, violent, anti-Semitic ideologies in Gaza and beyond, effectively laying the groundwork for a future armed struggle with Israel that would encompass fighting on multiple fronts with Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies all joining the fray, as we are seeing unfold today.

In August 2019, a Hamas official warned, "If the Israeli enemy launches aggression against the Gaza Strip, and we estimate that it is a confined battle that will not develop into a war to break us, we will face it alone. But if the enemy [Israel] tries to break the resistance, the rest of the axis will join the battle," referring to Hezbollah and Iran's foreign legion of proxy militias.

In May 2019, Hamas's leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar thanked Iran for providing the group with increasingly sophisticated and long-range rocketry. Following a weekend in which Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad fired 700 rockets into Israeli territory, Sinwar stated, "Iran provided us with rockets, and we surprised the world when our resistance targeted Beersheba. Had it not been for Iran, the resistance in Palestine would not have possessed its current capabilities."

In September 2019, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh wrote a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei thanking him for Tehran's "extensive" support and for "Iran's readiness to equip the resistance for whatever it needs to discharge its duty." Haniyeh had acted as the elected prime minister of Gaza between 2007 and 2014 and today holds the title of chairman of Hamas' politburo. He is residing in Qatar along with other senior Hamas officials like Khaled Mashaal and Moussa Abu Marzouk.

Yahya Sinwar has taken over leadership of Gaza, and he is thought to be based in southern Gaza, possibly in the Hamas stronghold and his hometown Khan Younis. Mohammed Deif is Hamas' top-ranking official in its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. He is also thought to be holed up in a deep underground tunnel below Gaza.

In February 2020, Israel seized $4 million in funds that it alleged were transferred from Iran to Hamas to help the group build weapons and pay its operatives. Iran's influence, however, extends far beyond financial support, particularly in Gaza. Iran has supplied and trained groups like Hamas and the PIJ in the use of longer-range rockets. In 2002, Israeli forces intercepted the Gaza-bound Karine A vessel in a raid

in the Red Sea, which was loaded with 50 tons of advanced weaponry from Iran. Iran has supplied increasingly sophisticated and powerful munitions to Hamas and technology including UAVs being delivered via Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Iran has supplied Hamas with IEDs, anti-tank munitions, and provides training for up to 6 months in modern tactical warfare for Hamas operatives.

Iran is now also building a loyalist, "Hezbollah-style terror group" in the Gaza Strip. Known as Al-Sabirin, the organization is funded directly by Tehran. Through Al-Sabirin, Iran is also seeking to make inroads into the West Bank. On January 31, 2018, the U.S. Department of State designated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and Harakat al-Sabireen, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), noting that they are "sponsored and directed by Iran."

Hezbollah has also stepped up its activities in the West Bank. In January 2016, Israeli security forces dismantled a five-man terror cell in the West Bank city of Tulkarem recruited by Hezbollah's Unit 133, which is tasked with recruitment and planning attacks in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. The cell—recruited and trained by Hassan Nasrallah's son, Jawad—was instructed to gather intelligence on IDF training facilities for an attack, and to prepare a bomb for use in a suicide operation against Israeli civilians. In July 2019, Shin Bet announced that it had thwarted another cell—an Iranian espionage network—based in Syria, which was recruiting operatives in the West Bank and Gaza via social media.

The emergence of these cells within the Palestinian territories appears indicative of a longer-term Iranian strategy. In the short-term, Iran is content to support and ally with extremist groups with shared anti-Israel aims, such as Hamas and PIJ, to fulfill broad geopolitical objectives. Al-Sabirin's name, which translates to "the patient ones," attests to a desire to anchor proxies loyal to Iran and who share its ideological predilections in the Palestinian territories further down the road if conditions on the ground are conducive. In fact, there have been signs of increased coordination within Iran's broader Axis of Resistance in furtherance of this project. In 2019, Iran's supreme leader reportedly proposed PIJ form a joint operations room in Gaza with Hezbollah and Iraqi militias.

Due to its implacable opposition to Israel's existence, Iran wages proxy warfare in the Palestinian Territories, backing the most recalcitrant and violent elements of Palestinian society, including terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iran's bid to hijack the Palestinian national movement serves to undermine efforts for a peaceable, negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In January 2020, following the Trump Administration's unveiling of the "Deal of the Century," the IRGC called for resistance against the peace plan and praised the Palestinians for "standing alone" against it.

Iran has also stood against regional initiatives, namely the U.S.-sponsored Abraham Accords, to accept Israel's existence and normalize its position in the Middle East. After Israel and the UAE announced a deal to restore full diplomatic relations in August 2020, Iran condemned the normalization of ties and vowed that the UAE's decision would strengthen the forces of the "resistance axis" in the region. Iran similarly condemned Bahrain in September 2020 after it decided to normalize ties with Israel, saying, "The rulers of Bahrain will from now on be partners to the crimes of the Zionist regime as a constant

threat to the security of the region and the world of Islam." Further afield in Africa, Iran has sought to impose costs on the moderate Sunni Arab state Morocco for its decision to join the Abraham Accords.

Hostilities Escalate

In May 2021, during clashes between Israel and Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip, Hamas and PIJ exhibited significantly improved rocket capabilities and tactics. Both organizations employed swarming tactics to overwhelm Iron Dome air defense batteries, firing simultaneous barrages of hundreds of rockets at a time. In one case, PIJ's Quds Brigade admitted it fired volleys of rockets directly at an Iron Dome battery near Nir Yitzhak, near Israel's border with Gaza, to disable it and facilitate the group's other rocket attacks on Israeli cities.

Both militant groups deployed more advanced weaponry. PIJ employed Badr-3 missiles in attacks on Israeli cities, for which a group spokesman thanked "the Resistance Axis, headed by the Islamic Republic of Iran," for helping the group develop the missile. Hamas spokesmen have been more circumspect about the source of their improved capabilities. However, their arsenal in this round of fighting included a rocket dubbed the "Ayyash 250"—a rocket named after the group's late chief bomb engineer, Yahya Ayyash, who was dispatched in an operation by Shin Bet in January 1996. The rocket, as its name suggests, has a range of 250 km, and was fired by the group for the first time on May 13, 2021, in the direction of Ramon Airport, in Israel's southernmost city of Eilat. The rocket missed its target, but caused flights from the airport to be temporarily canceled. On May 13, Hamas' Qassam Brigades also deployed several loitering munitions, colloquially known as (including by the group), "suicide drones," dubbed the "Shihab."

Rocket and incendiary attacks from the Gaza Strip have occurred regularly since the May 2021 fighting. Starting in April 2022, Palestinian militant groups in the Gaza Strip accelerated their attacks against Israel. On August 5, 2022, Palestinian militant groups launched over 400 rockets into Israel, a significant escalation that underscored the growing size of the terrorist groups' arsenals and their readiness to use their rockets.

Again on May 10, 2023, Palestinian militant groups launched over 500 rockets toward Israel, days after Israel carried out airstrikes against PIJ targets that killed three of its leaders. The increasingly large rocket salvos, designed to overwhelm Israel's air defense systems, were largely unsuccessful. The Iron Dome battery intercepted most of the rockets. Israel retaliated, striking over 150 PIJ targets in the Gaza Strip. On May 11, 2023, a rocket fire attributed to Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the central Israeli town of Rehovot caused one death and seven injuries. According to a source from PIJ, the Iranian-made Boraq 85 rocket, a relatively new weapon system fielded by PIJ, was the culprit.

In April 2023, rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip, Syria, and Lebanon were coordinated against Israel. Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani met with senior leaders in Hamas, PIJ, and Hezbollah in Lebanon to coordinate the Axis of Resistance as if it were a formal military alliance, where each terrorist group would join in the fighting if one member of the group is attacked. In one meeting with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and his late deputy Saleh al-Arouri and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, Qaani finalized a decision to launch rockets from southern Lebanon, culminating in the largest such

attack since the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. These planning meetings and subsequent attacks were precursors to the October 7, 2023 assault against Israel, which Hamas and its patrons in Tehran refer to as 'Al-Aqsa Flood,' the worst attack against Jews since the Holocaust.

Hamas and PIJ conducted a sophisticated and lethal major terrorist attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War in which Israel was surprise attacked by hostile Arab foreign powers. Hamas fighters infiltrated into Israeli territory after blowing holes in and breaching the Gaza Strip border fence. They proceeded to commit heinous acts of terror and violence, including murder, rape, and kidnapping, against Israeli and foreign women, children, and the elderly, resulting in the deadliest and most brutal attack in the history of the Israeli state. Israel, in turn, unleashed a fierce aerial and ground offensive in Gaza, while attempting to prevent other terrorist groups from escalating on other fronts, including in the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria.

The regime in Iran has in fact intensified its efforts to arm, finance, and recruit militants in the West Bank, particularly in the Jenin and Nablus areas. Numerous new militant groups, such as the Jenin Brigade, the Balata Brigade, and the Lions' Den, have emerged in the West Bank. PIJ also reportedly has a dominant presence in the West Bank and leads recruitment campaigns with financial aid from Iran. Recent personnel, structural, and doctrinal changes to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the broader military infrastructure in Iran, as part of Ayatollah Khamenei's "Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution" project, also reveal the IRGC preparing and moving towards for confrontation with Israel.

Billboard in Tehran's Vali Asr Square, which is managed by the IRGC's Owj Organisation, propagandizing Hamas' brutal assault on Israel that claimed the lives of over 900 Israelis. The billboard, which was unveiled a mere 24 hours after the assault on Israel, revealing Iran had foreknowledge of the attack

Billboards in Gaza in 2012 thanking Iran for their military support in fighting Israel, particularly their supply of longer-range rockets to target Israeli cities.

Syria

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)
- Hezbollah
- National Democratic Forces (NDF)
- Liwa Fatemiyoun (Fatemiyoun Division)
- Zainabiyoun Brigade
- Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba

The Iranian-Syrian alliance stretches back to the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, constituting one of the most enduring partnerships among authoritarian regimes in the region. Since 1979, Iran and Syria have remained close allies despite fundamental differences in their governments: Iran is a radical Islamic theocracy, and Syria is an Arab secular state. Iran is the most populous Shia country in the world, whereas Syria's dictator Bashar al-Assad and his father, the former ruler of Syria, hail from the Alawite sect, which is an offshoot of Shiism and a minority group in Syria. The partnership between these two states nevertheless found its roots in their mutual opposition to Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in Iraq as well as their confrontation against U.S. regional dominance and Israel.

In the 1980's, Syria supported Iran throughout the brutal Iran-Iraq War, which started after Saddam invaded Iran and continued in a stalemate as Iran sought to press a counteroffensive into Iraq. President Hafez al Assad, Syria's president at the time, was the Islamic Republic's only ally in the region. The rest of the Arab states either sided with Saddam or remained neutral, fearing the loss of U.S. support and that Iran would foment Shi'a revolutions within their borders, as it had projected its intentions in Iraq.

Throughout its history, the Islamic Republic has viewed its partnership with Syria as a vital national security interest. After popular uprisings against Bashar al-Assad's regime broke out in March 2011 amid the "Arab Spring" and turned into a civil war that threatened to unseat Assad, the Islamic Republic of Iran called upon its transnational proxy army to deploy to Syria and invested massive resources into saving and sustaining its partner. With the help of Iranian troops, Iran-backed militias, and Russian air support, Assad has regained control of most of the country. However, the U.S. military remains present in the east, northeast, and south of the country.

Iran's partnership with Syria is a necessary component of Iran's goal to dominate the region. Assad has allowed Iran to set up military bases across the country and to conduct military and proxy operations against Israeli and American interests. He also provides the Iranians with access to critical transit routes through Syria. Sometimes referred to as a "land bridge," these roads connect Iran to the Mediterranean Sea, allowing it to supply Hezbollah, its proxy in Lebanon, with increasingly sophisticated weapons, including precision-guided missiles (PGMs), that are a direct threat to the Israeli homeland. The Syrian Civil War provided Iran with an opportunity to secure its logistics network, which it also uses to distribute arms to its proxies and pro-government forces within Syria.

By supporting Assad, the Iranian regime denied a victory to its regional Sunni rivals, and further consolidated its "Shi'a Crescent," stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. Regional Sunni powers, along with the U.S., supported Sunni rebels against Assad. The U.S. and its partners in the region saw an opportunity not only to deprive Iran of a key ally, but to support the rise of moderate Sunni political influence in the country. In the interest of Sunni powers like Qatar and Turkey, who worked with Saudi Arabia to back rebels against Assad, Iran saw this as a direct threat to its influence in the Levant. Assad's rule provides a check against Sunni power in Syria and the greater Middle East.

Throughout his term in office, former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who is often hailed as a moderate in Western media despite his hardline credentials, articulated on several occasions that the purpose of Iran's intervention in Syria was to defend the Assad regime. Speaking with Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi in August 2013, Rouhani vowed, "the Islamic Republic of Iran aims to strengthen its relations with Syria and will stand by it in facing all challenges. The deep, strategic, and historic relations between the people of Syria and Iran… will not be shaken by any force in the world."

In December 2020, Rouhani reaffirmed Iran's support for the Assad regime, declaring, "The Islamic Republic of Iran will continue its support to the Syrian government and people as our strategic ally and we will stand by Syria until its final victory." He added Iran will continue fighting in Syria until the Golan Heights are liberated from "Zionist occupiers." Given that the supreme leader and the IRGC's Quds Force run point on the Syria file, Iran's policies towards the Assad regime have remained unchanged since the elevation of Rouhani's successor, Ebrahim Raisi, as president in 2021.

Although the policies are consistent, President Raisi's role in Iranian-Syrian relations is different from his predecessor's. For example, President Raisi attended a meeting between Iran's supreme leader and President Assad, when the latter made a surprise visit to Tehran in May 2022. He joined Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani and members of the Office of the Supreme Leader. Former President Rouhani did not attend when President Assad met the supreme leader in February 2019. Furthermore, President Raisi's foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, was invited to attend, unlike former President Rouhani's foreign minister, Javad Zarif. Javad Zarif resigned, because he was cut out of the loop, but the supreme leader rejected his resignation. This shows how the regime has sought to position the hardline president as a leader of the Axis of Resistance, which includes Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas and other violent militias across the region, in contrast to the Rouhani administration, which was excluded from key foreign policy decisions.

Iran's supreme leader may be positioning Raisi as the leader of an anti-American, anti-Israel informal military alliance, whose main goal is to confront the U.S. and Israel, ahead of the near term succession of the supreme leader of Iran. The Raisi meeting also signals Tehran's interest in ensuring that Syria stays a member of this axis, and does not drift toward the Gulf Arab states, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a signatory to the Abraham Accords. Only two months prior to the meeting, President Assad traveled to the UAE.

Iranian Economic Support to the Assad Regime

In support of the Syrian regime's campaign of mass murder to suppress the popular unrest, Iran has conducted an extensive, expensive, and integrated effort to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power. In the early stages of the conflict, Iran offered limited assistance to the Assad regime in the form of technical and financial support, facilitated primarily through the IRGC's Quds Force. Beginning in 2012, Iran's economic support increased markedly to forestall the collapse of the Assad regime.

It is unknown exactly how much Iran has spent to prop up the Assad regime, but estimates range from $30 billion to $105 billion in total military and economic aid since the onset of the conflict. In 2017, Iran, through its state-run Export Development Bank, extended Syria an additional $1 billion credit line, adding to the $5.6 billion total credit lifeline Iran provided the Assad regime in 2013 and 2015 to keep the Syrian economy afloat and facilitate Syrian purchases of petroleum. Iran's provision of credit to the Assad regime underscores its increased reliance on Iran for its survival.

Tehran has also greatly expanded its economic ties with Damascus during the Civil War, boosting bilateral trade from a peak of $545 million per year before the war to over $1 billion annually by 2017. Trade volume appears to have dipped since then according to Iranian state media reports, but in 2019, an Iranian official stated Iran's intention to boost trade volume by an additional $500 million to $1 billion annually within two years. To that end, Iran and Syria held a series of bilateral visits and economic delegations in 2019 aimed at cementing stronger economic ties. Most notably, in January 2019, Iran's vice president traveled to Damascus and inked agreements solidifying banking cooperation, for Iran to boost Syria's power generation, and for Iran to restore railways and other infrastructure, all with an eye toward boosting trade and sustaining Assad's reign. In November 2019, Iran and Syria announced a memorandum of understanding to establish three joint state-owned companies that will focus on reconstructing infrastructure and residential properties.

Iran has used its own oil tankers to transport Syria's embargoed crude oil, disguise its origins, and get it to market. Iran stepped up its provision of diesel fuel to the Syrian regime during the Civil War, fueling the Syrian Army's heavy ground vehicles – including tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and heavy transport. Tehran has done so through direct shipments as well as by providing Assad with credit lines to purchase the fuel. Additionally, Iran has provided Syria diesel in exchange for gasoline, a boon of hundreds of millions of dollars to the cash-strapped Syrian government.

Reports by Syrian government media indicate that in October 2018, Iran, hit hard by the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions, suspended its credit line to the Assad regime, triggering a fuel crisis. For at least a period of six months, Iran was unable to export fuel to Syria, but in May 2019, an Iranian oil tanker successfully delivered a shipment of oil, easing the crisis.

Iran's efforts to provide oil to fuel Syria's war machine have been ongoing, as evidenced by the July 2019 interdiction by British Royal Marines of an Iranian oil tanker off the coast of Gibraltar carrying 2 million barrels of oil suspected of being destined for Syria. The British operation highlighted Iran's efforts to maintain its lifeline to the Assad regime in violation of EU and other international sanctions.

As the civil war went in favor of Assad after regime forces, backed by Iran and Russia, retook Aleppo from the rebels in early 2017, Iran turned to secure its economic influence in the country. In September 2017, Iran's Research Institute of Petroleum, a governmental research institute affiliated with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), announced Iran's plan to build an oil refinery in Syria's western city of Homs once the civil war ended as part of a consortium involving Iranian, Syrian, and Venezuelan companies. The consortium has already begun pursuing international investments for the project, which will take an estimated $1 billion to construct and will have a projected refining capacity of 140,000 barrels per day.

The Homs oil refinery is one of a series of business deals Iran announced that indicate that the Islamic Republic is poised to take a leading role in the rebuilding of Syria, after playing a pivotal role in the nation's destruction. Also, in September 2017, Iran signed a series of lucrative agreements to restore Syria's power grid, and in January 2017, the Iranian government and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated entities inked major mining and telecommunications agreements with Damascus. The telecommunications agreements are particularly alarming, as they may provide Iran with communications-monitoring and intelligence-gathering tools.

In the process of shoring up its economic interests in Syria to recoup some of the resources it invested in defending Assad, Iran has competed with Russia. In 2018, a top Iranian military official demanded oil, gas, and phosphate contracts, seemingly concerned that the Iranians would not receive a fair share of Syrian assets relative to their economic and military commitment to Assad. Russian companies were pursuing contracts in the same industries, and reportedly have landed more deals than the Iranians.

Iranian Military Support to the Assad Regime

Iranian military support to the Assad regime was at first limited to advising and training regime forces and pro-Assad militias. However, Iran's support increased markedly in 2012 as Assad risked losing power due to rebel advances and force attrition. Iran began sending hundreds of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij fighters to Damascus, stanching and eventually reversing Assad's losses.

Tehran expanded its support to include deploying thousands of IRGC, Artesh, and Basij fighters to take a direct part in the Syrian Civil War's battles. These deployments corresponded with Iran taking an increasingly central role in the planning and conduct of the war and marked a departure from Iran's post-Iran-Iraq War dependence on non-state actors.

Iran has facilitated arms transfers to the Assad regime and the proxy militia forces in Syria, including Hezbollah, in violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorsed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and required Security Council approval for Iranian transfers of any weaponry outside Iran. This provision of Resolution 2231 expired in October 2020, thus removing the U.N. legal framework used to hold Iran responsible for conventional arms transfers. These arms transfers helped Assad regain lost territory and gave Iran and its proxies the ability to project power in the Levant militarily, threatening Israel, Jordan, and other U.S. allies and interests in the region.

Iran sent Syria vast quantities of military equipment throughout the civil war, including rifles, machine guns, ammunition, mortar shells, and other arms, as well as military communications equipment. These

arms transfers began prior to the introduction of Resolution 2231 and continued after it was adopted—much to the chagrin of JCPOA supporters, who thought that the deal would normalize Iran's relations with the West and promote cooperation.

Israel referred Iran to the U.N. Security Council on two separate occasions for alleged violations of Resolution 2231 in Syria, once for launching an "Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)," described as having been launched into Israeli airspace to attack Israeli territory, and once for Iran's delivery of a Khordad air defense system (which Israel destroyed before it could be set up) to an Iranian air base in Syria.

Iran uses its state-run airliners, including Mahan Air and Qeshm Fars Air, which it claims are strictly civilian, to ship arms into Syria via air transport. From January 2016 to August 2017, over 1,000 flights, many of them from so-called commercial airlines, departed from points in Iran and landed in Syria, indicating an ongoing complex logistical operation to resupply the Assad regime.

Air transport was a viable alternative to ground and sea transport during the civil war, but it was also vulnerable to airspace restrictions and no-fly zones. Prior to 2011, Iran depended on Turkey's airspace to transport weapons and personnel; however, at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey denied Iran access to its airspace. In March 2011, Turkish authorities interdicted a shipment of machine guns, ammunition, assault rifles, and mortar shells destined for Syria, the U.N. Security Council reported. After U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq in 2011, Iran began to utilize Iraqi airspace for its operations as well.

In a testament to Iran's influence in Iraq, in 2012, Obama administration officials failed to convince then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki to close down Iraq's airspace to Iranian flights. Then-Iraqi Minister of Transport, Hadi al Amiri, had close ties with Iran, as he previously led a powerful Iran-backed militia, known as the Badr Brigade. Subsequently, the Obama administration mulled enforcing a no-fly zone, but Obama decided against it, fearing that it would draw the U.S. further into the conflict.

As the tide of the war shifted in Assad's favor, Iran has moved to establish a permanent military presence in Syria, effectively transforming the country into a forward operating base from which to threaten and attack Israel. Iran has set about constructing military bases and weapons production and storage facilities to that end. Israel has targeted Iranian weapons depots on numerous occasions, vowing to strike against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria when it feels threatened. One prominent node for Iranian entrenchment is the T4 airbase, where Iran has sought to establish "a large air force compound under its exclusive control," according to Haaretz military correspondent Amos Harel. Iran shares the large base with Russian and Syrian forces, but operates independently of them, controlling T4's western and northern sides.

Highlighting the Iranian danger, in February 2018, Iran launched an armed drone from Syrian territory into Israel, an attack that Israel ultimately repelled. In August 2019, Israel struck Quds Force and Iran-backed Shi'a militia targets in Damascus who were preparing to launch explosives-laden "killer drones" into Israel's north. Iran's use of Syria as a staging ground for UCAV attacks against Israel illustrates the extent to which Iran has a free hand to operate in Syria, as Assad has allowed Iran to undertake such operations even though they put his own forces at risk.

In September 2019, Western intelligence sources alleged and satellite imagery confirmed that Iran's Quds Force was constructing a military complex, the Imam Ali compound, not far from the Abu Kamal-Al Qaim border crossing with Iraq, where it will house thousands of troops. Some of the buildings at the compound appear to be heavily fortified, heightening suspicions they could be storing sophisticated weaponry, including precision-guided missiles. The compound was partially destroyed by airstrikes after its existence was exposed, but in November 2019, *Fox News* confirmed that construction of the base is ongoing. In December 2019, *Fox News* reported that Iran is building an underground tunnel at the Imam Ali complex to store missiles and other advanced weaponry. Western officials claimed Israel destroyed segments of the underground tunnel system in January 2021 amid an accelerating air campaign against Iranian military assets in Syria.

While most of Iran's military hardware and personnel are concentrated in Syria's north, Israel is increasingly concerned about the transfer of sophisticated weaponry and precision-guided missiles to Hezbollah forces in the country. It therefore strikes the positions of both the IRGC and Hezbollah in Syria and weapons convoys that transit the Iraqi border.

To arm its proxies more securely, Iran has exported military production capabilities to Syria. Iran seems to hope these facilities are more immune to Israel's intelligence-gathering capabilities and its will to act militarily in Syria. To that end, it has set up missile and weapons production capabilities at underground sites in Syria that can be difficult to detect and destroy. In some cases, only "bunker-busting" bombs are capable of penetrating the underground fortifications.

In April 2022, Hezbollah and the IRGC reportedly began to develop ballistic missiles, chemical weapons, and UAVs under the "Project 99" program at a facility 25 meters below ground and fortified with a thick layer of concrete and steel in the city Masyaf, Syria. "Project 99" appears to be an extension of a cooperative program between Iran and North Korea to develop Scud missiles, which, according to the *Wisconsin Project*, are capable of delivering chemical weapons. These weapons would represent balance-altering upgrades to the arsenal of Iran-backed terrorist groups. Later that month, Israel struck in the vicinity of the alleged weapons development site, and it was reported that a precision-guided missile factory was the target.

In Taqsis, Syria and also in Hama province, Quds Force operatives have taken over an old Syrian regime research institution, the facilities of which are outfitted with tunnels and underground weapons depots. There, the Quds Force has reportedly begun work on advanced surface-to-surface missiles and chemical weapons. In the Mahin area in the southeastern countryside of Homs, Hezbollah, under the supervision of the IRGC, has set up fortified workshops for the purpose of manufacturing artillery and missile shells, mines and drones, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported in April 2022. The human rights organization also noted that these depots "are considered the second largest arms depots in Syria."

In addition to focusing on weapons proliferation, Israel is focused on deterring Iranian efforts to establish a presence in the Golan Heights, overlooking Israel's northern border. In November 2019, an Israeli military official announced, "there are Iranian Quds forces in the Golan Heights and that's not fear-mongering, they're there," increasing the urgency of the IRGC Quds Force threat at Israel's border.

In July 2020, Iran and Syria signed a comprehensive agreement to enhance their cooperation in the military and defense spheres. Both sides indicated that the agreement was meant to resist U.S. attempts to pressure and isolate Iran and Syria. Iran noted that as part of the agreement, it will "strengthen Syria's air defense systems within the framework of strengthening military cooperation between the two countries."

Israeli media reported in August 2020 that Israel has carried out over 1,000 airstrikes in Syria since 2017, largely in service of its effort to prevent Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and weapons transfers to Hezbollah. During that period, Israel reportedly took out over one-third of Syria's air defenses to ensure its continued aerial freedom of operation.

Throughout 2021, Israel intensified its attacks on Iranian arms and missile factories installed in Syria. The Iranians have reportedly sought to use Russian presence as cover for their weapons proliferation and shipment, thinking that the Israelis would hesitate to strike near Russians. Nevertheless, Israel recently attacked these sites, and Moscow did not condemn the attacks. Diplomatic and political sources claim that this indicated Moscow's "growing impatience with Iran's involvement in Syria." According to another expert at CSIS, "Moscow has remained wary about the excessive influence of Iranian-backed militias and non-state actors in a post-war Syria."

Iran's pledges to bolster Syria's air defenses and increase military cooperation with Damascus show that it remains committed to entrenching itself militarily in Syria. As Iran has entrenched itself, it has used Syria as a weapons transshipment hub, establishing supply lines to provide drones, precision-bombs, and other advanced weaponry to Hezbollah and Iran-backed Shi'a militias. Israel has repeatedly shown that it is willing to strike Iranian targets in Syria to stanch the Iranian proliferation threat and rein in the arms supply network Iran is building in the region. As such, Syria is likely to remain a battleground for direct Israeli-Iranian confrontation for the foreseeable future.

Provision of Proxies

Iran has deployed an estimated 20-30,000 regional proxies from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into the country. Former IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani was the head of these forces until he died in a U.S. drone strike on January 3, 2020, as he was in the process of actively planning attacks against Western interests. Soleimani coordinated activities among the various Shi'a mercenary forces to ensure they fulfilled Iranian foreign policy objectives. General Petraeus, former director of the CIA, described Soleimani as "a combination of CIA director, JSOC [Joint Special Operations Command] commander and regional envoy with the blood of well over 600 U.S. and Coalition soldiers on his hands, and the blood of countless others as well, in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Afghanistan—in each of which he supported, funded, trained, equipped and often directed powerful Shiite militias."

These duties shifted to Soleimani's successor, Esmail Qaani. Tehran's command and control over its proxy forces in Syria initially suffered because of the transition, as Qaani does not have the stature of Soleimani or benefit of close relationships with the heads of various militias that made Soleimani so effective. In June 2020, Qaani reportedly visited the Syrian side of the Abu Kamal border crossing with

Iraq, where he vowed that Iran would continue to fight the "Zionist regime" and the U.S. Qaani's visit was meant to show that, like Soleimani, he is capable of clandestinely visiting Iranian proxies around the region to assert his control over and consolidate unity among them.

In a testament to the tenuous state of the proxy militia command structure, a number of militiamen from IRGC-affiliated militias were killed fighting among themselves over a dispute regarding the sale of narcotics near Sayyida Zainab shrine, an area controlled by the IRGC and Syrian regime forces where drug trading by IRGC-backed militias is prevalent. The militiamen reportedly share their profits with their commanders, which probably include IRGC operatives.

Clashes even occasionally occur between Hezbollah and the Syrian Army's 4th Division—both of which are deeply involved in the drug trade in Syria—over how to distribute profits from the drug sales. Conflict is frequently reported in the Deir Ezzor region as well, with an armed altercation between the pro-regime National Defense Forces militia, and members of the Fatemiyoun division, serving as a recent example.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is the most prominent proxy acting at the behest of the Supreme Leader of Iran in Syria. Along with the IRGC-Quds Force, the group provides military and ideological training to Iran-backed militias and led them in battle throughout the Syrian Civil War. Moreover, Hezbollah troops fought all across the country, including on the Jordanian and Lebanese borders, Aleppo, and the Golan Heights, leading to a high number of casualties.

Under Iranian direction, Hezbollah entered the Syrian Civil War on Assad's side in 2011. Hezbollah spent the first two years of the civil war denying its involvement for fear that it would provoke opposition in Lebanon, but in April 2013, Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah openly declared Hezbollah's foray into the conflict, urging his followers to not "let Syria fall into the hands of America, Israel, or Takfiri (radical Sunni) groups." Since then, Hezbollah has deployed approximately 5,000-8,000 fighters into the Syrian arena, and between 1,000 and 2,000 of them have been killed. The group was involved in almost every major battle of the war, including the repeated offensives in Qalamoun and Zabadani, but most critically the battle of Aleppo. The battle of Aleppo ended with a regime victory in December 2016, irreversibly turning the tide of the Syrian war.

Hezbollah's role in the Aleppo offensive was critical to the Assad regime's victory. The Syrian army's heavy, mechanized units were not particularly effective in urban environments. Hezbollah trained and advised the Syrian army and pro-Assad militias to fight against a lightly armed guerrilla opposition in urban areas. Hezbollah troops also deployed alongside the Syrian army and its commanders took charge of militias. Its fighters' ability to communicate with Syrians in Arabic added to their value to the IRGC, whose operatives often cannot speak Arabic as they only speak Persian.

After averting the direct rebel threat to Damascus, Hezbollah acted to re-extend the Assad regime's control over all of Syria. In May 2017, Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah announced the withdrawal of his forces from positions on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Rather than demobilizing, however, they were sent deeper into eastern Syria, alongside the Syrian army, as part of a large-scale

offensive to retake the country's borders with Jordan and Iraq. At the same time, Iran-backed militias in the PMF charged from the Iraqi side of the border. In 2018, Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias linked up with Iranian proxies on the Iraqi side, defeating ISIS and securing the Abu Kamal-Al-Qaim border crossing west of the Euphrates River. South from Deir Ezzor City through Mayadin to Abu Kamal, the IRGC and Iran-backed militias—approximately 4,500 armed personnel in total—hold "full military authority and executive administration."

The number of Hezbollah fighters in Deir Ezzor likely decreased after the victory over ISIS, but the terrorist organization maintains a significant presence in this predominantly Sunni Arab area and continues to recruit, train, and assist local militia groups. Prominent Iran-aligned Iraqi militias and Syrian Local Defense Force militias continue to be stationed in this area, indicating the strategic value to Iran.

The Deir Ezzor province has been the location of recent U.S. and Israeli military action. In February 2021, the U.S. carried out airstrikes on military infrastructure in the province in retaliation for rocket attacks on a U.S. base in the northern Iraqi city of Erbil. In September 2021, an Iran-backed militia convoy was struck, though neither the U.S. or Israel claimed responsibility.

Given the strategic importance of the highway that passes through Deir Ezzor province, it is no surprise that Hezbollah (along with the IRGC and Iran-backed militias) has maintained its presence in this region, but the group has also established key positions in the southern suburbs of Damascus, near the Sayyida Zainab shrine, as well as in Daraya, a suburb in the southwest of the Syrian capital.

The group is constructing underground tunnels at Sayyida Zainab shrine, an old military site that is now intended to protect against Israeli airstrikes, which intensified in 2021. Hezbollah is also using this military site for unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) training operations.

Another important shrine that has attracted Hezbollah and members of Syria's 4th division is the Sayyida Sakina shrine, located in Daraya, a suburb of Damascus. Iran built the shrine, though its location had no religious significance, and today it is the third most holy Shi'a shrine for Iranian people, said a local Syrian researcher. The shrine, built near the municipality building against the protests of local people, acts as the centerpiece of a kind of settlement, where Iran-backed forces now live. Hezbollah and Assad's army have also acquired housing in this area, either by force or for large sums of money. They have also reportedly looted houses. Other Iran-backed militias present in this region include the Fatemiyoun Division, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas, al-Maqdesiyoun, and Harakat al-Nujaba.

To counteract local opposition to its activities, Hezbollah carries out programs to build popular support for itself and Iran. For example, Hezbollah runs an organization called Jihad al Bina, which plays an active role in the construction of schools and field hospitals in Deir Ezzor and other government-controlled cities. Iran funds the organization. The Hussein Organization is another so-called charity that, along with Jihad al-Bina, delivers services that the government fails to provide. These organizations provide food baskets, repair homes, rehabilitee water pipes, and supply generators to provide electricity in the war-torn area. In 2007, the U.S. Department of the Treasury prohibited transactions between Jihad al Bina and any U.S. persons and froze its assets.

Hezbollah's soft power campaign in Deir Ezzor is one of many indications that Hezbollah intends to remain in the country after an eventual Assad victory. To that end, it is entrenching itself militarily, similar to its Iranian backers. In December 2021, Hezbollah reportedly began installing air defense systems in the Qalamoun mountains. These systems threaten to weaken Israeli's ability to conduct air operations against key Hezbollah targets located in the Bekaa valley. Both tactical surface-to-air missile systems and man-portable air defense systems are suspected to be a part of this arsenal. Furthermore, Hezbollah has reportedly established missile bases in Qusayr and Qalamoun to better protect its longer-ranger projectiles from Israeli aerial attacks.

The group is also aiming to establish a presence on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. Their presence in this area concerns the Israelis because it could serve as a base to carry out limited strikes against soldiers or civilians in Israeli-held territory in a future conflict. However, this does not threaten Israel's military superiority in the area. Since the Israelis occupy the high-ground, IDF ground troops can easily seize the flat terrain between the Golan and Damascus.

Israeli security officials say Hezbollah is exploiting the chaos of the Syrian Civil War to clandestinely import advanced, balance-altering weapons—allegedly including chemical weapons, SCUDs, and Yakhont anti-ship missiles—from its Iranian patron and the Assad regime. In 2016, the U.S. Department of State reported that Hezbollah had already possessed anti-ship and anti-aircraft cruise missile systems. These weapons would be a major upgrade to the group's arsenal, estimated to be comprised of at least 150,000 rockets and missiles of various range and capability. Israel considers these shipments to be a red line and has repeatedly intercepted and destroyed these weapons with air strikes. Even the unsophisticated Katyusha rockets have the potential to reach population centers in Israel.

Many of these rockets and other weapons in Hezbollah's growing arsenal were first flown into Damascus Airport from Iran and then trucked across the border into Lebanon. Additionally, weapons have been shipped via land through Iraq and Syria. The land route centers upon the Abu Kamal-Al-Qaim border crossing—a frequent target if and when the U.S. conducts strikes in Syria. Moreover, Israel has shown advanced intelligence-collection and targeting capabilities, as several presumed Israeli strikes against convoys and storage facilities used to house weapons have been carried out in this area to prevent transfers en route to Lebanon.

In an effort to avoid Israeli airstrikes, Hezbollah may look to transporting weapons via the sea as well. In April 2021, Israel claimed that Iran was smuggling weapons from the Red Sea, through the Suez Canal, and into the Mediterranean Sea under the protection of a Russian fleet.

Hezbollah's Sectarian Campaign

To this day, Hezbollah recruits and trains militias in Syria and leads extensive soft-power initiatives, including building schools, religious shrines, and cultural centers with funding from Iran. These initiatives are designed to build popular support for Hezbollah and the Iranian regime and cement their sociocultural influence in the country. In the Damascus enclaves, Hezbollah has also implemented a sectarian campaign, often by force, to solidify its influence. Regime forces, backed by Shi'a militias,

began systematically displacing residents of Daraya in August 2016. The Assad regime, the IRGC, and Hezbollah have coordinated efforts to uproot Sunni populations from these areas.

In January 2022, Afghanis and Iraqis were moved in to replace locals that were living near the Sayyida Zainab shrine, as Hezbollah set up the above-mentioned military base there. The group's expansion into this area has been unpopular among locals, who view the shrine as one of the holiest. Hezbollah has removed farmers from their land allegedly to prevent them from documenting their military activities.

Hezbollah has also engaged in large-scale sectarian cleansing of Sunnis in Madaya and Zabadini to secure its Beqaa Valley and Baalbek strongholds across the border and guarantee its land corridor to Damascus. An Iranian-Qatari brokered population swap deal in April 2017 transferred almost all remaining Sunni combatants from the area, in exchange for the Shiite residents of besieged Foua and Kefraya.

In March 2021, Lebanese Hezbollah militiamen were conducting military training camps in northeast Syria for a brutal militia called the Shabiha, comprising predominantly Shi'a and Alawite people widely believed to have committed the Houla massacre in 2012 in which 108 people (mostly Sunni) were killed, many of them women and children. These sectarian acts of violence by Shi'a militias, in turn, radicalize and mobilize Sunni groups. In effect, Iran's revolutionary project fuels a vicious cycle of radicalization.

In many ways, Hezbollah has replicated itself throughout Syria. The Iranian proxy group recruits and indoctrinates members of the minority *Twelver Shi'a* population in Syria into the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *Velayat e-Faqih*, which grants authority to the Supreme Leader of Iran. Hezbollah has even reached out to Sunnis, with some success at converting them to the *Twelver Shi'a* faith. For example, Hezbollah helped recruit from the Sunni tribe, al-Baggara, in the west of Deir Ezzor province. These recruits joined the Baqir Brigade, one of the most prominent militias within the Local Defense Forces, and some of them converted to Shiism. Ideological training is an important dimension of Hezbollah's efforts to construct a network of militias in its image.

Hezbollah and the Syrian Drug Trade

The most common drug smuggled through Jordan from Syria is the Syrian-made cheap amphetamine known as Captagon, which is usually taken in a pill form, and is frequently used by combatants in war to alleviate fatigue. Amid the instability of a civil war, the lucrative trade in Captagon pills has become central to Syria's illicit economy. Although the Syrian government denies its involvement in the multi-billion-dollar industry, the country now contains the main production sites for this drug.

Syria has therefore been referred to as a "narco-state," given the fact that associates and relatives of President Assad control the trade. Brigadier General Ahmed Hashem Khalifat, director of the Border Security Directorate in the Jordanian Armed Forces, alleged, "Undisciplined forces from the Syrian army are collaborating with drug smugglers. The gangs…are supported by these forces and by the security apparatuses, in addition to Hezbollah and Iranian militias."

Hezbollah is involved in trafficking drugs through Syria into Jordan. Since the beginning of 2022 alone, Jordan's army has expanded its operations to confront drug trafficking at its border. In the first two

months of 2022, the army said it had foiled attempts to smuggle 16 million amphetamine-type Captagon pills—more than was seized in all of 2021—and killed 30 smugglers at the border with Syria.

Captagon is mostly manufactured in Lebanon and Syria, and Hezbollah is known to be involved in smuggling the drug out of its country to finance its operations. A Syrian opposition website reported in May 2022 that Hezbollah operatives from Baalbek had arrived in the southwestern Syrian city Al-Suwayada to oversee the construction of a small Captagon factory.

The Syrian border with Jordan is of considerable importance, given that Jordan provides a land bridge to wealthy Gulf markets. Pro-Iranian Syrian army units cooperate with Iran-backed militias including Hezbollah to control the flow of drugs from Syria into Jordan. The smuggling operations are a critical source of revenue for the militias, which have received less money from Iran as a result of the U.S. reimposing sanctions against Tehran in April 2018.

The constant flow of drugs from Syria into Jordan has resulted in a "drug war," in which the Jordanian military and law enforcement frequently engage armed smugglers. In May 2022, the Jordanian army said it was bracing for an escalation, as the armed smugglers attempt to export larger quantities of drugs. Drug smuggling out of Syria into Jordan provoked Jordan to carry out airstrikes in Syria against Iran-backed militias in January 2024.

Additional Shiite Militia Proxies

In addition to Hezbollah, Iran has mobilized, funded, and armed thousands of Shiite fighters to defend Assad's regime, inflaming Sunni-Shiite sectarian tensions in the process. These fighters, recruited from across the Arab and Islamic world, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, were brought under the unified command of Qassem Soleimani.

An estimated 3,000 Afghans, primarily immigrants, and refugees residing in Iran and Syria, form the Liwa Fatemiyoun (Fatemiyoun Division). Afghan children as young as fourteen have died in combat in Syria, revealing the IRGC's shockingly unscrupulous recruitment practices. The U.S. government designated the Liwa Fatemiyoun as a terrorist organization in 2019. Additionally, an estimated 1,000 Pakistanis were trained in Mashhad under the IRGC Quds Force. The Iranian press describes this group, known as the Zainabyoun Brigade, as an elite assault force. The core forces of the Zainabyoun Brigade reportedly initially came from Al-Mustafa International University, an Iranian network of colleges and seminaries tasked with disseminating Iran's religious ideology around the world.

In January 2021, the Afghan Fatemiyoun Division reportedly transferred 56 short and medium-range surface-to-surface missiles over the Iraqi border to Iraqi Hezbollah forces positioned in Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor province, disguising the weaponry by using vehicles meant for transporting produce. Iran's military entrenchment has eroded Syria's sovereignty and invited increased Israeli strikes on Syrian territory, indicating how the country has become embroiled as a battleground between Israel and Iran and its proxies.

Iran's Recruitment Drive

Iran's efforts to recruit Shi'a militants to the Syrian war effort from around the Middle East and beyond center upon the salaries it offers its disaffected conscripts and an extensive patronage and ideological infrastructure that includes universities, charities, mosques, and cultural centers. In terms of monetary incentives, recruits are offered monthly salaries on a sliding scale dependent on country of origin and level of military training. Iran offers to pay the families of "martyrs" for their children's education and to send family members on annual pilgrimages to holy sites in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The salaries are clearly intended to exploit the economic misfortune caused by the war.

In January 2022, the Syrian army was struggling to recruit new fighters in the Deir Ezzor region even as it offered defectors and rebels amnesty, because many of the potential recruits signed up with higher-paying Iran-backed militias. Since the Iran-backed militias are more powerful than the state forces, they also provide a form of protection against the state and other terrorist groups. In fact, recent attacks by ISIS added to the motivation to join Shi'a militias.

Another way Iran strives to remake Syria in its own image is by penetrating the educational system. In January 2018, Iran announced plans to establish Islamic Azad University branches in Syrian cities, which would allow it to spread its Islamic revolutionary ideology. Iran has also taken measures to indoctrinate young children. Iran is spreading Shiism in the west Euphrates area, which resembles "ISIS' policy of recruiting and brainwashing children during its control of large areas of Syrian territory." According to The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 20 children under the age of 12 were introduced to Iran's version of Shiism at a school in the town of Hatlah, and given money and gifts for attending the lesson. These material inducements may be intended to exploit the poverty of the population for the purposes of propagating Iran's particular brand of Islam.

To further expand their support base in Syria, Iran and Hezbollah have also sought to convert Sunnis to Shiism, particularly in the Sunni-majority Deir Ezzor province. The Shiite call to prayer can be heard from mosques; and Shia shrines have been built at locations with religious significance. To motivate people to convert, Iran has bought property and guaranteed housing to Shi'a converts; and Iran-backed militia leaders have even paid people to become Shi'a. Syrian authorities have reportedly arrested Sunni imams for refusing to participate in Shi'a prayers. Furthermore, Iran offers financial assistance to tribal leaders in Deir Ezzor, and in return these leaders have helped the Iranians build religious schools and centers.

Iran also relies heavily on religious and ideological appeals to find recruits willing to die for its cause. The New York Times detailed how recruiters affiliated with the IRGC appeal to the Shi'a faith and identity, reporting that once recruited, fighters train near Tehran where "Iranian officers delivered speeches invoking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the revered seventh-century Shiite figure whose death at the hands of a powerful Sunni army became the event around which Shiite spirituality would revolve. The same enemies of the Shiites who killed the imam are now in Syria and Iraq, the officers told the men."

Iran has sought to frame the fighting in Syria as an urgent necessity to defend Shi'a shrines. The golden-domed Sayyeda Zainab shrine, strategically located in south Damascus, is central to this narrative of Iran and its proxy fighters. Attendees at funerals for Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shi'a militia fighters killed

in Syria frequently chant "labaykya Zainab" (At your service, O Zainab), and these same groups have also produced propagandistic songs featuring the slogan and placed the shrine's iconic dome prominently in the background of martyrdom posters of fallen fighters.

One of the most important and notorious of those groups is Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, which played a critical role in the battle for Aleppo and is alleged to have summarily executed 82 civilians, including 11 women and 13 children. Harakat al-Nujaba, an offshoot of Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, recently formed a "Golan Liberation Brigade" to fight the Israelis.

In March 2021, Syrian opposition media outlets reported that the Iran-backed militia Kataib al-Imam Ali had opened a recruiting station in the regime-controlled city of Aleppo. Kataib al-Imam Ali was created in Iraq in June 2014 as the armed wing of an Iraqi political party, Harakat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah (The Movement of the Islamic Iraq). The group has been uniformed and well-armed since its inception. It was founded by Shibl al-Zaydi, a U.S. designated terrorist who has leveraged his position as head of a powerful militia to become one of the richest men in Iraq with a large business empire and controlling interest in the Iraqi Ministry of Communications.

Assad regime defense officials reportedly approved of the group's recruitment operations and have made allowances not to pursue army defectors and dodgers of compulsory military service if they instead join the militia. The militia appeals to economically disenfranchised Syrian youth, offering $200 per month for married recruits and $150 per month for single individuals. The group's nascent presence in Syria is a testament to many of the Iran-backed Shi'a militias' transnational nature.

Local Actors

One of the most pernicious ways in which Iran has sought to bolster its influence along sectarian lines in Syria has been by providing ideological guidance for the transformation of elements of Bashar Al-Assad's Popular Committees—small, localized defense units—and other irregular pro-Assad armed groups into increasingly "regularized" militias, known as the National Defense Forces (NDF), modeled after Hezbollah. Iran's Qassem Soleimani and Hezbollah personally oversaw the creation of the NDF, whose local Syrian recruits receive training in urban and guerilla warfare from both the IRGC and Hezbollah at facilities in Syria, Lebanon and Iran. The NDF has participated in critical battles, including the 2016 Aleppo offensive and the campaign to dislodge ISIS, contributing to Assad's territorial reconquests. In a 2017 offensive to take back Deir Ezzor from ISIS, the NDF allegedly committed war crimes and human rights abuses against the local Sunni population.

The militia operates as a part-time volunteer reserve force of the Syrian Army which has opted to fight on behalf of the Assad regime against rebel groups, filling the void created by the depletion of Assad's Syrian armed forces since their creation in mid-2012. Iran has taken the lead in the "rebranding, restructuring, and merging" of the Popular Committees into the NDF, with Hezbollah playing a critical role in providing military and ideological training. In a similar vein to Hezbollah, the Iran-backed NDF operate in a localized context and are ostensibly Syrian actors, but their true raison d'etre is the propagation of Iran's supranational revolutionary project.

The NDF is now by far the largest militia network in Syria, estimated at approximately 50,000 primarily Alawite members as of late 2015. The NDF also has a large contingent of Shi'a fighters who, despite being a small minority in Syria, have played an outsize role in supporting the Assad regime against the rebels, which were mostly Sunni. The NDF militants are more audacious than the average member of the regular Syrian army, according to one rebel, who added that they fight with "sectarian zeal."

In addition to replicating the Hezbollah model in Syria, Iran's role in creating the NDF also mirrors the establishment of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a loosely-knit coalition of predominantly Shi'a militias in Iraq, most of which continue to have close ties to Iran. Both the Syrian NDF and Iraqi PMF are governmentally-sanctioned and financed paramilitary outfits whose fighters are more numerous and powerful than their respective states' official defense forces.

Furthermore, both were formed on a sectarian basis: the NDF mobilized the Alawite community on the basis of a need to defend it against Sunni rebels, and subsequently ISIS; and the PMF was formed after the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highest Shi'a cleric in Iraq, issued a *fatwa* calling on all able-bodied people to join a militia and fight ISIS. The areas in Iraq that were liberated from ISIS are largely under control of the PMF. In Syria, prominent Defense Force militias, such as the Baqir Brigade, operate alongside other Iran-backed militias to control the areas they liberated from ISIS. PMF militias have taken control of the roads and levy taxes in Iraq. Likewise, at the Abu Kamal-Al-Qaim border crossing, the PMF militias generate billions in tax revenue.

A further similarity between the Iraqi and Syrian militias is that Iran pressured the Iraqi government to integrate the PMF within the state security apparatus, just as it pressured Assad to integrate the NDF. Iran played a role in the formation of both units, today enjoys loyalty from the PMF as well as the NDF. Most of the Shi'a militias which make up the PMF act in the interest of Iran and at the behest of the Supreme Leader of Iran, even though the group is legally under control of the Iraqi Prime Minister's office. On the other hand, while Iran has had to plead with the NDF in some parts of Syria to increase their loyalty, the NDF appears to be a permanent fixture in Syria, remaking a country that historically "was home to many competing ideological forms of Shiism" in Iran's image. The militia's secure Iranian alignment and loyalty to its revolutionary ethos ensure that Iran will be the dominant military and cultural power in Syria for the foreseeable future.

The clerical regime in Iran has largely abandoned any pretense of pan-Islamism to focus exclusively on the Shi'a non-state proxy model, with the aim of dominating the region through loyal Shi'a legions. Iran takes advantage of poverty, chaos, and war to achieve these aims.

Iran's Gains in Syria

The successes of Hezbollah, the NDF, and affiliated Iranian proxy forces in the Syrian theater have expanded Iran's objectives within Syria. What began as an Iranian-sponsored attempt to create a "Useful Syria" from the regime's major cities and economic centers has now become a more ambitious campaign to retake the entire country. Iran's provision of economic, military, and proxy support was critical in stabilizing Assad's rule along with Russia's entry into the civil war in 2015.

Following the Syrian regime's 2016 victory in Aleppo, which followed on the heels of Russia's entry into the conflict, the civil war's momentum swung decisively in Assad's favor. In 2018, the Assad regime consolidated its control in a brutal fashion, pressing an offensive in Eastern Ghouta, the last rebel-held bastion in the Damascus suburbs. The Eastern Ghouta campaign forced the remnants of rebel forces and thousands of civilians to flee to Idlib province, which is now Syria's last-remaining rebel-held enclave on the western Syrian corridor that runs from Damascus-Homs-Hama-Idlib-Aleppo. As of January 2022, millions of displaced people in this province were living under the rule of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist group that became notorious during the Syrian Civil War for suicide bombings against government and civilian targets.

Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif euphemistically declared that Idlib, whose population had doubled to 3 million people since the war broke out due to internally displaced refugees, must be "cleaned out" of opposition forces. The U.N. has warned that a regime offensive backed by Iran and Russia would result in the "worst humanitarian catastrophe" of the century as there are no longer any opposition-held areas left in Syria where those fleeing can evacuate. In September 2018, Russia and Turkey negotiated a tenuous truce to forestall a bloodbath in Idlib, but the Assad regime has referred to the deal as a "temporary one."

In October 2019, President Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeast Syria and signaled his intention to eventually end U.S. involvement in Syria. The troop withdrawal strengthened Iran's hand and facilitated further Iranian military and commercial entrenchment in Syria, presenting a setback to the administration's concerted effort to pressure Tehran. The U.S. troop withdrawal also increased the chances of a Russian-Syrian-Iranian onslaught in Idlib. Turkey, concerned that an offensive would further increase refugee strains, had stood as a major impediment to an Idlib offensive. In the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal, however, Turkey has drawn closer to Russia, neutralizing its protestations over a "fait accompli" in Idlib.

In November 2019, Syrian and Russian forces killed at least 22 civilians in attacks on an internally displaced person (IDP) camp and a maternity hospital in villages around Idlib, according to opposition monitoring groups. These events indicated that a full-scale offensive in Idlib was imminent. At a December 2019 summit in Kazakhstan as part of the Russia-Iran-Turkey negotiation track, Turkey joined Russia and Iran in expressing concern over the increased presence of "terrorist groups" in Idlib, and pledged to work cooperatively to pacify the situation. The pledge came in the wake of increased activity by Syrian armed forces, in conjunction with Russian air power, on the outskirts of Idlib in the weeks prior.

The Kazakhstan summit ended without a definitive ceasefire agreement, and in the days that followed, Syrian government forces, Russia, Hezbollah, Iran, and other pro-Assad militias launched an offensive to retake Idlib. Nearly one million Syrians, roughly half of them children, were displaced by the fighting, straining U.N. relief efforts. In March 2020, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire, but the situation remains volatile.

The U.S. troop withdrawal from northeast Syria weakened the deterrent that allowed the Kurdish-led SDF to control a full third of Syria's territory, home to the country's richest oil and agricultural resources, keeping it out of the hands of the Russia-Assad-Iran alliance for seven years. Nevertheless, the SDF, backed by a U.S. troop presence at the former Conoco gas facility, never surrendered control of the al Omar oilfield, the largest oilfield in the country, in the eastern part of Deir Ezzor. In August 2020, the SDF signed a contract with an American oil company to extract oil from this lucrative oilfield. The U.S. also conducts counterterrorism operations out of the Conoco base and recently participated in joint military exercises with the SDF in Deir Ezzor, near the Iraqi border.

U.S. vs. Iranian positions in Syria

Iran and Iran-backed forces control most of the territory to the west of the Euphrates River, across from the Conoco base. Further south, the Abu Kamal-Al-Qaim border crossing in Deir Ezzor is the most essential Syrian territory to the Iranian regime, as it serves as a major logistics hub between Syria and Iraq under its control. That is why a large number of Hezbollah forces and the IRGC are stationed there, and along the Euphrates River. This route—one out of three major routes into Syria from Iraq—is known as the upper passage of the southern route, skirting alongside the western edge of the lush Euphrates River Valley, passing through Deir Ezzor city, and eventually connecting to Aleppo, which, as noted, is largely controlled by the Syrian regime.

There is also a lower passage of the southern route, passing through al Tanf. The third major route, known as the northern route, passes through al Yarubiyah. Of course, overtime, Iran has adapted its transport routes to avoid detection and Israeli airstrikes, but the Abu Kamal-Al-Qaim border crossing remains key. As of 2019, *the Atlantic Council* concluded that neither the southern-most nor the northern-most causeway were open to Iran, with the U.S.-held al Tanf garrison and U.S.-backed forces obstructing the al Tanf causeway; and the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) holding al Yarubiyah. Given the vulnerability of the Abu Kamal-Al-Qaim crossing to detection and airstrikes, Iran has occasionally resorted to transporting materials via illegal border crossings on unpaved roads.

Two-hundred U.S. troops still occupy a military base at the strategic al Tanf border crossing to conduct counterterrorism operations, while also limiting Iran's ability to ship weapons along this southernmost transit route from Baghdad to Damascus. However, in 2017, Iran-backed militias and pro-regime forces began establishing a presence outside the U.S.-enforced 55-kilometer "de-confliction" zone at al Tanf. Despite U.S. warnings, the Assad regime and allied forces—including Hezbollah and other Iranian proxy militias—established a presence near this border crossing, indicating that a U.S. withdrawal would result in these forces taking the crossing and opening an additional route for weapons transportation. These maneuvers indicate the strategic value of al Tanf and create a potential "flashpoint" for escalation between the U.S. and Iran.

In October 2021, a coordinated UAV attack was carried out by Iran on the al Tanf U.S. military base in what American and Israeli officials believed to be retaliation for an Israeli airstrike in Syria. Since Biden took office, the Iranians have carried out increasingly dangerous and frequent attacks on U.S. personnel and facilities in both Syria and Iraq. Between January 20, 2021, when Biden took office, and July 2021, Iran-backed militias had carried out 20 rocket attacks and 11 drone attacks on U.S. assets in Syria and

Iraq, a significant increase compared to Trump's time in office. Yet, these attacks were not met with a forceful U.S. response, increasing the risk readiness of the proxy militias acting at Tehran's behest.

Iranian proxy attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria escalated throughout 2022. There were seven attacks in May 2022—as many as in February, March, and April combined. They were again not met with a decisive U.S. military response, through red lines were being tested. Nor did the U.S. respond with force to any of the 29 attacks launched on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria between October 2021 and August 2022. The failure to establish clear red lines, backed up by kinetic action, allows Iranian proxies to carry out attacks with impunity.

Some analysts view these brazen attacks as a signal from the Iranian system that it will take a more aggressive stance against U.S. presence in the region because it fears no consequences. In this way, it sought to increase pressure on the U.S. to withdraw and agree to concessions in the then-ongoing Vienna negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear deal. Through the PMF, Iran has also increased political and military pressure on U.S.-backed forces stationed in Iraq.

Head of the PMF Faleh al-Fayyad reportedly traveled to Damascus in March 2022 to meet with President Bashar al-Assad in order to discuss border security cooperation, with the aim of restricting the activities of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and shoring up security coordination on both sides of the border at the behest of Iran. Another possible intention behind Al-Fayyad's trip may have been increasing pressure on the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which have a major presence in northeast Syria.

If President Biden brings the remaining troops home, the Iranians would be in an improved position to take full control of the remaining bordering crossings and seize key oilfields. Iran has already begun to invest in its relations with eastern Syrian tribes, like the Baggara tribe, who are poised to take over SDF-controlled regions in the event of a US withdrawal.

The U.S. military presence in Syria, and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, are helping to prevent Iran from taking control of the remaining roadways from Iraq into Syria. If these valuable strategic assets come into Iran's possession, Iran would have an easier time shipping weapons to its terrorist proxy in Lebanon, along with the variety of proxy forces it supports throughout Syria. It would also be easier to resupply the Assad regime.

Iran's Long-Term Influence in Syria

Iran's Syrian intervention has clearly paid off, guaranteeing both Assad's survival and his dependence on Tehran given his weakened position both domestically and within the international community. For its efforts to shore up Assad, Iran and the IRGC—which has a hand in virtually every sector of the Iranian economy—have the opportunity to further carve out a long-term role for themselves in Syria, utilizing ideology and the cover of military and economic projects to export the Islamic Revolution by creating Shi'a militias and quasi-state institutions loyal to Iran and its Supreme Leader within Syria.

Iran has relied on both local and foreign proxies—trained, funded, armed and directed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and Hezbollah—to defend Assad against the rebel

forces and accomplish core foreign policy objectives. As of March 2021, Iran and Iran-backed militias controlled the outskirts of Damascus, patrolled strategic towns on the Syria-Lebanon border, were present in large numbers in southern Syria near Israel, had multiple bases in Aleppo, and camps in the west of the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV), near the border with Iraq. Through its growing proxy network in Syria and its local support, Iran can exert leverage over the central government and coerce Assad to make decisions in its favor, like appointing Iran-aligned figures to key positions in the government, military, or other institutions or providing Iran with lucrative contracts.

Furthermore, Iran uses its Shi'a proxies in Syria to project power into the Levant with a low risk of escalation, for Iran denies its involvement in the attacks it directs through proxies. Iran continues to direct attacks on U.S. assets and Israel and denies any involvement. Iran and its proxies now threaten Israeli positions in the Golan Heights, thus opening the possibility of a multi-front war with Israel.

Iran has built capabilities in Syria as a base from which to provoke the U.S. and its allies. Moreover, Assad permits Iran's expansive military and proxy operations throughout the country, including its weapons shipments and attacks on Israel. He continues to grant permission for these activities even though they increase the risk of Israeli strikes on Syrian interests. For example, in a significant military escalation, Israel struck 70 Iranian military sites throughout Syria in retaliation for an unprecedented rocket attack on Israeli targets in the Golan Heights conducted by Iran in May 2018. In these strikes, 5 Syrian soldiers were reportedly killed. In December 2021, Israel bombed a storage container holding Iranian munitions in the Syrian port of Latakia.

In addition to its military entrenchments, Iran has sought to establish political influence. Some members of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's inner circle appear to support a growing Iranian presence in Syria, as one of his advisors suggested in an interview that Iran is still needed to support Syria's war. Other members of the president's inner circle reportedly want the Iranians out of the country, including the powerful General Maher al Assad, the president's brother and commander of the Army's notorious 4th Division.

President Assad had already ejected Iran's top commander of forces in Syria, General Javad Ghaffari, in November 2021. The general, who came to be known by the opposition as the "butcher of Aleppo," was reportedly asked to leave the country because he was directing proxy attacks without approval from Syrian officials. Iranian accounts of this situation have dismissed the notion that he was fired.

Iran and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah are accelerating their military expansion into Syria, especially since the war in Ukraine required Russia to pull forces from Syria. At the end of March 2022, at least 1,000 Russian mercenaries from the infamous Wagner Group redeployed to Ukraine. This shift created a power vacuum in Syria that Iran has looked to fill. According to Israeli sources, hundreds of Iranian personnel are moving into strategic areas that were previously dominated by the Russians, including the city of Aleppo and the Mohin warehouse area. Moreover, in May 2022, Hezbollah and Iranian forces began taking over military bases that were formerly occupied by Russian forces.

Syria Remains a Proxy Battlefield

Even though Assad has consolidated control over key cities and towns, Iran remains militarily and politically entrenched in Syria as a result of its over decade-long commitment to sustaining the Assad regime. Its forward presence in Syria allows it to attack Israel and U.S. forces. According to leaked intelligence cables, Iran was planning to escalate attacks against U.S. military convoys in Syria using remote-triggered roadside bombs known as explosively formed projectiles (EFPs). The documents showed that Iran and Russia agreed in late 2022 to establish a jointly-run command center in Syria to coordinate the EFP campaign. Both countries have long sought to evict the U.S. military to allow Assad to reassert control over the entire country, including in the autonomous northeast region, where the U.S.-backed, primarily-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are in control of key oil fields.

As Iran surges weapons through Syria in order to resupply Hezbollah, especially noting that the terrorist group in Lebanon continues to expend ammunition to attack Israel and prepare for escalation, Israel has taken increasingly proactive measures to prevent Iranian arms proliferation, striking at IRGC personnel responsible for these transfers as well as Hezbollah operatives. In fact, it was reported in January 2024 that over the course of three months, 19 Hezbollah fighters were killed in Syria, which was twice the total throughout the remainder of 2023. In late December 2023, Israel also assassinated the IRGC-Quds Force's Unit 2250 Commander Razi Mousavi, who was responsible for coordinating logistics operations in Syria and was essential personnel for the rearmament of Hezbollah, near Damascus. Then, the IDF struck again near Damascus, killing five senior IRGC-Quds Force operatives in mid-January 2024.

The Assad regime's re-consolidation of power, a project in which Iran played an indispensable role, has given Iran and its proxies a foothold to project economic, military, and cultural influence into Syria. Assad owes a huge debt to Iran for providing the material, financial, and military support to conduct the war against the rebels. Assad received oil and armaments, economic and military assistance, loans, and increased trade. And, of course, on the military side, Iran was indispensable. Iranian troops and proxies played lead roles in conducting ground operations, and training and commanding pro-Assad militias. Iranian proxies from throughout the Middle East supplied additional manpower; and Iran even recruited and mobilized fighters from within Syria.

Funeral in Tehran for a senior IRGC commander killed fighting in Syria in 2015.

IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, who is said to be running the war in Syria, addressing Iran-backed fighters near Aleppo in 2015.

Yemen

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)
- Hezbollah
- Houthis

The Houthi flag and slogan, which reads "God is great/ Death to America/ Death to Israel /God curse the Jews/ Victory to Islam," draws inspiration from the Iranian regime slogans "Death to America" and "Death to Israel."

Iran has destabilized Yemen by supporting the Shiite Houthi insurgency (directly, and indirectly through Hezbollah) from the beginning of its war against the Sunni-dominated, internationally-recognized central government in 2004 to the present. Iran uses the Houthis and Yemen as a proxy and base, respectively, to attack its leading Sunni rival, Saudi Arabia, and to attack merchant vessels in the Red Sea. Iran's support for the Houthis has helped the latter expand their control of Yemeni territory; capture Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and dethrone Yemen's central government; and survive a massive air bombardment from a Saudi-led coalition seeking to restore the former Yemeni regime.

Tehran's aid to the group has included funding, Iranian fighter pilots, arms shipments, and military training. In 2009, Iran's support for the Houthis was exposed when the Yemeni navy apprehended an Iranian ship off the Yemeni coast in the Red Sea carrying weapons experts and anti-tank weapons sent to replace wounded "Iranians fighting alongside Houthi rebels" against Yemeni government forces. The Houthis' motto, "God is great! / Death to America! / Death to Israel! / God curse the Jews! / Victory to Islam!" which emulates the Iranian regime's own "Death to America" slogan and extremist ideology, underscores the group's links to Tehran. Iranian meddling in Yemen includes arms shipments and support for assassinations and coups; the use of missiles, drones, and roadside bombs; and the deployment of foreign regional proxies, namely Lebanese Hezbollah, on the ground.

According to the U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, throughout 2019, Hezbollah, the IRGC-QF, and other Iran backed terrorist groups continued to exploit the political and security vacuum created by the ongoing conflict between the Yemeni government under the leadership of then-President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi, recognized by the U.N. Security Council as the legitimate government of Yemen, and the Iran-backed Houthi militants. The IRGC-QF has exploited the conflict to expand its influence in Yemen.

On December 5, 2019, as part of its reward offer for information leading to the disruption of the financial mechanisms of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the U.S. Department of State's "Rewards for Justice" program requested information on the activities, networks, and associates of Abdul Reza Shahla'i, a Sana'a, Yemen-based high-ranking commander of the IRGC's Quds Force (IRGC-QF). In early January 2020, the Trump Administration targeted Shahla'i in airstrikes in Yemen, on the same night it struck IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani's convoy at Baghdad International Airport, but Shahla'i survived.

On January 18, 2020, ballistic missiles struck a mosque at the al-Estiqbal military camp in Marib, killing at least 116 people in what was reportedly one of the deadliest attacks in the civil war. There were no immediate claims of responsibility, but Yemen's internationally-recognized government blamed Houthi rebels. The United States blamed Iran, which denied involvement. On January 20, 2020, government forces fought Houthi rebels east of Marib, killing senior Houthi commander Jaber Al Muwaed.

On December 30, 2020, the Houthis launched an attack against the civilian airport in Aden, as officials associated with the Saudi-backed Yemeni government deplaned. The attack resulted in the deaths of 27 people, including three staff members of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Afterwards, the Trump Administration designated the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.

In a particularly audacious attack in January 2022, the Houthis used ballistic and cruise missiles to attack the United Arab Emirates. This was a similar swarm attack configuration which was employed during the attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure in 2019. They targeted civilian areas—which resulted in the deaths of three civilians—while an international business conference was taking place in the Emirates as well as when South Korea's president was on an official visit.

After the attack, the Houthis said they fired four Quds cruise missiles at an oil refinery in Musaffah district and the airport in Abu Dhabi, a Zulfiqar ballistic missile at Dubai airport, and several drones at those and other sites. This happened while the Houthis chief negotiator was reportedly on a visit to Tehran, with some accounts in Axis of Resistance media indicating he actually met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on the day of the attack.

Arms Shipments and the Houthi Coup

According to a senior American intelligence official in 2012, intercepted phone conversations between smugglers and the IRGC-Quds Force revealed that Iran has been "using small boats to ship AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, and other arms to replace older weapons used by the rebels." In early 2012, the Yemeni government intercepted another shipment of Iran-made components for explosively formed

penetrators (EFPs), which are advanced improvised explosive devices able to penetrate armored vehicles and which Iran provided to Iraqi insurgents throughout the Iraq War, resulting in the death of over 600 American servicemen during the Iraq War. In January 2013, a joint U.S.-Yemeni military operation intercepted an Iranian shipment of surface-to-air missiles, C4 explosives, and rocket-propelled grenades in the Arabian Sea. American officials have likened Iran's shipments of "relatively small, but steady stream of automatic rifles, grenade launchers, bomb-making material and several million dollars in cash" to the kinds of materiel Iran provides to its allies in Syria and Iraq.

In September 2014, the Houthis seized Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and pushed out Yemen's central government four months later. Iranian support for Houthi operations then increased considerably, with Tehran shipping the group 160 to 180 tons of arms and military equipment in March 2015. On September 27, 2014, while speaking about the Houthi coup, Ali Riza Zakani, a member of Iran's parliament and a close confidante of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, stated that Iran is in a phase of "Grand Jihad" and "Three Arab capitals (Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad) have already fallen into Iran's hands and belong to the Iranian Revolution," and called Sanaa the fourth. A Saudi-led coalition undertook military operations to defeat the Houthis and to restore the internationally-recognized Yemeni government to power.

Missile and Drone Attacks on Saudi Arabia and the Saleh Assassination

Since 2015, the Houthis used Yemeni territory under their control as a launching pad to fire more than 100 missiles and drones at Iranian rival Saudi Arabia. Such strikes have landed on multiple cities, including Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Targeted locations include the king's official residence, military bases and encampments, oil refineries, the Riyadh international airport, and shopping malls. Further, as the *Congressional Research Service* notes, "Since 2016, the Houthis have periodically targeted commercial and military vessels transiting and patrolling the Red Sea using naval mines, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, anti-ship missiles, and waterborne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs). Some of the weapons used reportedly have been supplied by Iran, including sea-skimming coastal defense cruise missiles."

Evidence indicates that Iran is arming and directing the Houthis in their missile campaign against Saudi Arabia, contrary to Tehran's denials and in violation of an arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council in April 2015. An independent U.N. monitoring panel stated in November 2017 that remnants from four ballistic missiles fired by the Houthis into Saudi Arabia likely came from the Iranian-made and designed Qiam-1 missile. In December 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley and Pentagon officials displayed debris from missiles fired into Saudi Arabia, claiming the markings on and designs of the missiles demonstrated that they were made by Iran. Iran has also provided other types of arms to the Houthis, including roadside bombs found in Yemen resemble ones used by Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain.

In December 2017, the Houthis assassinated former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, their erstwhile enemy and then ally, after he turned against them again and proposed reconciliation with the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition. Iranian leaders and regime-affiliated media outlets celebrated Saleh's killing. They said the Houthis are inspired by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and similar to Iranian-supported militant

groups in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. After Saleh was assassinated, the forces loyal to him joined the Saudi-led coalition. In 2018, fierce fighting erupted between the Saudi-led coalition, joined by the Saleh loyalists, and the Houthis over the port of Hodeida. The fighting lasted for approximately six months until a truce in the port city was reached.

The U.N.'s finding of Iran's direct involvement in arming and directing the Houthis continued well into 2018, with panel after panel affirming the Iranian connection. One U.N. report from January 2018 found that recently inspected missiles and drones "show characteristics similar to weapons systems known to be produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran." The panel therefore concluded that Tehran gives missiles and other arms to the Houthis. Indeed, Iran has bragged openly about their support for the Houthis and their involvement in attacks. An IRGC general told IRGC-controlled media that the IRGC had instructed the Houthis to attack two Saudi oil tankers in July 2018.

Hostilities between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis have calmed as a result of U.N.-brokered ceasefires and possibly also as the result of the China-brokered normalization agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. According to reports, Iran committed to halt weapons transfers to the Houthis as part of this March 2023 agreement, and the Houthis have not attacked Saudi Arabia's homeland since then. Nevertheless, the following section shows how Iran continues to violate these terms by surging weapons to the Houthis and deploying its forces and Hezbollah to the country.

Attacks against Israel and International Shipping

Yemen is located on one of the most critical sea lanes in the world, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, through which some 10 percent of global commerce transits daily. Several major international shipping companies were forced to suspend shipments through the Red Sea, after freighters traversing the strait came under regular Houthi missile and drone attacks beginning in mid-November 2023. Many of the shipping companies have directed their vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, a more expensive route that avoids the Red Sea.

Some of the vessels that the Houthis have targeted were allegedly targeted because they were shipping goods to Israel. The Houthis have also launched missiles towards Israel, claiming that the attacks were retaliation for the war in Gaza. On October 19, 2023, a U.S. guided missile destroyer deployed in the northern Red Sea engaged three land attack cruise missiles and several drones launched from the Yemen in the direction of Israel. Saudi Arabia also intercepted a missile over its territory headed in the direction of Israel. The incident revealed that the Houthis may have the capability to strike Israel at some 2,000 km distance. Again, on October 31, the Houthis attempted to strike Israel with missiles and drones, but Israel's Arrow air defense system and fighter jets downed the incoming projectiles.

On November 19, the Houthis seized the Galaxy Leader vessel as it was underway near al-Hodeida, Yemen. Houthi rebels repelled down from a helicopter and took the vessel and its crew by force. The Galaxy Leader is owned by an Israeli company Ray Shipping, whose vessels have been attacked by Iran in the past. Since this hijacking, the Houthis have escalated their attacks on merchant ships in the region. Between November 19 and mid-February 2024, UANI has documented around 60 separate attacks against international shipping or against the U.S. Navy, mostly in the Red Sea.

The Houthis would not be able to conduct these attacks without Iranian arms, training, and targeting assistance. In late 2022 and early January 2023, Iran surged weaponry to the Houthis via sea, leading to several interdictions by American, British, and French navies operating in regional waters. On December 3, 2022, the U.S. Navy interdicted over a million rounds of ammunition aboard a vessel transiting the Gulf of Oman as well as fuses and propellants for rockets.

In February 2023, French forces seized "more than 3,000 assault rifles, at least a half million rounds of ammunition, and over 20 antitank guided missiles." And the U.K. found weapons aboard a small boat later that month. The frequency of interdictions suggests that Iran had been planning for escalation, at least one year prior to the Houthi's assault on international shipping. Later, in an interdiction operation, two Navy SEALs slipped while climbing aboard a vessel and were swept out to sea. They were later declared dead. The raid uncovered Iranian-made ballistic missile and cruise missile components.

However, Iran does not only provide the weapons. IRGC-Quds Force operatives and Hezbollah have deployed to Yemen to provide military assistance as the Houthis wage a campaign on behalf of Tehran against maritime security. An Iranian surveillance vessel has been in the Red Sea since April 2021, when it first arrived in the area to replace the ship that was formerly patrolling near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. Known as the Behshad and registered as a cargo ship, the vessel provides real-time ship-tracking data to the Houthis to improve their ability to target international shipping. The Saviz, another Iranian vessel registered as a cargo ship, had patrolled the waters between 2016 and 2021, when it returned to Iran after a limpet mine exploded on the side of the ship and caused damage.

Hezbollah's Assistance to the Houthis

The Iranian proxy group Hezbollah, a terrorist organization operating in Lebanon and elsewhere, also has longstanding ties to the Houthis, who are fellow Shiites. Working with Iran, Hezbollah operates on the ground in Yemen, arming, training, and even fighting for the Houthis. Analysts have speculated that the Houthis seek to replicate in Yemen Hezbollah's Lebanese model of a "state within a state."

Hezbollah operatives themselves have admitted that the group has deployed to Yemen and fights directly against the Saudi-led coalition. A Hezbollah commander told the Financial Times that the group began training with the Houthis in 2005. "They trained with us in Iran, then we trained them here and in Yemen," he said. A Hezbollah commander told researchers in 2016, "After we are done with Syria, we will start with Yemen, Hezbollah is already there. Who do you think fires Tochka missiles into Saudi Arabia? It's not the Houthis in their sandals, it's us." A Houthi militia leader confessed after surrendering to coalition forces in 2017 that Iran and Hezbollah operatives were operating covert training facilities in Yemen.

The United Nations has confirmed the Saudi-led coalition's findings that Hezbollah supports the Houthis. Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi claimed in 2016 that Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah wrote to him that "Our fighters arrived in Yemen to teach the Yemeni people the essence of governing. "In June 2018, the anti-Houthi coalition stated that coalition forces had killed eight Hezbollah members in Yemen. That August, Khalid bin Salman, the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., said that not enough attention was paid to "not only the direct assistance the Al Houthi militia receives from the

Iranian regime, but also the existence of Hezbollah commanders on the ground." He added that a coalition raid on a Houthi site had "revealed a Hezbollah operative training, advising [the Houthis] on asymmetric warfare, and showed background portrait [sic] of Iran's 'Supreme Leader' on militia's computer [sic]."

Ambassador bin Salman also tweeted evidence of ties between Hezbollah and the Houthis, including footage of a "Hezbollah operative in Yemen advising the Houthis to use deception tactics such as using water tanks to store weapons, and smuggling fighters through civilian vehicles; endangering the lives of Yemeni civilians." Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir has repeatedly accused Iran and Hezbollah of being responsible for missile attacks targeting Saudi territory.

In July 2018, a coalition spokesman said "Hezbollah is the Houthis' greatest arms supplier" and said the coalition had evidence that Hezbollah experts were on the ground in Yemen, training the Houthis and giving them a military communications system. Then, in October 2018, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen.

In 2018, Nasrallah stepped up his group's public support for the Houthis. On June 29, Nasrallah paid tribute to the Houthis in a public speech, even saying, "I wish I could be one of your fighters and fight under the guidance of your brave and dear leaders." In mid-August, Hezbollah used its annual commemoration of its 2006 war against Israel to display pro-Houthis propaganda—namely, as the National reported, "a reconstruction of a bus hit by a Coalition airstrike which had killed a number of civilians and children in Saada province several days earlier that the Arab-led force later said had been a mistake. Organizers used the bus for journalists to photograph, complete with actors impersonating the victims, special effects smoke, red lighting and fake blood in an evocative image of the war." And on August 19, Hezbollah disclosed that Nasrallah had met recently with a Houthi delegation in Beirut.

Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi has reciprocated, praising Iran and thanking Nasrallah for his "solidarity." He also promised that Houthis would fight alongside Hezbollah or Palestinian militants in a future war against Israel.

In December 2021, the Arab Coalition released a video detailing Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen, purportedly showing a Hezbollah commander meeting with the Houthis' senior military commander Abu Ali Al-Hakim, whom the United States has sanctioned. The Hezbollah commander indicates on the tape that he spoke directly with Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, who reportedly said that "he wishes he could come for (Jihad) himself in Yemen." In the tape, the Hezbollah commander notes, "the Syrian War is about to end, and most of the Mujahideen will come to Yemen." This evidence further shows how the Iranian regime and Hezbollah have long sought to increase coordination and interoperability within Iran's Axis of Resistance in preparation for a conflict with Israel.

A shipment of Iranian weapons destined for the Houthis seized by American naval forces in the Arabian Sea in 2015.

Subversive Activities

Afghanistan

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)

Support for Afghan Proxies

Iranian influence in Afghanistan has deep-seated roots reaching back to the 15th century when the Afghan city of Herat was the capital of the Persian Empire. Iran also shares ties with various groups in Afghanistan, particularly the Persian-speaking Tajiks and the Shi'a Hazara. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), Iran supported Shi'a resistance efforts and opened its borders to Afghan refugees. After the Soviet Union withdrew, the first Gulf War occurred in 1990. A U.S.-led international coalition mobilized to repel Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. As a result, Iraq, the major proximate threat to Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, was effectively neutralized. Throughout the early to mid-nineties Afghanistan went through a civil war, which eventually led the extremist Sunni jihadist movement, the Taliban, to rise to power with the backing of Iranian geopolitical rivals Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Afghanistan supplanted Iraq as the main threat facing Iran.

During the Afghan Civil War, Iran cultivated military and political influence in Afghanistan by backing elements hostile to the Taliban with ethnic, sectarian, and linguistic affinities toward Iran, namely the Hazaras in the West of the country and Tajiks in the North who formed the core of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, more commonly referred to as the "Northern Alliance." By 1998, Iran had amassed 70,000 IRGC troops along its border with Afghanistan to defend against spillover from the conflict next door.

In August 1998, tensions between Iran and the Taliban reached a boil after the Taliban captured the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, a cosmopolitan and diverse city with a large Shi'a Hazara population. The Taliban brutalized the town's Hazaras, raping and massacring hundreds. Amidst the chaos, Taliban soldiers besieged an Iranian consulate and executed nine Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist. As demands for retaliation grew, Iran stationed an additional 200,000 conventional forces along the border.

Since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, Iran has sought to avoid confrontation and heavy casualties, and so it refrained from direct intervention and opted instead to escalate its strategy of proxy warfare. Iran ramped up its support for the Northern Alliance, with former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani reportedly taking an active role in directing the Northern Alliance's operations from Tajikistan, where the group had established bases from which to launch attacks into Afghanistan and coordinate efforts to resupply its fighters.

After the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) discovered that the Taliban was providing Al Qaeda safe haven in its territory, it authorized covert assistance to the Northern Alliance in 1999 to facilitate operations against the growing Al Qaeda threat. This marked a rare instance of the U.S. and Iran

independently backing a guerilla movement, albeit for different ends. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda, America initiated hostilities against the Taliban government, a welcome development for Iran at the time.

While wary of the expanding U.S. military footprint in its environs, Tehran was willing to leverage American military might to neutralize its most pressing adversary. The U.S. and Iran held several rounds of secret shuttle diplomacy, leading to covert cooperation that went as far as Iran sharing intelligence detailing Taliban positions for the U.S. to strike. While many in Iran were skeptical about the efficacy of partnering with the U.S., Soleimani saw the situation as a win-win for Iran. He posited that even if the U.S. ended up betraying Iran after toppling the Taliban, their enemy would be defeated, and America would end up entangled in Afghanistan, similar to the Soviet Union. "Americans do not know the region, Americans do not know Afghanistan, Americans do not know Iran," warned Soleimani.

Relations between the U.S. and Iran would ultimately sour following President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union, in which Iran, Iraq, and North Korea were labeled the "axis of evil," and the subsequent March 2003 invasion of Iraq. Iran's threat perception changed as the U.S. was no longer the distant "Great Satan," but a proximate threat with an expanding military footprint in the region that had toppled two neighboring governments and was ultimately bent on Iranian regime change.

As such, Iran's primary objectives in Afghanistan shifted toward ensuring that the country remained sufficiently weak in order to preclude a further military threat toward it, and toward imposing costs on the U.S. to compel its withdrawal. Iran's long-term interest is in a stable, friendly, and weak Afghanistan in order to prevent drug trafficking, terrorism, and refugee flows from spilling over into Iran. To that end, Iran pursued foreign direct investment in Afghanistan's reconstruction and assistance in the fields of infrastructure, agriculture, energy, and communications.

At the same time, however, Iran played what former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates termed a "double game" in Afghanistan, seeking good relations with the central government while also modestly funneling arms to insurgents of various ethnic and ideological stripes through the IRGC-Quds Force, according to U.S. intelligence. The haphazard way Iran has sought to play all sides off each other in pursuit of its short-term interests imperils its longer-term interest in a stable, friendly Afghanistan. It has also engendered enmity among broad swathes of the population, as evidenced by pushback and demonstrations against Iranian meddling in recent years.

Economic and Cultural Influence

Tehran has dramatically expanded its economic ties with Afghanistan in recent years to buy influence in the country. According to the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce, Iran surpassed Pakistan as Afghanistan's largest trading partner from March 2017-2018—with Iran exporting goods worth $1.98 billion. While foreign investment supports Afghanistan's development, Iranian investment sought to undermine NATO and the Afghan regime's efforts to stabilize the country. In 2010, Afghan President Hamid Karzai admitted that Iran was paying his government $2 million annually, but U.S. officials believe that this was just the "tip of the iceberg" in a multitude of Iranian cash inflows to Afghan groups and officials.

Iran's economic influence in Afghanistan is best illustrated by its development of the western city of Herat, where Iran has developed the electrical grid, invested heavily in the mining industry, and invested over $150 million to build a school, mosque, residential apartments, a seven-mile road, and even stocked store shelves with Iranian goods. According to the head of Herat's provincial council, Nazir Ahmad Haidar, "Iran has influence in every sphere: economic, social, political and daily life. When someone gives so much money, people fall into their way of thinking. It's not just a matter of being neighborly."

Furthermore, Iranian influence in Afghanistan extends past its economy and into Afghan culture and religion. Coordinated by an official under the office of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran has funded the development of Shi'a organizations, schools, and media outlets in order to expand Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Mohammad Omar Daudzai, Afghanistan's former Ambassador to Iran, has stated that "thousands of Afghan religious leaders are on the Iranian payroll."

Recently, Iran has bridged its regional influence by creating the IRGC-backed Fatemiyoun Division, a group of Afghan Shi'a fighting in support of the al-Assad regime of Syria. Often recruiting Afghan Shi'a refugees in Iran, and to a lesser extent, Shi'as within Afghanistan itself, the IRGC offers a $500/month stipend and Iranian residency in return for joining pro-Assad militias. The Fatemiyoun was upgraded from a brigade to a division in 2015, indicating the militia's ranks had grown to at least 10,000 fighters, with some estimates reaching as high as 20,000. The Fatemiyoun militants in Syria have typically been dispatched to dangerous fighting on the front lines with inadequate training and tactical preparation, leading to high casualty rates. Fatemiyoun survivors and deserters have described heavy-handed recruitment methods, including threats of being expelled from Iran and handed over to the Taliban in order to coerce marginalized Afghan refugees to fight in a war they have little understanding of or connection to. Human Rights Watch has identified at least 14 minors who fought and died in Syria for the Fatemiyoun Division.

Support for the Taliban

Demonstrating the lengths Tehran was willing to go to repel U.S. influence after the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, one of the primary groups the IRGC-Quds Force began arming was its former mortal enemy, the Taliban. Beginning in 2006, the IRGC-Quds Force began "training the Taliban in Afghanistan on small unit tactics, small arms, explosives, and indirect fire weapons" in addition to providing armaments "including small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, and plastic explosives." Iran has also permitted the Taliban free movement of foreign fighters through Iranian territory to support its insurgency in Afghanistan.

On October 25, 2007, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated the IRGC-Quds Force under Executive Order 13382 for providing material support to the Taliban and other terrorist organizations. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Treasury added three Iranian IRGC-Quds Force operatives and one "associate" to its list of global terrorists for their efforts to "plan and execute attacks in Afghanistan," including providing "logistical support" in order to advance Iran's interests in the region. The Treasury Department has stated that these designations "[underscore] Tehran's use of terrorism and intelligence operations as tools of influence against the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan."

Iran's support for the Taliban was at times short-sighted. For example, the governor of Helmand Province accused the IRGC in 2017 of giving the Taliban weapons to attack Afghanistan's water infrastructure so that Iran could receive a larger portion of water from the Helmand River. While this was self-serving in the immediate term, such tactics served to weaken the Afghan government and ultimately undermined Afghanistan's longer-term stability.

In 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned additional individuals who spearheaded cooperation between the Taliban and Tehran. They included Mohammad Ebrahim Owhadi, a Quds Force operative, who, according to the U.S. government, provided "military and financial assistance" to the "Taliban Shadow Governor of Herat Province," Abdullah Samad Faroqui, in exchange for Taliban forces launching attacks against the Afghan government.

Additionally, the U.S. government identified Esma'il Razavi, an operative who ran a training camp for Taliban forces in Birjand, Iran, and also "provided training, intelligence, and weapons to Taliban forces in Farah, Ghor, Badhis, and Helmand Provinces." News reports indicate that Iran directly supported the Taliban offensive against Farah Province in May 2018.

Brigadier-General Esmail Qaani became the head of the IRGC-Quds Force following the death of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Qaani has deep contacts and experience in Afghanistan—dating back to the 1980s. After Soleimani's demise, Iranian media began circulating unconfirmed reports that high-ranking Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials perished in a plane crash in Taliban-controlled territory of a Bombardier E-11A electronic surveillance plane, and that one of those officials was involved in the death of Soleimani. Days later, the U.S. government announced two U.S. Air Force pilots were killed in the incident, and there was no indication of hostile action in the downing of the jet.

There has been speculation that this story was produced as part of an Iranian propaganda campaign. Such allegations came on the heels of an increasingly close relationship between Tehran and the Taliban, with Iranian media repeatedly interviewing its officials. Days after the plane crash, the head of U.S. Central Command warned of a "worrisome trend" in intelligence pointing to an uptick in Iran's malign activity in Afghanistan. This was evidence of the new Quds Force commander seeking to deploy his existing network inside Afghanistan against U.S. forces.

Iran's Destabilizing Double-Game

On February 29, 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha that envisioned a complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in exchange for assurances from the Taliban that the group would prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. The agreement was meant to pave the way for negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government on a power sharing agreement that would shape Afghanistan's future.

After the agreement was reached, Iran continued to play a destabilizing double game in Afghanistan, as it sought to ensure that it would retain influence in the country regardless of the outcome of the peace process. On one hand, Iran sought to ingratiate itself with the Afghan government and encouraged various stakeholder factions from across the political spectrum in the government to form a joint committee to ensure a unified front in future talks with the Taliban. Iran even offered to mediate in

future talks between the government and the Taliban. In July 2020, Iran announced that it had formulated a "Comprehensive Document of Strategic Cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan" whose fundamental principles are "non-interference in each other's affairs," "non-aggression," and "non-use of each other's territory to attack and invade other countries."

On the other hand, however, Iran maintained contact with the Taliban to retain leverage over the Afghan government and peace process. Moreover, Iran evidently worked to sabotage the peace process by backing more radical elements and splinter groups from the Taliban who opposed negotiations and sought to keep fighting the central government and the U.S. military presence. An August 2020 *CNN* report revealed that U.S. intelligence agencies assessed that Iran had provided bounty payments to the Haqqani Network, a terrorist offshoot of the Taliban, for attacks on U.S. and coalition forces. The report found that Iran had paid bounties for six Haqqani Network attacks in 2019 alone, including a major suicide bombing at Bagram Air Base in December 2019 that killed two civilians and wounded over 70 people, including four U.S. service personnel. The U.S. ultimately refrained from retaliation for the attack in order to preserve the peace process with the Taliban, but Iran's role in financing these attacks against the U.S. showed the potential for Tehran to play spoiler through its ties to the Taliban.

Iran was hard hit by sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, so it sought to avoid pushing the envelope too hard in terms of proxy confrontation with the U.S., instead pursuing strategic patience in the hopes that the U.S. would withdraw on its own accord. At the same time, by retaining its influence over radical Taliban elements, Iran ensured that it would be able to marshal such forces to reengage in hostilities against the U.S. at a time of its choosing should the U.S. have vacillated on leaving Afghanistan. Iran's influence over both the Taliban and its most radical elements allowed it to protect against hostilities from Afghanistan in the event of a Taliban takeover.

In July 2021, after years of playing arsonist in Afghanistan, Iran tried to take on the unlikely role of firefighter, hosting a round of peace negotiations that brought together the Afghan government and the Taliban. The talks signaled that with the U.S. departing from the scene, Tehran sought to become a major power broker going forward in Afghanistan. Chairing the talks, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif hailed the defeat of U.S. forces and called for a political solution to the escalating hostilities between the Afghan government and the resurgent Taliban.

Iran's diplomatic overtures were too little too late, however. The last-ditch attempt to revive the stalled intra-Afghan peace process broke down for many reasons. The Trump Administration effectively sidelined the Afghan government by bypassing it and entering a bilateral agreement directly with the Taliban in February 2020, signaling that the government would not be a major stakeholder in shaping the country's future trajectory. Further, the Trump Administration telegraphed its determination to withdraw from Afghanistan, securing only vague promises from the Taliban to govern more inclusively and prevent terrorist safe-havens. The U.S. did not attach any conditions to its withdrawal based on progress on the peace process or suitable power sharing arrangements, removing any incentive for the Taliban to negotiate in good faith or make concessions.

Reading the tea leaves, the Taliban opted to wait out the clock on the U.S. withdrawal, convinced that its takeover of Afghanistan was a fait accompli. The Taliban, therefore, dragged its feet on entering

negotiations and became bolder on the ground, heavily rearming and reclaiming territory at a rapid clip in the months after the Doha agreement. This confluence of factors—the Taliban's growing strength, the U.S.'s desire to check out, and the Afghan government's increasingly apparent weakness—had a demoralizing effect on the country's military and law enforcement forces, contributing to their unwillingness to fight back against the Taliban's rapid retaking of two-thirds of Afghan territory, including the seat of government in Kabul, in August 2021.

Iranian officials were cautiously optimistic in the preceding months about the return to power of the Taliban, clinging to the hope that a new Taliban regime would be a different beast from the 1998 perpetrator of the Mazar-i-Sharif massacre.

Iran's support for the Taliban, though rooted in a marriage of convenience to repel the U.S., won Iran influence with the group it hoped would endure even after the departure of their common foe. Faced with the challenge of governing Afghanistan's disparate ethnic, sectarian, and tribal factions and seeking to avoid again becoming an internationally isolated pariah, the Taliban then sought to portray itself as a nationalistic, as opposed to strictly Pashtun, force, capable of inclusive governance. As such, it has dialed back its persecution of Shi'a Hazaras, going so far as to appoint a Hazara cleric as a northern district governor.

After the Taliban declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Iran reached out to the Taliban with an olive branch. Newly inaugurated President Ebrahim Raisi issued a statement hailing the U.S. military defeat in which he declared, "Iran backs efforts to restore stability in Afghanistan and, as a neighboring and brother nation, Iran invites all groups in Afghanistan to reach a national agreement." By invoking "all groups," Raisi was signaling Tehran's willingness to work with the Taliban.

Tensions between the Taliban and the Iranian regime escalated in mid-2023. At the border of Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan provinces and Afghanistan's Nimroz province, in May 2023, Taliban and Iranian forces exchanged fire amid a dispute over water rights. The dispute centers around the Helmand River, which empties into the Helmand swamps on the border with Iran. Iran claims rights to the river, which it depends on for irrigation in the Sistan and Baluchestan province. It has asserted that the Taliban have violated a 1973 agreement that guarantees Iran's access. Iran alleges that the Taliban is allowing a mere four percent of the agreed amount and has rejected the Taliban's claim that the reduced flows are due to a lack of rain and drought.

Iranian weaponry to the Taliban seized by international coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2011.

Former IRGC Quds-Force Commander Qasem Soleimani in Syria with commanders of the Iran-backed Fatemiyoun Brigade, an Afghan Shi'a militia.

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Bahrain

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)
- Hezbollah

The tiny island Kingdom of Bahrain, ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family, has been acutely vulnerable to interference from its much larger Shiite neighbor, Iran, given that approximately 70-75 percent of its population is Shiite. In Bahrain, Iran's revisionist policies are apparent: Tehran aims for no less than the subversion of the ruling Sunni class and the rise of a Shi'a political movement whose leaders are willing and able to do Iran's bidding. To this day, Iran seeks to export the Islamic Revolution to Bahrain in a clear violation of its national sovereignty.

With its majority Shi'a population, Bahrain constitutes a key node within the "Shi'a Crescent," which stretches in the shape of an arc through Iran and the Levant. Iran views this arc as a means of acquiring political influence in the sovereign nations where Shi'a reside, namely Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Often coopting this demographic with the intention of inspiring acts of loyalty to the Supreme Leader of Iran—ranging from violently opposing the royals in Bahrain, attacking U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq, fighting on behalf of an autocrat in Syria, to menacing Israel at its northern border—Iran advances its foreign policy interest of regional domination.

While Iran's policy of radicalization of this "Shi'a Crescent" has been notably successful in the Levant, particularly after the 2003 Iraq War and the 2011 "Arab Spring," it has been less successful in the Gulf. Iran covets a foothold in the Gulf, as it seeks to confront Saudi Arabia and disrupt the mostly cordial diplomatic relations between the predominantly-Shi'a Bahrain and the predominantly-Sunni Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Furthermore, Tehran also wants Bahrain to remove the U.S. military from its base in the country, the largest U.S. Navy fleet in the region, the 5th Fleet, but that is highly unlikely given that Bahrain fears Tehran and depends on the U.S. for security.

According to a Bahrain expert, the main opposition party's spiritual leader, Sheikh Isa Ahmad Qassem, is "a religious representative of Khamenei" who "propagates his religious authority" and "encourages people to follow [Khamenei] rather than other 'sources of emulation.'" As such, he is laying a foundation for the Iranian state creed of *Velayat-e Faqih*, which places ultimate political authority in the hands of the Supreme Leader of Iran. Like other Iran-aligned Shi'a figures in the region, he is attempting to generate the popular support in Bahrain needed for Iran's foreign policy objective of subordinating the interests of a sovereign nation to the interests of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's ties to Bahrain are more than sectarian, though; they are also historical. Up until the 1780s, successive Persian empires controlled Bahrain for centuries. Not until 1970 did Iran, under the leadership of the Shah, drop its territorial claims. Even still, since 1979, the Iranian regime has persistently attempted to return Bahrain to Shiite rule, even referencing its former sovereignty over the island.

In 2009, Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri, an advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, bluntly stated that "Bahrain was the fourteenth province of Iran until 1970," precipitating a crisis between the two countries. Similarly, in 2018, Hossein Shariatmadari, Iran's Supreme Leader's representative at the *Kayhan* newspaper, reiterated his statement from ten years prior that "Bahrain is ours [Iran's]" and that the people of Bahrain want their country to become part of Iran again. Even to this day, some fear that Iran's backing of a Bahraini insurgency could pave the way for conventional military action.

Iran-Backed Bahraini Insurgency

The provocations against the Bahraini government started following the onset of Iran's Islamic Revolution and continue to this day. In September 1979, only months after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile in Iraq, Sadegh Rouhani, a prominent Shi'a cleric in Iran, warned that if the emir of Bahrain did "not want to stop oppressing the [Bahraini] people and restore Islamic laws, we [the Iranians] will call on the people of Bahrain to demand annexation to the Islamic government of Iran." As it does in other parts of the region, Iran posed as a liberator of Shi'a people from the oppression of what it claims to be western-backed tyranny.

Some Bahraini Shiites were inspired by the success of the Iranian Revolution. The most prominent Shiite militia group which formed in Bahrain at this time, under this motivation, was the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB); it was established by Ayatollah Hadi Modarresi, Ayatollah Khomeini's personal representative to Bahrain.

IFLB leaders traveled to Tehran in 1980 and swore allegiance to the then-Supreme Leader of Iran: "Imam Khomeini is the leader and axis around which our oppressed peoples should rally if they truly seek freedom." Seeking to create a theocratic government in Bahrain in the image of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the group executed a failed coup in 1981. Separately, in 1996 Bahraini authorities accused Iran of organizing a coup. Forty-four members of a Hezbollah offshoot, known as Hezbollah al-Hejaz, were arrested. A subsequent investigation showed that these operatives were trained by the IRGC and intent on recreating the Islamic Revolution in Bahrain.

While Iran continuously denies its involvement in Bahrain, Bahrain repeatedly warns Iran to refrain from meddling in its internal affairs. Bahraini officials, along with Bahrain experts, viewed the Arab Spring uprising in Bahrain as a culmination of years of Iranian subversion. Iran's efforts to spearhead a series of "popular petitions" to reform the Bahraini monarchy is an example of the subversive activity. In 1994, a Bahraini Shiite cleric, Ali Salman, led a drive which acquired, by some estimates, as many as 25,000 signatures, according to authorities in Manama. This led to Bahrain and Iran recalling their respective ambassadors, with Bahraini authorities alleging that the petitions were "planned and backed by foreign propaganda" rather than homegrown.

As was the case in other parts of the Arab world, the "Arab Spring" provided Iran with an opportunity to grow Shi'a influence in the country. When anti-monarchy protests broke out in Bahrain in 2011, Tehran increased its efforts to undermine the monarchy. It sought to achieve sectarian aims, namely the rise of Shi'a power and the eventual installment of a Shi'a government. The Bahraini monarchy was not overthrown, partly because one month after the Arab Spring, Saudi and Emirati armed forces arrived to the island to suppress the protests in operation Peninsula Shield Force. The Bahraini army deployed

tanks, shocking and enraging some members of the largely Shi'a opposition. Partly as a result of this crackdown, several Iran-backed Shi'a militant organizations formed in Bahrain.

Since the 2011 Arab Spring, Iran, through the IRGC, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies, increased its efforts to provide a Bahraini insurgency not just with soft-power support, as in the instance of the petition drive, but with increasingly effective asymmetric capabilities. Iran prepared Shi'a extremists with the means that they would need to overthrow the government were another popular protest to break out. In the initial period following the uprisings, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks became increasingly prevalent, but by 2015 Bahraini insurgents were being trained in how to create and deploy armor-piercing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), which can be used to destroy tanks.

In September 2020, Bahraini security officials revealed that they had foiled a terrorist plot to attack a visiting foreign delegation shortly after the death of Qassem Soleimani. The newly-formed terrorist organization, which is named after the late Iranian general, claimed to be seeking revenge for his death. The announcement came on the heels of the island kingdom's decision to normalize relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. While there are not many details on the perpetrators of the attack, the Bahraini government prepared a case against eighteen individuals, nine of whom have already fled to Iran, where they received protection from prosecution. More recently, in November 2021, Bahraini authorities arrested an unspecified number of individuals for planning an attack and confiscated weapons and explosives which came from Iran.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was created at the time of the Islamic Revolution to protect the revolution from dissidents. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, particularly feared pro-Shah elements within the Iranian military, so he organized an ideologically-driven paramilitary out of Islamists loyal to him. The IRGC continues to take care of domestic security—that is to say, it silences all dissent in Iran—and has expanded its operations to include coordinating, strengthening, and directing revolutionaries abroad. Today, an elite branch of the IRGC, known as the Quds force, takes the lead on these operations, which are central to Iran's foreign policy.

The IRGC has looked to recruit hardline members of the Shi'a opposition in Bahrain. Often, the IRGC will bring these recruits to training bases outside of Bahrain and then reinsert them back into Bahrain as cell leaders, trained in guerrilla warfare and able to carry out terror attacks on public facilities as well as civilian populations. The IRGC coordinates all aspects of recruitment, training, funding, and arming of these groups with the help of Hezbollah and Iraqi militias—for example, Kataib Hezbollah.

Kataib Hezbollah (KH) is a radical Iraqi Shiite paramilitary group, backed and directed by the IRGC. Prior to his assassination, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a powerful leader in the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), led this group. In June 2015, Bahraini police chief, Tariq al-Hassan, accused the U.S.-designated terrorist of providing training in EFPs at camps in Iraq and logistical and financial support to Saraya al-Ashtar (discussed below). KH is ideologically committed to Iran's extraterritorial goals, frequently expressing their support for the Bahraini Shi'a and even threatening military action against the Bahraini monarchy.

Given that Bahrain is an island nation, insurgents, arms, other materials must travel to and from by boat. Researchers at the *Combatting Terrorism Center* at West Point uncovered the IRGC's dependency on maritime routes. They explained in a January 2018 report that "the most regular known use of militant boat sorties is the inbound smuggling of explosives, weapons components, or whole weapons systems."

On April 22, 2013, an IRGC member allegedly worked with eight Bahraini citizens to plot the assassination of Bahraini officials and target government buildings and the international airport. The plot was foiled, and the Bahrainis were arrested.

The IRGC not only provides operational support to terrorists and groups in Bahrain, but it also provides material support. Later in 2013, on December 30, the Bahraini coast guard intercepted an Iranian shipment of over 220 pounds of C4 explosives, 50 hand grenades, land mines, and detonators labeled "made in Syria" that were en route to Shiite opposition groups in Bahrain. During interrogation, the detained suspects "admitted to receiving paramilitary training in Iran."

In September 2015, Bahrain uncovered an illicit Iranian weapons factory aimed at supplying militant elements within the opposition with heavy weaponry to fuel unrest in the kingdom. Bahrain recalled its ambassador to Iran the next month. In November of that year, Bahrain arrested 47 members of an Iran-linked cell that was plotting to carry out imminent attacks on Bahraini territory.

Furthermore, the IRGC provides training to Bahraini terrorists in conducting subversive activities. In June 2016, two men, allegedly trained in weapons and explosives by the IRGC, planted a bomb that killed a Bahraini woman. In February 2017, an Iran-linked 14-member cell bombed a bus carrying Bahraini police officers, wounding five. According to Bahraini officials, six of the arrestees received military training in IRGC-run camps, including Kata'ib Hezbollah facilities and camps in Bahrain. In March 2017, Bahraini authorities broke up a terror cell they accused of planning to assassinate government officials and attack police and US military targets with IRGC support. In March 2018, the government revealed that it had arrested 116 members of an IRGC-coordinated group that was planning to attack senior Bahrain officials and critical infrastructure. Manama claimed that almost half of the arrestees received training from the IRGC in Iran or in Iran-linked facilities in Iraq and Lebanon.

In April 2019, a Bahraini court sentenced to prison 139 Bahrainis; 69 of them received the life sentence of 25 years on terrorism charges. The court also revoked their citizenship. The government of Bahrain accused the individuals of forming an organization it referred to as "Bahraini Hezbollah" with the intention of carrying out attacks in Bahrain.

Iranian Illicit Finance in Bahrain

Iran has a history of laundering money through Bahraini banks to circumvent financial sanctions. Bahraini officials alleged in 2016 that Future Bank, which was set up as a joint-venture with Iranian banks, had laundered $7.4 billion, using practices such as "wire-stripping," which is when a bank changes or removes identifying information from its financial transactions. More specifically, Future Bank "concealed basic information on international transactions, including through the SWIFT network, to disguise entities likely to face U.S. sanctions," Bahraini officials found. This is a violation of Bahraini law and banking regulations.

In May 2021, Bahraini Attorney-General Ali bin Fadhel Al Buainain announced findings of "unlawful practices" carried out by Future Bank in conjunction with Iranian banks between 2008 and 2012. Thirteen banks were referred to court for prosecution, including Future Bank, Bank Melli Iran, Bank Saderat Iran, and the Iranian Central Bank. An anonymous source in the Bahrain Public Prosecution said at the time, "Several issues were brought to light [as a result of the investigation], and the funds were in many cases confiscated. All the entities that the bank dealt with secretly were revealed, most notably the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the Lebanese Hezbollah organization, and other entities in Iraq." Such money laundering schemes are essential to Iran's efforts to finance terrorism throughout the region. In August 2021, Bahrain's High Criminal Court found the Central Bank of Iran guilty of money laundering and confiscated $1.3 billion dollars-worth of Iranian funds belonging to Future Bank.

In late 2021, a tribunal at the Hague ordered the government of Bahrain to pay Bank Melli and Bank Saderat $270 million as compensation for the losses they incurred because of Bahrain's decision in 2015 to close down Future Bank, which those Iranian banks had backed. The Hague tribunal ruled against Bahrain, despite the fact that all three banks have been targeted by U.S. sanctions.

The al-Ashtar Brigades (AAB)

In January 2016, Bahrain caught an IRGC- and Hezbollah-backed cell plotting a series of bombings. The Bahraini authorities claimed that one of the main suspects received $20,000 from Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in Iran. The cell was allegedly part of Saraya al-Ashtar ("al-Ashtar Brigades"), a Shi'a militant group in Bahrain which has claimed responsibility for more than 20 attacks in the country since 2013, including one in March 2014 that killed three police officers, three of which were Bahraini and one from the United Arab Emirates. The AAB was founded in 2013 and is among the deadliest Shi'a groups operating in Bahrain. They have called for violence against the U.S., Saudi, and Bahraini governments, according to the U.S. Department of State.

The AAB also allegedly engages in particularly brutal and highly-visible acts of violence against public servants. Relying on urban warfare tactics that the terrorist group likely learned abroad, soon after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, AAB members "[drew] security personnel into the villages and kill[ed] them in highly publicized, highly charged sectarian violence." They proceeded to release videos of the executions on social media for propaganda purposes, emphasizing that their aim was to "overthrow [the] Al Khalifa rule."

In February 2018, the AAB changed its logo to adopt IRGC branding, reflecting its role as part of Iran's "Axis of Resistance" against the U.S. and its allies in the region. The AAB also reaffirmed its fealty to the Iranian regime, stating, "We believe that the commander and ruler of the Islamic religion is the line of the two imams, Khomeini and Khamenei…" It outlined new objectives, including cultivating a "resistance and martyrdom culture" and "creat[ing] a deterrent force."

Iran's subversive activities in Bahrain have resulted in a large number of casualties. Bahrain's chief of public security estimated in May 2018 that, since 2011, AAB and other Shiite militant organizations have caused 22 deaths and more than 3,500 injuries to policemen. With the ability to dial up AAB and other radical Shia groups' violent actions, Iran is able to exert pressure on Bahrain's government and deter it from taking actions against Iran.

This latter objective is held in common with all of Iran's proxies. For example, Hezbollah, located on Israel's northern border with Lebanon, acts as a deterrent against Israeli strikes on Iranian assets. Similarly, the Houthis in Yemen continue to threaten Saudi Arabia and the UAE, although its missile, rocket, and drone attacks on the Saudi and Emirati homeland have decreased following a series of extended ceasefires that were first agreed to in April 2022. Prior to the truce, Iran's Yemeni proxy launched regular attacks Saudi Arabia to provoke it and sap its resources in a war that has had a devastating humanitarian toll. Since the truce, the Houthis have continued to act as a deterrent against Saudi Arabia, because its capabilities remain a threat to the Saudi homeland.

An armed Shi'a militant group in Bahrain could become an additional threat to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Like Hezbollah in Lebanon, AAB has designs on increasing its political clout in Bahrain by channeling Iranian funding into social or religious services for a marginalized Shi'a community, in parallel with its militant activities. This would be consistent with the aspiration of Iranian proxies to become a Hezbollah-style "state within a state."

The IRGC facilitates Hezbollah in its efforts to train AAB. Hezbollah has taken a lead role in the ideological and military training of militants not only in Bahrain but also throughout the region. In late 1985, the CIA reported that over 2,000 Shi'as were training at a Hezbollah-run camp near Bala'bakk. Sixty of them were from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and expected to perform operations in the Gulf. Later, after Israel withdrew its troops from southern Lebanon in the year 2000, the Lebanese-based Shi'a terrorist organization, probably at the behest of Iran, shifted its attention to the propagation of the Islamic Revolution throughout the region.

Bahrain added the AAB to its list of terrorist groups in 2014. In March 2017, the U.S. Department of State designated two AAB members, Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi and the Iran-based Ahmad Hasan Yusuf, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). These designations were a departure from Obama-era policy, geared toward mending ties with a pariah regime in Tehran in order to come to an agreement on the nuclear deal. For the first time, the Trump administration went after Iran's network in Bahrain, with the steadfast support of other GCC nations.

In July 2018, the State Department designated the AAB as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and an SDGT, stating that AAB "members have received weapons and explosives from Iran, training at IRGC-funded camps in Iraq, and senior AAB members have taken refuge in Iran to evade prosecution by Bahraini authorities." In August of that year, the U.S. Department of State also designated an Iran-based AAB senior member, Qassimal-Muamen, as an SDGT. Muamen is said to be a "principal coordinator" for foreign military training within the AAB, which suggests that he works closely with the IRGC and other IRGC-backed proxies.

On October 31, 2019, the Bahraini judiciary issued life sentences to five nationals for "forming a terrorist cell" affiliated with al-Ashtar Brigades. In February 2019, AAB released a video statement promising more attacks in Bahrain to mark the anniversary of Bahrain's Arab Spring-inspired political uprising.

Additional Shiite Militant Groups

In addition to AAB, a variety of other Shiite militant groups in Bahrain are committed to the overthrow of the Bahraini monarchy. For example, the Saraya Al-Mukhtar Brigade, which has similar branding to the IRGC, has carried out terrorist acts in Bahrain and promoted them via social media. The group was created in July 2011, following the Arab Spring uprising. By 2017, its capabilities had substantially improved, leading Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt to designate it as a terrorist organization. Not until December 2020 did the U.S. Department of the Treasury impose terrorism sanctions on the al-Mukhtar Brigades. In the designation, the U.S. government cited the significant risk that this group would commit acts of terrorism. It based this assessment on numerous past plots against U.S. personnel in Bahrain and the group's offering of cash rewards for the assassination of Bahraini officials.

After the death of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, the Al-Mukhtar Brigade put out a statement claiming that they would exact revenge: "We consider all its [the U.S.'s] interests and presence in Bahrain to be legitimate targets for us." The group's rhetoric, though, is more pronounced than its capabilities, according to one analyst. The group relies on rudimentary improvised explosive devices (IED) for their attacks, but it also has acquired "advanced cyber-terrorism capabilities," which are improving from relatively unsophisticated efforts to hack social media accounts in order to recruit and radicalize young men, to attacks against Bahrain's infrastructure and official government platforms. Moreover, it maintains an extensive social media presence.

Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya (SMS), also known as the Popular Resistance Brigades, is another similar organization with purported connections to the IRGC. This group reportedly was behind the detonation of an IED near the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet and an attack on a branch of the National Bank of Bahrain. Bahraini officials have also arrested members of a group known as Bahraini Hezbollah: in 2019, 139 people were sentenced for joining this Iran-linked terrorist group, executing bombings, and receiving arms and explosives training.

Still, many Shi'a in Bahrain remain indifferent to Iran. According to a January 2022 poll, not even a majority of the Bahraini Shi'a community finds that good relations with Iran are an "important" foreign policy consideration. While the Shi'a community is more inclined to seek relations with Iran than the Sunni community in Bahrain, it is notable that only thirty-nine percent of Bahrain's Shi'a population think these relations are important, while thirteen percent of Sunnis do.

The Abraham Accords

In September 2020, a month after Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords, Sheikh Isa Qassim, the prominent Shi'a spiritual leader of a suspended Bahraini opposition party, al Wefaq, seconded a statement put out by that organization rejecting the Abraham Accords. In the statement, the non-official party said, "the Bahraini government does not possess the legitimacy to normalize [relations with Israel], and because the Zionist entity is itself illegitimate." He stated, from Iran, that he was against the normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel and called for the region to "resist this defeat." An Israeli think-tank with close ties to the IDF published a report at the time which anticipated more episodes of Iran-sponsored terrorism in Bahrain with the goal of derailing the normalization trend with Israel.

In September 2021, Israel opened an embassy in Manama and the Foreign Minister of Israel, Yair Lapid, made a landmark trip to the island nation—a trip which was denounced by Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. In response to the trip, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson said, "This stain will not be erased from the reputation of Bahrain's rulers. The people of the region will continue to oppose the process of normalization of ties with the Zionist regime."

Referring to the process of normalization between Bahrain and Israel, the Iranian foreign minister, who was previously the ambassador to Bahrain, said to the ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan: Iran would not tolerate "activities of the Zionist regime against its national security." Following his remarks, anti-Israel protests broke out in Bahrain, featuring slogans and chants that resemble hardline Iranian rhetoric, including "Death to Israel" chants.

In February 2022, then-Israeli Prime Minster Naftali Bennett traveled to Bahrain to meet the Bahraini King and held discussions about increasing economic and security cooperation between the states. Bennett's office stated that the meeting would be geared toward the two countries' deepening bilateral relationship, economic and diplomatic cooperation, and technological innovation. Furthermore, Bennett described the meeting as an opportunity to coordinate on a mutual threat: Iran.

Tehran reacted furiously. An Iranian news outlet, Fars News, published an article citing experts who described the cooperation as being geared toward "economic and media pressure [on Iran]" as well as "intelligence operations aimed at sabotage and insurgency inside the country [Iran]."

The IRGC may seek to coordinate an attack on Bahrain to deter further cooperation, especially military cooperation, with Israel. A commander in the IRGC, Mohammad Tehrani Moghaddam, warned Gulf Arab rulers against allowing their country to be used for an Israeli strike on Iran: "we [the Iranians] will certainly target them [the rulers of Gulf Arab countries] with the Revolutionary Guards' invisible arrows."

The Abraham Accords have increased Iranian paranoia about Bahrain. Earlier in February, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz signed a memorandum of understanding with his Bahraini counterpart in Bahrain, which was created to "help advance intelligence cooperation, a framework for exercises, and cooperation between the countries' defense industries," according to Gantz's office.

Iran views this new military cooperation as a threat; it opposes Israeli military presence in the Gulf. Iran's foreign minister described Israeli military presence as "a threat to all countries and the region itself" in a call with the Emirati foreign minister in February 2022. The IRGC has similarly reacted with alarm. Iran-backed political parties protested the meeting between Gantz and his counterpart, waving signs that said "Death to America" and "Death to Israel.

Israel confirmed in February 2022 that an Israeli naval officer will be stationed in the country. It is the first time an Israeli military officer will be posted in an Arab country. This is not to mention ongoing discussions among the Abraham Accord members—specifically UAE, Bahrain, and Israel—about intelligence sharing and the creation of a regional integrated air and missile defense system.

Bahrain and Israel also seem to be in agreement with regard to the Europe-mediated nuclear negotiations between the U.S. and Iran in Vienna, which were ongoing in 2022. Bahrain Under Secretary for International Relations at the Foreign Ministry said in Jerusalem that the "JCPOA has caused more instigation and extremism in many different regions across the Middle East."

The Iranian proxy Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (logo pictured) failed in its coup attempt in 1981.

Iranian weapons and explosives seized by Bahraini authorities in December 2013.

Kuwait

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)
- Hezbollah

Iranian proxies were responsible for a series of coordinated bombings in Kuwait in 1983, which struck the US embassy (pictured), among other targets.

Iran has long attempted to increase its influence over Kuwait due to the latter's sizeable Shiite minority (approximately 30 percent of its population), extensive oil reserves, its strategic geographical location between Iran and Iraq at the mouth of the Gulf, and its importance to American and Saudi Arabian security. Kuwait enjoys popular participation in contested parliamentary elections, including by its Shi'a minority. Some believe that Kuwait's citizenry is the most politically active of all countries in the Gulf. In 2006, the National Assembly approved the crown prince, Sheikh Nawaf al-Amed al-Sabah, who became the country's leader in 2020 after the death of his half-brother, then Kuwait's Emir. Kuwait's vibrant and apparently inclusive political system is an obstacle to Iran's pursuit of influence in the Gulf.

The relationship between Kuwait and Iran was strained during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, because Kuwait, like the other Gulf Arab states, sided with Saddam Hussein of Iraq, hoping to prevent Iran's revolutionary zeal from engulfing the region. Kuwait extended billions of dollars-worth of loans to Iraq to help it finance its war against Iran. Consequently, major terrorist attacks tracing back to Iran were committed in Kuwait. These attacks leveraged a network of Shi'a radicals formed by Mohammed Mahdi al-Shirazi, a Shiite who moved to Kuwait from Lebanon after being exiled from the holy Iraqi city of Najaf by Saddam Hussein in 1971. His network extended throughout the Gulf, and became one of the earliest manifestations of Iran's outward transnational Shiite activism once he moved to Iran after the 1979 Revolution. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran also attacked Kuwaiti ships and refineries, because Kuwait was shipping Iraqi oil.

Not long after the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein attempted to annex Kuwait in 1990; and the United States mobilized a massive international coalition which repelled him. The war was over by 1991; however, the U.S. troop buildup in the region was not completely drawn down. To this day, large numbers of U.S. troops remain in the Gulf region, at the invitation of the host countries, to maintain regional security. According to one estimate, there were between 60,000 to 80,000 troops deployed to the U.S. military's Central Command area of operations as of January 2020.

In the Gulf, U.S. troops are located in Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, indicating the strategic value of this region of the Middle East. Iran staunchly opposes the U.S. military presence in the region, and foreseeing such as the result of a U.S. troop buildup in the run up to the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), it remained neutral in that war. Part of the reason Iran meddles and supports terrorism in Kuwait is because of the country's alignment with the West.

In April 2011, Kuwait uncovered Iranian covert operations designed to undermine American-Kuwaiti military cooperation and inflame sectarian tensions among Kuwait's Shiite minority. The Kuwaiti foreign minister reported the discovery of an Iranian spy cell that had operated in Kuwait since the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003. The cell "monitored the U.S. military presence and possessed explosives to bomb 'strategic' facilities" in addition to lists of "names of officers" and "extremely sensitive information." This announcement followed the March sentencing of two Iranians and one Kuwaiti for spying on behalf of Iran and coincided with the expulsion of several Iranian diplomats from Kuwait.

Iran seeks to expand its influence in Kuwait by coopting Shi'a groups. The IRGC "exploits the space for religious freedom that exists in Kuwait to expand its foothold in Kuwaiti society," said a retired Kuwaiti political officer. Since some religious centers, including Shi'a mosques, are not subject to oversight by government institutions, Tehran is given an opening to project its revolutionary message to Shi'a people in Bahrain. Portraits of IRGC commanders and Ali Khamenei and flags of Hezbollah reportedly show up in private religious institutions.

Hezbollah in Kuwait

Since its creation in 1982, Hezbollah has carried out operations in Kuwait at the behest of Iran. As early as 1983, Hezbollah operatives, along with Iraqi Da'wa Party members, targeted, as one analyst noted, "the American and French embassies, the Kuwait airport, the grounds of the Raytheon Corporation, a Kuwait National Petroleum Company oil rig, and a government-owned power station" in coordinated suicide bombings which killed six people and wounded another ninety. Kuwait imprisoned 17 people for their involvement in these attacks, including several members of Hezbollah.

In order to pressure Kuwait to release these 17 prisoners, known as the "Kuwait 17," Iran directed Hezbollah to engage in a campaign of terrorism and kidnappings throughout the Middle East. In 1984, Kuwait Airways Flight 221 was hijacked on its way to Pakistan and diverted to Tehran. Although Iran eventually arrested the hijackers, the perpetrators, who murdered two employees of USAID, were never tried in an Iranian court and were permitted to leave the country. The next year, an individual who later claimed to be part of a group known as Islamic Jihad, drove a bomb-laden vehicle into the Kuwaiti Emir's motorcade in an attempted assassination. Given the Iranian opposition to Kuwait at this time, the suicide car-bomber had suspected links to Iran and Hezbollah.

Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, sectarian violence in Kuwait has declined; it began to ease when Kuwaiti Shiites affirmed their loyalty to the defense of the state in the Gulf War. The current lack of sectarian tensions makes the country less susceptible to Iranian destabilizing activities; for example, it cannot as easily stir up and foment fear and animosity against rival Sunni groups. As was seen in the above-section on Syria and elsewhere, such rivalries, which can devolve into vicious cycles of violence,

serve as breeding grounds for Iran-sponsored terrorism. While Kuwait is not the tinder box that it once was during the Iran-Iraq War, it is still vulnerable to volatility and radicalism, particularly when spurred on by Iran and other external actors like Hezbollah.

The Abdali affair is the most striking example of this vulnerability. In August 2015, Kuwaiti officials foiled a plot by Hezbollah to carry out attacks in the country's al-Abdali area. The Hezbollah offshoot responsible for planning the attack was made up of 25 Bahraini nationals and one Iranian. Authorities seized a huge arms cache that they said was smuggled from Iraq and hidden underneath houses close to the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. In Kuwait's Al-Abdali area, they discovered a total of 42,000 lbs. of ammunition, 144 kg of explosives—including C4—68 weapons, and 204 grenades. Members of the Abdali cell were charged with plotting with Iran and Hezbollah to destabilize Kuwait's national security.

In June 2017, Kuwait's Supreme Court upheld the convictions of 21 members of the al-Abdali terrorist cell, noting the group's intention to carry out terror attacks around the country. Kuwait protested to Lebanon that Hezbollah, which is part of the Lebanese government, played an active role in training the members of the terror cell. Subsequently, the Kuwaiti government closed Iran's cultural mission and expelled some Iranian diplomats. A year later, shortly after the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization, Kuwait expelled over 70 Lebanese nationals who had permanent residency status for alleged links to Hezbollah. Moreover, in May 2018, Kuwait joined the U.S. and other Gulf states in sanctioning 9 Hezbollah-affiliated persons and entities, but did not join the other governments in designating Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah as well.

In July 2020, Kuwaiti authorities broke up a money laundering cell with alleged ties to Hezbollah. The cell, whose mastermind was an Iranian resident of Kuwait, was reportedly active for five years. The members reportedly laundered over 3 million dinars ($9.8 million USD) through online auctions of luxury goods using a Gulf bank, with the money subsequently being sent to an unnamed regional state.

Terrorist financing operations continued to be uncovered in 2021 as well. That November, news reports circulated that Kuwaiti prosecutors detained 18 people suspected of financing Hezbollah. In September 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Talib Husayn 'Ali Jarak Ismai'l for coordinating the transfer of millions of dollars to Hezbollah from Kuwait through Jamal Husayn 'Abd 'Ali 'Abd-al-Rahim al-Shatti**,** the brother of former Kuwaiti lawmaker Khaled al-Shatti.

Kuwait tried to mediate between Lebanon and Gulf Arab states amid a diplomatic row that began when the Lebanese minister of information criticized Saudi Arabia's role in the war in Yemen. In January 2022, the Kuwaiti foreign minister traveled to Lebanon and presented a set of "trust-building" proposals, one of which was the disarmament of Hezbollah, who in recent years has increased its influence in Lebanon.

In return for its cooperation, the Gulf state said that it would help facilitate a World Bank project to help deal with Lebanon's severe economic crisis. Hezbollah, in line with its frequent critiques of Gulf Arab states for serving the interests of the U.S. and other Western powers, staunchly opposed the Western-backed Kuwaiti offering. Later in January, Lebanon's foreign minister traveled to Kuwait and

explained that the disarmament of Hezbollah was not in the offing. Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah blasted the Kuwaiti proposal for improvement in ties between Lebanon and Gulf Arab states, calling them "dictates." This shows the continued tensions between Iran's proxies and partners and the Kuwaiti leadership.

Although it is clear that Iran seeks to establish influence in the country, the Kuwaiti political system's inclusion of moderate Shi'a parties has often produced compromise with the majority Sunni population. The political integration of moderate Shi'a parties counters Iran's efforts to spread its radical and subversive Shi'a doctrine.

The National Islamic Alliance (NIA), Kuwait's main Shi'a Islamist political bloc, has become less susceptible to Iran's radicalization campaign over the years. While Sunni-Shi'a tensions ran high in 2008, when thousands of Shi'a people gathered to mourn the death of a top Hezbollah commander widely hated by the Sunni community for his alleged role in terrorist attacks in Kuwait during the Iran-Iraq War, they have since declined, as the NIA has taken a pragmatic, rather than an ideological, approach to politics. It should also be noted that, according to an expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "the Kuwaiti public, including [the] Shi'a minority, [are] still anti-Iran."

Iran-Kuwait Diplomatic Relations

Despite Iran's meddling and support for terrorism in Kuwait, Kuwait has sought to cultivate good relations with Tehran, placing it at odds with other GCC nations. For the first time since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, in June 2014, the Kuwaiti Emir, Shiekh Sabah al-Ahmad al Sabah, led a high-level delegation to Iran. As a result of this visit, Kuwait and Iran agreed to a memorandum of understanding, saying that the two countries would coordinate their security efforts.

Unlike Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Kuwait initially opted to maintain diplomatic ties with Iran after Iranians attacked the Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran in 2016 in response to Saudi Arabia's execution of the prominent Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr. However, Kuwait would later cut diplomatic ties with Tehran out of solidarity with Saudi Arabia. More recently, Kuwait has also sought to serve as a mediator in the dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, which centers on Qatar's links to Tehran and its support for terrorist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

In August 2022, Kuwait sent its first ambassador to Tehran since downgrading ties in 2016. The resumption of diplomatic relations between Kuwait and Iran flew under the radar of Western media outlets. Ongoing talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran overshadowed it. Still, the improvement in relations between Iran and Kuwait was significant because it shows that Iran has been able to counter international efforts to isolate and pressure it. Despite its ongoing efforts to destabilize the region and promote terrorism, and despite the rapid advances in its nuclear program, which also threaten regional security, Tehran has been able to normalize relations with Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Tehran is also reportedly seeking to improve ties with Bahrain as well. These developments risk normalizing Tehran's malign behavior and its threat to regional security, while undermining the U.S.'s efforts to isolate Tehran.

A cache of Iranian weapons seized by Kuwaiti authorities in August 2015.

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Saudi Arabia

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)
- Hezbollah
- Houthis

Iranian Meddling and Terrorism in Saudi Arabia

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Saudi officials have feared growing Shiite influence in their country and the region as the Iranian regime has sought to export the revolution throughout the Persian Gulf. An estimated 15 percent of Saudi Arabia's 25 million citizens are Shiite Muslims, the vast majority of whom are concentrated in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province. Shiites are the majority in key towns such as Qatif, Dammam, and al-Hasa, which, as the *BBC* notes, "are home to the largest oil fields and processing and refining facilities."

Consequently, Iran has often sought to stir unrest among the Shiite population in these areas. The Islamic Revolution sparked significant unrest in Qatif in November 1979. Emboldened by Ayatollah Khomeini's claims that hereditary monarchies were incompatible with Islam, Shiites in Qatif mobilized against the Saudi government.

Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration that he was the leader of not only Iran but the entire Muslim world threatened the Saudi monarchy's religious legitimacy as custodians of Islam's holiest sites. On July 31, 1987, Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operatives incited Iranian pilgrims to riot outside the Grand Mosque in Mecca during the annual hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. As 155,000 Iranian pilgrims chanted "Death to America!" and confronted Saudi riot police, a stampede ensued, resulting in the death over 400 people, including hundreds of Iranian pilgrims and Saudi policemen.

Shortly following these attacks, Tehran's proxy Hezbollah carried out Iranian interference in Saudi Arabia via attacks on the Saudi petrochemical industry, targeted assassinations of Saudi politicians worldwide, and a foiled plot involving explosives placed near Mecca's Grand Mosque.

On June 25, 1996, Saudi Hezbollah—directed and funded by Iran—bombed the Khobar Towers housing compound in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where U.S. and allied forces supporting air operations in Iraq were housed. The attack killed 19 American servicemen and one Saudi, and injured hundreds of others. Iran is also believed to be responsible for the August 2012 cyberattack on Aramco, Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company. This attack disabled over 30,000 computers operated by Aramco, disrupting operations for nearly two weeks.

Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia ratcheted up in the early to mid 2010s. In 2011, the U.S. accused Iran of plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. by bombing a restaurant in Georgetown, Washington D.C. The plot had been "directed and approved by elements of the Iranian government and, specifically, senior members of the Quds force," said then-U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. Still, Saudi Arabia did not at this time sever diplomatic relations with Iran.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed outspoken Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Riyadh had accused him of involvement in Iran-linked Shiite attacks on policemen and civilians in 2011. Iran's Supreme Leader proclaimed that "the unjustly spilled blood of this oppressed martyr will no doubt soon show its effect and divine vengeance will befall Saudi politicians," describing the execution as a "political error." Subsequently, an Iranian mob, chanting "Death to the Al Saud family," ransacked and set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad on January 3. The assault at the embassy led the kingdom to sever diplomatic relations with Iran and to pressure countries in the Gulf and in Africa to take the same measure.

Al-Nimr's execution prompted unrest and anti-monarchy protests in Qatif, his home province. While most of the protests were peaceful, some skirmishes between Shiites and the Saudi security forces resulted in deaths or injuries. Further, in December 2016, Saudi Judge Mohammed al-Jirani was kidnapped in Qatif; his body was found one year later. *Asharq al-Awsat* reported that an Iranian cleric promulgated a fatwa ordering terrorists to kidnap and kill al-Jirani.

The Saudi government clamped down on Qatif and protests became more violent in 2017 and 2018, as Shiite fighters attacked and killed or wounded Saudi police and soldiers. The Saudi government prosecuted Saudis allegedly working for Iranian proxies like Hezbollah. Riyadh has pushed back against Hezbollah, joining the U.S. Department of Treasury and other Gulf states in sanctioning Hezbollah officials and entities in May 2018.

Iranian Attacks on the Saudi Homeland

On May 14, 2019, unmanned aircraft systems targeted two pumping stations on the East-West pipeline carrying crude oil from Dhahran to Yanbu. Yemen-based Iran-backed Houthi militants claimed responsibility, but the U.S. government later concluded the systems were launched from Iraq.

On June 12, 2019, Saudi-led coalition senior officials reported a cross-border cruise missile attack at Abha International Airport, injuring 26 civilians. Yemen-based Iran-backed Houthi militants claimed responsibility for this attack. On August 17, 2019, Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi militants struck a natural gas liquids plant at Shaybah oilfield in the Kingdom's Empty Quarter with drones. The drone strike damaged the facility and caused a fire. No deaths or casualties were reported.

On September 14, 2019, Iranian attacks hit the Abqaiq and Khurais oil processing facilities in the Eastern province, initially taking 5.7 million barrels per day of crude oil production offline. Although Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi militants claimed responsibility for the attack, investigations led by Saudi Arabia and the United States concluded the Iranian government was behind the attack. Saudi Aramco resumed pre-attack production levels less than two weeks later, ahead of schedule.

In early 2021, Iraq-based members of Iran's Axis of Resistance claimed responsibility for targeting Riyadh with "missiles or drones." The incident was more serious than initial reports indicated—with the Saudi royal palace in Riyadh being targeted. There is an emerging pattern of using Iraqi militants in Iran's proxy network—as opposed to the Houthis in Yemen—to launch attacks on Saudi Arabia, following the May

2019 attack on the Saudi oil pipeline. The Houthis also claimed responsibility for a March 7 attack on Ras Tanura port, but there are some indications it originated elsewhere. In early 2021, there was an uptick in drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia after the Biden administration revoked the Houthis' terrorism designations.

Iranian Terrorism Against Saudi Interests in the Region

Saudi officials have viewed Iranian support for Shiite unrest in allied Bahrain during the "Arab Spring" as a "fundamental risk" to Saudi national security. Consequently, Saudi Arabia sent 1,000 troops to Bahrain in 2011 in an effort to stabilize the country and prevent Iranian and Shiite influence from spreading to the Saudi mainland. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has supported Yemeni government forces against the Iranian-backed Shiite Houthi rebels.

Iran's involvement in Yemen has led the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, to conclude that the Saudi government must "deal with Iran's aggression in the region." This Saudi determination resulted in the formation of a coalition with Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates which began launching airstrikes against the rebels in Yemen in March 2015. Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nawaf harshly condemned Iran's support for the Houthis and its meddling in the affairs of Arab states: "Their interference has ignited instability, they have created havoc in our part of the world…"

Since 2015, the Houthis have used Yemeni territory under their control as launching pads to fire more than 100 missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia. Such strikes have hit multiple cities, including Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Targeted locations include the king's official residence, military bases and encampments, oil refineries, the Riyadh international airport, and shopping malls. Further, as the Congressional Research Service notes, "Since 2016, the Houthis have periodically targeted commercial and military vessels transiting and patrolling the Red Sea using naval mines, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, anti-ship missiles, and waterborne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs). Some of the weapons used reportedly have been supplied by Iran, including sea-skimming coastal defense cruise missiles."

Evidence indicates that Iran is arming and, in some cases, directing the Houthis in their missile campaign, contrary to Tehran's denials and in violation of an arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council in April 2015. An independent U.N. monitoring panel stated in November 2017 that remnants from four ballistic missiles fired by the Houthis into Saudi Arabia likely came from the Iranian-made and designed Qiam-1 missile. In December 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley and Pentagon officials displayed debris from missiles fired into Saudi Arabia, claiming that the markings on and designs of the missiles demonstrated that they were made by Iran.

The U.N.'s finding of Iranian origins in the Houthis' missiles continued well into 2018, with panel after panel affirming the Iranian connection. One U.N. report from January 2018 found that recently inspected missiles and drones "show characteristics similar to weapons systems known to be produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran," and, therefore, the panel "continues to believe" that Tehran is giving missiles and other arms to the Houthis. Indeed, Iran has recently bragged openly about their

support for the Houthis, with an IRGC general telling IRGC-controlled media that the Guards had instructed the Houthis to attack two Saudi oil tankers in July 2018.

In January 2023, French special forces seized Iranian-supplied weapons and ammunition en route to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The forces discovered and seized over 3,000 assault rifles, half a million rounds of ammunition, and 20 anti-tank guided missiles after conducting the operation in coordination with the U.S. military.

Then in March 2023, the U.S. and U.K. interdicted a shipment of arms, including Iranian versions of Russian Kornet anti-tank guided missiles and medium-range ballistic missile components, en route to the Houthis in Yemen from Iran. These weapons interdictions occurred in the months and weeks preceding a China-brokered normalization agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which saw Iran commit to halting attacks against Saudi Arabia, including via the Houthis in Yemen, and to end its arms transfers to the Houthis. While there was a decline in the number of disrupted Iranian arms transfers to the Houthis after Iran and Saudi Arabia normalized ties, there have been interdictions since the war in Gaza began in October 2023. During one of those operations in January 2024, two U.S. Navy SEALs lost their lives after they were swept out to sea. The boarding team subsequently discovered missile components intended for the Houthis.

Unlike Bahrain, Saudi Arabia has not joined the U.S.-led coalition that has conducted airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen to degrade and deter the group's attacks against international shipping. As Saudi Arabia is looking to implement the economic development project, "Vision 2030," and wants to ensure that Houthi threats or attacks don't harm international business prospects in the country, it may continue to abstain from the coalition strikes. That policy will also depend on whether the Houthis refrain from attacking Saudi Arabia.

Iran was responsible for the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing which killed 19 American servicemen based in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Proxy Group Reports

Asaib Ahl al-Haq

Iran provides money, weaponry, training, and operational oversight to Asaib Ahl al-Haq, an Iraqi Shi'a militia. As a proxy of the Iranian regime, Asaib Ahl al-Haq remains ideologically aligned with Iran's Islamist political goals, and loyal to its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. On January 3, 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the U.S. government would designate AAH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

- **Type of Organization**: Militia, political party, religious, social services provider, terrorist, transnational, violent
- **Ideologies and Affiliations**: Iranian-sponsored, Islamist, jihadist, Khomeinist, Shi'a
- **Place of Origin**: Iraq
- **Year of Origin**: 2006
- **Founder(s)**: Qais al-Khazali
- **Places of Operation**: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon

AAH: An Iranian-Backed Militia

Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)—in English, the "League of the Righteous"—is an Iranian-backed Shi'a militia and political party operating primarily in Iraq, with ancillary operations in Syria and Lebanon. Formed in 2006 by Qais al-Khazali, AAH has approximately 10,000 members and is one of Iraq's most powerful Shi'a militias. Until the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, AAH had launched over 6,000 attacks on American and Iraqi forces, including sophisticated operations and targeted kidnappings of Westerners. The group seeks to promote Iran's political and religious influence in Iraq, maintain Shi'a control over Iraq, and oust any remaining Western vestiges from the country.

AAH's history in Iraq dates back formally to 2006, when the group broke away from the Mahdi Army (JAM)—the militia run by the violent Shi'a cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. In August 2007, the U.S. designated AAH as a "Special Group," a label given to Iranian-backed Shi'a militias operating in Iraq. AAH is still one of three prominent Iraqi Shi'a militias funded and trained by Iran's external military wing, the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). AAH overtly displays its loyalty to Iran's leaders, including the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and his predecessor, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The group reportedly operates under Iran's Quds Force.

After the U.S. withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, AAH announced its intention to lay down its weapons and enter Iraqi politics. The group opened a number of political offices and religious schools and offered social services to widows and orphans. According to a Reuters report, AAH modeled its operations after Hezbollah, another Iranian proxy. Yet, AAH didn't fulfill its vow to halt armed resistance, instead continuing to carry out sectarian violence, execute homophobic attacks, slaughter women alleged to be prostitutes, and threaten the "interests" of Western countries participating in strikes in Syria.

The group's membership in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a paramilitary that was formed out of Iraqi volunteers to fight ISIS and repel its conquest of large swathes of Iraq in 2014, contributed to its popularity in the Iraqi Shi'a community, which often viewed AAH as a defender against the Sunni terrorist organization.

Consequently, its performance in elections improved. Around one year after victory over ISIS was declared, in the May 2018 elections, AAH won 15 seats in the Iraqi parliament—a significant increase from the one seat it had won in the 2014 elections. Under the subsequently-formed government, AAH member Abdul-Amir Hamdani was given the position of minister of culture. On July 13, 2018, Iraqi protesters in the country's south attacked the political offices of AAH and other Iran-backed groups as they called for Iran to withdraw from Iraq.

In January 2020, the U.S. government designated AAH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The sanctions announcement noted that AAH, led by Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali, "has claimed responsibility for more than 6,000 attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces since its creation in 2006."

The political wing of AAH, known as al-Sadiqun, and its political allies in the Fatah coalition, have increased their political power following the October 2021 parliamentary elections, by employing intimidation and violence as part of their campaign to oust the rival Shia bloc from parliament, led by Muqtada al-Sadr. This campaign has yielded significant gains in parliament for AAH and the other Iranian-backed militias, allowing AAH to wield outsize influence relative to the number of seats it initially won, which indicated diminishing popularity. Sadr's nationalist movement, which has been critical of Tehran's meddling in Iraq, was much more successful in the elections.

Although Sadr claimed to have resigned from parliament to avert the stalemate in the government formation process, he may have been acting to avoid intra-Shia escalation. AAH and the Fatah coalition at first took to the streets in protest of the results of the October 2021 parliamentary elections in which they lost handily to the bloc led by Muqtada al-Sadr.

Following Sadr's decision, the parliamentary coalition of the militias, known as the 'Coordination Framework,' set in motion the process that would see their ally become prime minister. As part of that coalition, AAH has vocalized its maximalist demands for a complete U.S. troop withdrawal and has reiterated it will not comport with the outcome of U.S. and Iraqi bilateral negotiations.

The terrorist group's ties with the 'Islamic Resistance in Iraq,' which has claimed at least 50 of the over 160 attacks against the U.S. in Iraq and Syria between October 17, 2023 and February 2024, are not clear. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, however, AAH is not a member of this umbrella organization, led by Kataib Hezbollah.

AAH Ideology: Imported from Iran

AAH is a religiously motivated group with allegiance to Iran. The group is anti-American, sectarian, anti-Kurdish, homophobic, and violent. A former Iraqi MP, Taha al-Lahibi, said that AAH has "actively served as an Iranian arm that oppresses all Iraqis opposed to the Iranian influence by commanding assassination squads to kill them, particularly in the city of Basra."

Pro-Iranian: AAH seeks to establish an Islamist, Shi'a-controlled Iraq and promote Iranian objectives. While AAH has origins within the Iraqi Sadrist movement, the group is openly loyal to Iranian leaders, most notably the Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei. Similarly, AAH shows deference to the Guardianship of the Jurists (Velayat-e Faqih), a governing structure that serves as one of the cornerstones of Iran's Islamic Revolution system.

Analysts characterize AAH as a Khomeinist organization that aims "to create a suitable environment for the return of Imam Mahdi through the imposition of strict Shi'a Islamic governance." This assessment is corroborated by Guardian Middle East correspondent Martin Chulov, who writes that AAH is a "proxy arm of the Revolutionary Guards' al-Quds Brigades, whose main brief is to export Iran's 30-year-old Islamic Revolution." AAH is also ideologically aligned with Iranian proxy Hezbollah, a Shi'a Lebanese terrorist group.

Declassified interrogation reports of Qais al-Khazali, AAH's founder, underscore the breadth and depth of the relationship between Shi'a militias and Iran. Al-Khazali described multiple trips to Tehran with Muqtada al-Sadr, beginning in 1989 with the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini, where he met with representatives of the Iranian government. These meetings continued over the next decade, where al-Khazali met with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and other senior leaders.

During questioning in 2007, Al-Khazali emphasized that while Iran did not order the militias to attack specific targets in Iraq, Iranian officials "suggested" the militias concentrate their efforts on British troops in Basra and American troops "to force a withdrawal." Al-Khazali also spoke at length of generous Iranian provisions of explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) and their role in the slaughter of American troops. According to one report, "[d]etainee said that anyone can receive EFP training and Iran does not care who gets it… this is because of the availability and low cost of EFPs."

AAH is also present in Syria. The Iraqi militia coordinates its activities at the Iraq-Syria border with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). There, they secure critical transshipment hubs. In particular, the IRGC has a major presence along the western side of the Euphrates River in Syria, extending north from the Abu Kamal border crossing. An unidentified drone struck Iran-backed militias stationed in Abu Kamal in September 2021. It was not entirely clear who carried out the attack, but al-Khazali threatened the Iraqi government in response.

In addition to fighting in Syria at Iran's behest, recent reporting shows that Iran-backed militiamen, including from AAH, are also being offered stipends to fight in Ukraine in support of Russia. In March 2022, an individual with AAH expressed interest in the offer of $400 a week to fight with the Russian military against "imperialism."

An Iraqi militia group, Ashab Ahl Kahf, thought to be linked to AAH, claimed a missile attack against Israel at the height of the May 2021 Gaza conflict. Qais Khazali visited the Lebanese-Israel border in December 2017, vowing "to stand together with the Lebanese people and the Palestinian cause" against "Israeli occupation." He was subsequently banned from visiting the country again by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

Furthermore, a March 2022 report suggests that the IRGC may have dispatched a large number of fighters from its Iraqi militias to Yemen in order to reinforce the Iran-backed Houthis, who had suffered major losses. The report explicitly states that fighters from AAH would be included.

As a member of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), AAH has been integrated within the Iraqi government. Although it 89receives government funding and is formally under the command of Iraq's prime minister, the PMF seldom obeys the commands of ranking Iraqi officials, nor do the factions within it always act in unison. The following statement made by a member of the Political Bureau of AAH demonstrates the group's insubordination: "al-Hashd al-Shaabi is a security system that follows the orders issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, while the resistance factions [i.e., AAH] are the ones that reject the American presence on Iraqi soil."

Under the command of the late Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, the Shi'a elements in the PMF loyal to Iran exhibited more cohesion. Since his death, though, Iran's command and control over the militias that it formed has weakened. The current commander of the IRGC-Quds Force, Esmail Qaani, was at first thought not to exert the same degree of influence over the Iraqi militias, given the fact that he did not have the longstanding ties to the militia leaders that Soleimani did.

The General-Secretary of AAH suggested that it would pursue its own interests, regardless of Tehran's dictates. On November 19, 2020, after AAH carried out a rocket attack on the day of Qaani's visit to Baghdad, he said, "I sent a clear and frank message to Mr. Esmail Qaani … the Americans occupy our country not yours, those martyred in Qaim were our sons … then the matter is related to us, regardless of other calculations, so please from now on if someone came to you, embarrassed you, please no one talks to us and we won't listen… our motives are national 100%…" These statements by AAH at the time indicated the group's increasing defiance and Qaani's decentralized management over the group's activities. Still, Qaani has proven skillful at uniting and mobilizing the Axis of Resistance militias in Iraq to attack the U.S. and Israel, particularly in the lead up to and following Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel on October 7, 2023.

AAH has always been an extremely violent and heavily indoctrinated entity operating at Tehran's behest. Therefore, it is no surprise that AAH was the first group to break a ceasefire that a number of Iran-backed militias had agreed to in mid-October 2020 on the condition that Iraq's government create a timetable for the withdrawal of all remaining U.S. troops. Even Kataib Hezbollah, another radical Iran-backed militia in Iraq, complied with the ceasefire and criticized AAH for breaking it, which shows how the groups are aligned in their vision of evicting the U.S., but not necessarily in their tactics.

Rockets targeted the U.S. embassy in Iraq in November 2020. The *Washington Institute for Near East Policy's* program to track militia activities in Iraq and Syria determined that AAH undertook two rocket attacks on the U.S. embassy complex in Baghdad at the end of 2020. In February 2021, the program, known as Militia Spotlight, assessed that AAH was responsible for rocket attacks on the U.S. military base in Erbil, which is part of Iraq's Kurdistan region. The attack was claimed by a group that goes by the name of "Awliyaa al-Dam," but U.S. and Iraqi officials said that this group is merely a front. Another

front group operating under AAH, Ashab al-Kahf carried out an IED attack against a U.S. convoy in Al-Diwaniyah, Iraq in March 2021 and attacked Israel with a rocket one month later.

A terrorist group attempted to assassinate Iraq's prime minister in a drone strike in November 2021. AAH claimed that the attack was "fabricated," but Reuters reported that month that two Iraqi security officials, speaking anonymously, said that the attack was carried out by both Kataib Hezbollah and AAH. One of the officials noted that the drone was designed like other Iranian-made drones used to attack U.S. forces in Iraq earlier in the year, as a "quadcopter" carrying one projectile with high explosives.

The statements of these officials indicate that Iran probably supplied the weapons, and some reports suggest Tehran may have had foreknowledge of the attack. The Iranians condemned the assassination attempt, and some ask whether the attack is an indication that Iran is "losing some of its grip on Shi'a militias in Iraq." Other experts, such as Nathan Sales of the *Counter Extremism Project,* claim that the failed drone strike on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Khadimi "appears to have Tehran's fingerprints all over it." The prime minister was not harmed in the attack, but many Iraqis fear that the attack was politically motivated and could portend a broader intra-Shia civil conflict.

Anti-American: AAH is virulently anti-American, a stance that did not abate after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. AAH is so staunchly opposed to the U.S. that it boycotted the PMF's attack against ISIS in Tikrit in March 2015, because the U.S. provided airpower support. By the end of the month, AAH only agreed to rejoin the battle against ISIS after then Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi promised that the United States would stop its airstrikes. AAH Spokesman Naim al-Aboudi said that the Prime Minister "realized this battle can't be finished" without AAH and other militias, demonstrating AAH's continued prioritizing of its anti-American position above its other goals.

In 2018, Qais al-Khazali framed AAH's anti-Americanism as a political rather than ideological struggle. As al-Khazali told reporters, "[i]deologically, we do not consider the U.S. an infidel or its people enemies. The only thing that happened is a phase of American occupation, and it is normal for people to resist occupation." Yet this convenient rebranding of AAH came on the heels of the U.S. Congress' attempts to sanction AAH as a terrorist organization.

On May 1, 2019, AAH militants fired rockets at U.S. contractors working in Taji. Local security forces arrested two AAH militants shortly after. The U.S. struck the Iraq-Syria border in June 2021, and Khazali vowed to retaliate against American forces in Iraq. The leader went on Iraqi television and claimed that the U.S. was responsible for escalating hostilities. In the televised speech broadcast on the group's satellite television channel, *al-Ahed*, Khazali said: "We are not seeking blood… however the American treacherous enemy is the one who started wasting lives and moved the battle to this level."

Also, in June 2021, Khazali announced on Iraqi television an escalation in drone operations against U.S. assets: "The truce is over…now its war…except for the American embassy…and Balad base…any U.S. military presence is targetable by the fasiqil [armed groups] of the Iraqi muqawama, and the decision is to escalate the operations in terms of quantity and quality."

Sectarian: As a Shiite, Iranian-backed group, AAH follows and implements a sectarian ideology that has enflamed tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq and across the region. According to Martin Chulov, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali's speeches have galvanized "thousands" of Iraqi Shiites to fight for Assad's regime in Syria, worrying many Iraqi communities about "a sectarian conflict that increasingly respects no border." In August 2012, AAH militants reportedly bombed the Sunni Sabatayn Mosque in Iraq, an attack that stirred a new wave of sectarian tensions in the country. Since then, Human Rights Watch has documented numerous AAH attacks on Sunnis in Iraq in which AAH militants targeted Sunni mosques or towns.

More recently, AAH and the Badr Organization went on a sectarian "killing spree" in a majority-Sunni town in Diyala province in revenge for an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attack on October 26, 2021. This incident underscores how these radical groups take vengeance on innocent civilians.

In line with this sectarian strife, AAH members have reportedly appropriated the derogatory term rafidah (a pejorative meaning "rejecters" that some Sunnis use for Shiites) as a badge of honor and "self-identity." A January 2014 Foreign Policy piece reported that on an AAH linked-webpage, AAH proudly identified its fighters as rafidah "as a sign of mocking defiance against their foes."

Anti-Kurdish: AAH leaders frequently demonize and alienate Iraqi Kurds. In 2015, AAH's leader Qais al-Khazali said on live television, "The problem is that the Kurds are operating right now like leeches, which feed on the host's body—sucking more and more of its blood—in an effort to grow in size."

Homophobic: Members of AAH have committed numerous acts of violence targeting gays in Iraq. In May 2014, AAH members published a list of 24 "wanted" individuals, the vast majority of whom were accused of carrying out "homosexual acts." Two months later, AAH members beheaded two teenagers believed to be gay, and threw their heads into the garbage. According to police anecdotes, these types of attacks and intimidation are indicative of the group's violent disposition toward sexual minorities.

Violent: AAH operates as a militia, with ancillary operations as a political party. The group does not eschew violence in pursuit of its objectives, which include the establishment of an Islamist Iranian-inspired Shi'a state.

AAH's Organizational Structure: A Group that Answers to Iran

AAH is led by its founder, Qais al-Khazali, who broke off from the Mahdi Army (a.k.a. Jaysh al-Mahdi or JAM), a Sadrist militia, in 2006. According to a 2012 report by analyst Sam Wyer, al-Khazali sits on AAH's five-person board of trustees along with two deputies. As an Iranian proxy, AAH coordinates with senior Iranian commanders, notably the late IRGC-Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani.

AAH first began as a military unit within JAM. With the 2003 Iraq War, AAH reorganized into battalions assigned to four sectors: Baghdad, Maysan, Najaf, and Samarra. When al-Khazali made AAH an independent group in 2006, he retained this structure. AAH's military arrangement is thought to be based on fellow Shi'a militant group Hezbollah, with which the group has close ties.

Since the United States withdrew its forces from Iraq in December 2011, AAH has expanded significantly into politics, "opening a string of political offices" throughout Iraq, according to *the Washington Post*.

AAH runs two political offices in Baghdad, and others in the Iraqi cities of Basra, Najaf, Hillah, al-Kalis, and Tal Afar. AAH has also sent political representatives to the southern Iraqi provinces of Dhi Qar, al-Muthanna, and Maysan to meet with tribal and minority leaders. The group's political bloc is called al-Sadiqun (the Honest Ones), and in the May 2018 parliamentary elections, AAH ran in alliance with Hadi al-Amiri's Fatah Coalition. Outside Iraq, AAH has maintained political representation in Beirut, Lebanon, since early 2011. As of early 2011, Sheikh Ammar al-Delphi headed AAH's political offices in Beirut. In the April 30, 2014, parliamentary elections, AAH ran in alliance with Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanoon (State of Law).

AAH: Financed by Iran

AAH has received training, arms, and financial support from Iran, particularly through Iran's external military branch, the IRGC-Quds Force, as well as from Iran's Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. Col. Rick Welch, a retired U.S. Army intelligence officer, said that during the 2007 U.S. surge in Iraq, Iran was giving AAH "$20 million a month or some outrageous figure like that" in order to train AAH fighters. After U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, the financial pipeline from Iran continued.

During 2012, Iran was giving AAH $5 million in cash and weapons per month, according to an Iraqi close to the group. The Iranian financing was indispensable to the group's efforts to recruit new fighters and build up its capabilities after the U.S. withdrawal. In a backlash against the growth of these and other Iran-backed Shia militias, ISIS expanded recruitment and eventually took control of large swathes of Iraq and Syria, leading the U.S. to redeploy troops in 2014. During March 2014, the group continued to receive an estimated $1.5 million to $2 million a month from Iran.

Recruitment Tactics and Messaging: AAH as the Protector of Shiites in Iraq

AAH recruitment focuses on two strategies: traditional propaganda efforts to raise the group's profile, and a comprehensive religious system aimed to indoctrinate and recruit members. AAH has also emulated groups like ISIS by using social media to expand recruitment throughout the Middle East, South Asia, and the West.

One of the main ways AAH draws recruits is by advertising itself as a protector of the Shiite community within Iraq and abroad. AAH uses posters and issues calls for recruits on Iraqi television stations, often emphasizing its connection with Iran and Hezbollah. One AAH member said that he was drawn to AAH because it was "protecting the Shi'a community inside Iraq and abroad as well." In the past, the most important galvanizing point for Iraqis to join AAH and go to Syria to fight alongside Assad forces was the defense of the Sayeda Zenab shrine, a Shi'a holy site in a Damascus suburb.

AAH has seized homes and offices in Baghdad in order to establish recruiting centers where would-be volunteers could go to join other Shiites fighting in Syria. In southern Iraq, posters urge men to join the fight in Syria with other Iraqi Shiites and provide a hotline number to call. In August 2012, AAH distributed over 20,000 posters with AAH's logo; a photograph of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; and a photograph of the late Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr. The posters were plastered on buildings and billboards and also used in street demonstrations.

AAH's second, but perhaps most comprehensive, recruitment strategy is a religious activism and education system. The group uses two mosques in particular, the Sabatayn mosque in Baghdad and the Abdullah al-Radiya mosque in al-Khalis, as hubs for recruitment. AAH leaders give sermons at these mosques, advocating social and religious reform in Iraq in an attempt to entice attendees into joining, financing, or otherwise contributing to AAH's mission.

AAH has expanded its reach through a network of religious schools known as the "Seal of the Apostles." These schools, spread throughout Iraq, serve as propaganda and recruitment facilities for the group. As with its military and political structures, AAH also appears to be emulating Hezbollah by launching social services programs for widows and orphans. AAH's recruitment efforts are funded in large part by Iran.

AAH also disseminates propaganda that features its violence. The group uses Telegram—a free instant messaging service that can be used across different platforms—to publicize their attacks and recruit new members. Videos of attacks and other uploaded propaganda are difficult to trace on this application because it provides encrypted file sharing. AAH balances its interest in publicly taking credit for attacks for propaganda purposes and covering up its involvement.

The *Combatting Terrorism Center* at West Point produced a report, relying heavily on an investigation conducted by the Militia Spotlight into Telegram and other open-source information, that explained how these propaganda efforts work: militia leaders "want to individually brand attacks and claim credit in a way that is discernable to their inner circles and followers" but not easily discernable by Iraqi security personnel or U.S. forces. To that end, they set up front groups. The report states that AAH uses Ashab al-Kahf, Liwa Khaibar, and Quwwat Dhu al-Faqar to claim its attacks.

Training: Emulating Iran's Hezbollah Proxy

Iran's IRGC–Quds Force trains AAH in addition to funding and arming the group. AAH's training program resembles that of Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. In the past, AAH militants have received training from Lebanese Hezbollah, including one of its senior operatives Ali Mussa Daqduq. The Quds Force placed Ali Mussa Daqduq in charge of overseeing training for Iraqi Shi'a militants in the region, including AAH fighters.

In June 2014, following calls for volunteer fighters from the Iraqi government and Iraq's highest Shi'a religious authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, there was a surge in Shi'a volunteers to join the fight against ISIS. Many found their way through AAH recruiting centers in Iraq. According to an Iraqi source from 2014, AAH recruits joined Assad forces in Syria after training in Iran for approximately two weeks.

In December 2017, al-Khazali joined Hezbollah on a tour of Lebanon's border with Israel. During the visit, he proclaimed, "[w]e declare our full readiness to stand united with the Lebanese people and the Palestinian cause in the face of the Israeli occupation." Al-Khazali's trip signaled the transnational nature of Iran's nurturing of Shi'a militias. Furthermore, it underscored how Iran's Lebanon-based proxy, the most loyal, well-organized, and capable of its proxies in the Axis of Resistance, is also positioned as a leader of the Palestinian terrorist movements in Gaza and the West Bank.

AAH in Iraqi Politics

As the leader of one of the most powerful militias in the PMF, Khazali is a prominent figure in the political bloc opposed to the Sadrist movement. The political wing of AAH, al-Sadiqun, joined the Fatah coalition in rejecting the October 2021 parliamentary election results and boycotting the parliamentary process of voting on a president. Only 178 lawmakers showed up for the vote on March 30, far short of the two-thirds required. Even though they have since admitted that the elections were legitimate, the Coordination Framework boycotted the selection process, as they did in previous votes, because they feared a majority government led by Sadr, who could ally with Sunnis and Kurds. More specifically, they didn't want to be shut out of the government-formation process.

Representing the voice of powerful Shi'a militias in the PMF, as opposed to the broader Shi'a community, Khazali argued that Sadr's plans would undermine the right of the Shi'a community to have a say in the government. Evidently, a meeting on December 2, 2021, between Sadr, Khazali, Maliki, and the leader of the Fatah coalition, Badr Organization head Hadi al-Amiri, failed to break to deadlock.

Khazali has made his opposition to the Sadrist movement clear. First, he rejected the results of the parliamentary elections. On November 9, 2021, Khazali said that the parliamentary elections, which empowered his political opponents and served as the basis for forming a government, must be held again; and that he would "completely boycott the political process" to select a president. He also accused then-prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, of engaging in anti-democratic practices, including political violence. He asserted that the Kadhimi government arrested people "illegally" and committed "hideous acts of torture against detainees."

Later, Khazali accepted the Supreme Court's ruling that the parliamentary elections were legitimate. Some analysts say that Khazali's change in position was motivated by Iran. But the Coordination Framework still boycotted the president selection process. A senior researcher at *the National Endowment for Democracy,* Rahmah al-Jubouri, said that "the Shiite Coordination Framework may have accepted the election results… [but] should Sadr take control of the government and the state in general, he will likely face a dangerous confrontation with the armed factions—something that he does not want." That may have been what Sadr hoped to avoid when he resigned and thereby allowed the Iran-backed militias to increase their political power in Iraq by forcing the selection of the prime minister, Mohammed al-Sudani.

Badr Organization

The Badr Organization is a Shi'a political party and paramilitary force that acts as "Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq," according to *Reuters*. The group's military wing is "perhaps the single most powerful Shiite paramilitary group" fighting in Iraq. One Iraqi official described the Badr Organization as "easily" the most powerful force in Iraq, even stronger than the Iraqi Prime Minister. Given the group's deep ties to Iran and its political and military preeminence in Iraq, analysts have compared the Badr Organization to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

- **Type of Organization**: Militia, political party, religious, social services provider, terrorist, transnational, violent
- **Ideologies and Affiliations**: Iranian-sponsored, Islamist, jihadist, Khomeinist, Shi'a
- **Place of Origin**: Iraq
- **Year of Origin**: 1983
- **Founder(s)**: Iraqi Shiites loyal to the al-Hakim Shi'a clerical dynasty, with the help of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)
- **Places of Operation**: Iraq, Syria

From Badr (Brigades) to Badr (Organization): the Oldest Iranian Proxy in Iraq

Since its founding, the Badr Organization has imported Iran's Islamist Revolution to Iraq. Formed in 1983 under the name "the Badr Brigades," the Badr Organization originally served as the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), an Iraqi Shi'a political party that sought to expand Iran's revolution into Iraq. During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, SCIRI's Badr Brigades fought alongside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) against the Iraqi military. From 1983 to 2003, the Badr Brigades continued to operate out of Iran, carrying out intermediary attacks in southern Iraq.

In 2003, the Badr Brigades returned to Iraq to take advantage of the political vacuum following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. That year, the group formally rebranded, changing its name to "the Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development" and publicly pledging to abstain from violent attacks. From 2004 to 2006, however, the Badr Organization launched a brutal sectarian war on Iraq's Sunni population. During this period, Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri allegedly personally ordered attacks on up to 2,000 Sunnis and himself was known for using brutal torture techniques and violence. According to a leaked cable from the U.S. Department of State , "One of [al-Amiri's] preferred methods of killing allegedly involved using a power drill to pierce the skulls of his adversaries."

The Badr Organization and Shi'a militias also "deployed alongside Iraqi military units as the main combat force" fighting ISIS, according to Reuters. Reuters reported that in the March 2015 fight for Tikrit, Badr militiamen and the regular army drove identical tanks with only an army logo differentiating the two forces. Some units in Iraq's army, including Iraq's 20th Battalion, reportedly answer to Badr commander Hadi al-Amiri. Estimates for the membership of the Badr Organization range between 10,000-50,000 militants.

In analyzing the group, *CBS News* wrote in 2015 that the Badr Organization "was born out of Iraq's bloody civil war and their notorious death squads are implicated in the torture and murder of thousands of Sunni Muslims." According to General Michael Flynn, former director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "Members of the Badr Corps are responsible for killing many American Soldiers [sic] and they will likely do it again if given the chance… [G]roups like the Badr Corps represent enemies of a stable, secure, and inclusive Iraq. As soon as we get done helping them with ISIS, they will very likely turn on us." Indeed, in November 2017, following ISIS' devastating defeats in Iraq, Hadi al-Amiri publicly called on U.S. troops to leave Iraq and warned that the Badr Organization was prepared to "adopt a parliamentary decision" to force the United States to withdraw.

In October 2020, Iran-aligned armed factions of the PMF agreed to an "unofficial truce" with the U.S. that resulted in a temporary cessation of hostilities between the two parties. The armistice was agreed to under pressure from the Trump Administration, which threatened to close the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and target Iranian assets inside and outside Iraq. The Iranian proxies demanded that the Iraqi government engage in dialogue with the U.S. and establish a timetable for the withdrawal of all remaining U.S. forces from Iraq.

In May 2021, the armed factions declared an end to the truce and threatened to target military convoys and army bases. The militias, including Badr, AAH, and Kataib Hezbollah, formed the Iraqi Resistance Coordination Commission (IRCC), and issued a statement censuring the Iraqi government for failing to reach an agreement on a complete withdrawal. "What resulted from the [Iraqi-American] round of talks was very bad and unfortunate," the statement said. The proxy groups then intended to "force the occupation out."

However, later in 2021, the leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi al-Amiri, shifted his position on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue. Soon after meeting with the head of the IRGC-Quds Force, Esmail Qaani, in July, he "uncharacteristically" praised Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Khadimi for his role in the dialogue and described its outcome as a "national achievement," which led some to believe that Amiri was reverting to the political realm to accomplish his objectives.

Badr Organization Sectarian Violence

Since the PMF militias contributed to ISIS's defeat in 2017, they have sought legitimacy as the defender of Iraq's national security. They justify their actions and existence, in part, on the grounds that they are needed to fight ISIS and other "terrorists." "We will maintain our presence to fight terrorism in Iraq as long as terrorist groups continue to operate and as long as the Iraqi government asks us for support," said Amiri in 2021.

After PMF forces defeated ISIS in Diyala province, which is in northern Iraq bordering with Iran, in 2017, the Badr Organization consolidated its position as one of the most powerful PMF militias and solidified its control over Sunni-majority areas. The current governor of Diyala province, Muthanna al-Tamimi, is a member of the Badr Organization. The PMF Diyala Operations Command directs Badr Organization formations and operates out of Camp Ashraf. U.S. CENTCOM noted that "the 5th Iraqi Army Division,

which is responsible for Diyala, operates as an extension of the Badr Organization, making it more responsive to Iran than to the Iraqi Prime Minister and the formal Iraqi chain of command."

Although ISIS no longer controls territory, the terrorist group still has operational cells in the area. In November 2021, ISIS carried out an attack in the al-Muqdadiya district of Diyala, which left fifteen people dead. In response, Iran-backed militias, including Badr Organization, went on a "killing spree" in neighboring Sunni-majority towns. The *Al-Rafidain International Centre for Justice and Human Rights* called for an investigation and blamed Hadi al-Amiri, along with AAH leader, Qais Khazali, for the sectarian crimes.

The *Afada Observatory* produced a report on the sectarian violence in Diyala province based on eye-witness accounts, with one of the sources saying that the PMF militias "carried out field executions, burnt houses, a healthcare center, vehicles and orchards…the security forces were pre-informed about the attack, but they failed to preclude it." The report claims that the PMF militia responsible for the violence was the Badr Organization. Twelve Iraqis, including two children, were killed in Nahr al-Imam.

Sectarianism can also serve a political purpose for Amiri. Purporting to represent the Shi'a population, he said in January 2022, "We agree with the national majority government and we were the first to sign it, but for everyone to agree on the exclusion of a Shiite group is not the name of this national majority." In reality, he is not so much opposed to a government that excludes Shi'a people, but one that excludes the Iran-backed militias represented by the Fatah Alliance.

The Badr Organization in Iraqi Politics

In 2007, the Badr Organization's political wing rebranded, changing its name from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) as part of an effort to de-emphasize the party's ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 2012, the Badr Organization branched off from ISCI and began operating as a political party of its own in addition to its capacity as a militia. As ISIS gained control over large swaths of territory in 2013 and 2014, the Badr Organization overtly mobilized, recruited, and fought ISIS alongside other Shi'a militias and the Iraqi army.

The Badr Organization constitutes an active political force in Iraq in addition to operating as a militia. From 2011 to 2014, Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri served as Iraq's transportation minister. Since October 2014, two Badr members, Mohammed Ghabban and Qasim al-Araji, have served consecutive terms as Iraq's interior minister, and another, Mohammad Mahdi al-Bayati, served as minister of human rights until the position was abolished in 2015. Badr Organization officials ascended to these ranks, despite the group's lack of popular support.

Before the 2018 parliamentary election cycle began, Hadi al-Amiri segregated the military and political wings of the Badr Organization in order to run for parliament. He even ordered his fellow militiamen to take orders from the Iraqi military. In the run up to elections, the Badr Organization, along with other powerful PMF units, joined together to form the Fatah Alliance, a political bloc to be headed by Amiri. In 2018, the political bloc was, compared to the more recent October 2021 parliamentary elections, relatively successful, trailing the Sadrist movement by only a few seats.

Hadi al-Amiri's Iran-backed Fatah coalition came in second place nationally—earning 47 seats, of which 22 went to Badr—after Muqtada al-Sadr's nationalist Sairoon movement. Amiri, therefore, played a central role in the selection of Prime Minister and his cabinet. In last years' election, though, the bloc lost many of its seats, and the Sadrist movement gained seats. Amiri's Fatah Alliance won 17 seats, and the Sadrist bloc won 73.

On October 12, 2021, after the election results came in, the Fatah Alliance and Amiri cried foul. They rejected the outcome of the election, claiming technical and legal violations. In early November of that year, street protests erupted outside the Green Zone, and clashes with security personnel ensued, despite Amiri's assurances that the alliance would not resort to escalation. Amiri subsequently expressed "extreme anger at the ugly repression of peaceful protesters by government forces." The Fatah Alliance then made an appeal to the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court rejected the appeal and ratified the votes on December 27. A day later, the Fatah Alliance accepted the decision. The parliament was then thrown into gridlock, with the so-called "Tripartite Alliance" between Sadr, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Sunni Sovereignty Alliance unable to come to an agreement with the Fatah Alliance, who joined forces with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the Coordination Framework to represent the Shi'a-majority PMF. Amiri rejected Sadr's offer to coordinate votes with the Coordination Framework on the condition that former Prime Minister Maliki not be included in the discussions. On March 30, 2022, parliament attempted to select the president but failed, as the Coordination Framework, along with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party of the incumbent president, continued to boycott the vote.

Amiri and Sadr have differing opinions on what the country's security apparatus should look like, which contributed to the political stalemate. In September 2021, a month before parliamentary elections, Amiri said, "There are plots seeking either the merger or dissolution of Hashd al-Sha'abi. We will not allow these schemes to be carried out. The Popular Mobilization Units will stay on, and their main mission will be persevering Iraq's sovereignty, and supporting the country's security forces."

This statement contrasts with Sadr's view. In November 2021, Sadr said, "I call for the liquidation of the PMU's undisciplined elements… All armed factions must be dissolved and disarmed at once—their arms to be handed over to the PMF supervised by the commander in chief [Prime Minister Khadimi]." A day after he said this, he claimed to be dissolving the armed faction loyal to him.

While Sadr once received Iranian largess, especially during the U.S. occupation when he commanded the violent militia known as the Mahdi Army (JAM), he has since embraced a nationalist platform that seeks to reduce Iran's influence in Iraqi politics. Amiri, the more loyal beneficiary, represents the interests of the Iran-backed militias and has pushed backed against Sadr's initiatives.

But Iran does not only extend its influence through Amiri. Some believe the IRGC itself has directly tried to intimidate political opposition parties. Iran's ballistic missile strike in Erbil near the U.S. Consulate in March 2022, for example, has been viewed in this context. Michael Knights at the *Washington Institute* explained that the attack was an attempt to pressure Sadr and the KDP to make concessions to Iran-backed groups. The Iranians claimed to be targeting an Israeli intelligence station.

Although the Badr Organization's political arm portrays itself as welcoming and conciliatory to Sunnis, the areas where the group fought ISIS saw "some of the most high-profile Sunni-Shiite violence of the current conflict," according to the *Washington Post* in 2014. This is particularly true in Iraq's Diyala province, where al-Amiri led military operations. According to one *Human Rights Watch* employee, "We've documented widespread burning and destruction of homes. That's something we've recorded in literally every place where militias are leading the fight against ISIS. In some instances, we have documented them carrying out summary executions of people… the [militias] that we've documented the most abuses by are definitely Badr Organization."

Badr Organization's Penetration of Iraqi State Institutions

The Badr Organization's penetration of government institutions was most apparent in 2011, when Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appointed Amiri to be minister of the Department of Transportation. In that position, which he held until 2014, Amiri made sure that Iraq's airspace would be open to Iranian transport planes flying to Syria with supplies to support Assad's war effort. He resisted pressure from the U.S. to close down the airspace to Iranian planes.

Moreover, in 2014, Haider al-Abadi became prime minister and appointed Badr-member Mohammed Ghabban to head the Ministry of Interior (MOI), a powerful ministry that oversees key elements of Iraq's security apparatus, including the federal police and the Emergency Response Division. This appointment gave Amiri control over the institution.

That year, Prime Minister Maliki, with U.S. support, sought to integrate militias into the MOI, ostensibly as a way of bringing the militias under the control of the Iraqi state. As a result, "pro-Khamenei" actors in the MOI have gained substantial influence over the country's security operations. Tehran exerts its influence over the institution through the nearly seventy percent of MOI personnel loyal to Khamenei.

A December 2021 Inspector General report on Operation Inherent Resolve reported that the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) found that "while [Iraq's] MOI's Federal Police and Emergency Response Division, and the Iraqi Army's 5th and 8th Divisions are the units thought to have the greatest Iranian influence, officers sympathetic to Iranian or militia interests are scattered throughout the security services."

A May 2021 report by *The Institute for the Study of War* shows that the Badr Organization continued at this time to wield power over the MOI, even though control over the ministry had been handed to former army chief of staff, Othman al-Ghanmi. According to the report, the Badr Organization has been engaged in a campaign to increase its presence in urban areas, while weakening the formal Iraqi security apparatus. They have leveraged their influence in the MOI to "push the Iraqi Army away from the capital and other major cities." The report also notes that the Iraqi Joint Operations Command spokesperson confirmed that the army would withdraw from cities and be replaced by forces under the command of the Interior Ministry. Diyala province is mentioned as one of the areas where MOI forces were expected to take over control of security.

Militiamen also allegedly conducted high-profile attacks on Iraqi security personnel in Shula and al-Mansour. In June 2021, senior Iraqi intelligence officer Nebras Abu Ali was killed by gunmen to the east of the capital, Baghdad.

Partly as a result of the above-mentioned Department of Defense report, members of the U.S. Congress increased pressure on the Biden administration to halt the provision of U.S. taxpayer dollars to the MOI, given the "high-ranking presence of the Badr [Organization] in Iraq's security forces." U.S. representative Joe Wilson told the Free Beacon, "The Biden administration should re-evaluate funding to Iraq's Ministry of Interior as long as it includes Iran-backed militias, such as the Badr Corps, which were responsible for the terrorist attack on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad."

The Pentagon alleges that these militias are taking advantage of U.S. taxpayer dollars by penetrating the Iraqi security apparatus. The well-documented connection between the IRGC and Badr Organization has also led to calls on the Biden Administration to designate the group as a terrorist organization. Under the Trump Administration, the National Security Council ran up against resistance from the Pentagon when it tried to reduce the MOI's funding.

Badr: Financed, Armed, and Assisted by Iran

Iran backs the Badr Organization, according to reports by Reuters and other news outlets, and Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri has confirmed that his group receives support from Iran. Senior Badr official Muen al-Kadhimi has said that Iran "helped the group with everything from tactics" to "drone and signals capabilities, including electronic surveillance and radio communications."

The IRGC transferred short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) to militias in Iraq in 2018, according to a Reuters report. The Zelzal, Fateh-110, and Zolfaqar missiles, which have ranges between 200 km and 700 km, were among the weapons shipped to the proxies. With that range, the proxies could strike the capitals of its sworn rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia. More recently, the IRGC aided the Badr Organization in the construction of its own rockets, which resemble the Naze'at and Zelzal.

The Badr Organization also acquires funding through extortion. After ISIS was defeated and Badr took control of Diyala province, it inherited the Mandali border crossing between Iran and Iraq and began to extort money from truckers and others crossing the border. Renad Mansour, an expert at the *Chatham House*, explained that this source of revenue is the organizations' "lifeblood." Payments for permission to cross can yield up to 120,000 dollars per day, he said. This income compensated for the loss of government funding, which was reduced after ISIS was defeated.

In July 2020, Prime Minister Al-Khadimi deployed the Iraqi Rapid Response Forces to regain control of the border crossings with Iran and Kuwait, as well as the port in Basra, from the militias. These efforts recovered over 100 million dollars in new revenue, none of which came from Diyala province. It appears, then, that the Badr Organization's extortion racket at the border went untouched, further indicating the influence the organization wields within the Iraqi government. According to an extensive report on the security situation in Iraq by *The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA),* Badr and AAH "work with" the Iraqi army's operations command and the province's governor to collect money from people commuting across the border.

The *EUAA* report describes Diyala as a strategic location. It points out that key roadways pass through the province, including the Baghdad-Tehran highway. The DoD Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve stated in his report that the Iranian militias in Diyala "are mainly concerned with using Diyala's strategic location to smuggle arms and other assistance from Iran." In April 2021, the Chinese company Sinopec was awarded a contract to develop the al-Mansouriya natural gas field in Diyala.

Badr Ideology: Importing Iran & Emulating Iranian Leaders

For years, the Badr Organization served as the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a political party committed to bringing Iran's revolutionary brand of Shi'a Islamism to Iraq. However, when SCIRI reemerged in Iraq in March 2003, the group insisted that it was not pushing for an Iranian-style government, despite the group's name and ongoing ties to Tehran.

Since 2003, Shiism and Iranian-influenced Islamism have remained central elements of the Badr Organization's identity. In 2011, Badr members celebrated the end of the U.S. military presence in Iraq by plastering the walls of government buildings with posters of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In early 2015, al-Amiri reaffirmed his support for Iran's Supreme Leader, saying that Khamenei "has all the qualifications as an Islamic leader. He is the leader not only for Iranians but the Islamic nation. I believe so and I take pride in it."

Badr's Organizational Structure: Answering to Iran, Casting Iranian Influence

Hadi al-Amiri leads the Badr Organization, but his influence extends beyond the group's confines. For example, al-Amiri commanded Iraq's army and police in Diyala province. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi also reportedly entrusted al-Amiri with control over the Iraqi Army's 20th Battalion, according to the battalion's commander, General Ali al-Wazir. One *Human Rights Watch* employee said that al-Amiri "is an extremely powerful figure and he's essentially acting with total impunity now. It's not really the government leading the militias; it's the other way around."

As leader of the Badr Organization's militia, al-Amiri claimed in February 2015 that he presented the group's military plans to the Prime Minister for approval. However, in April 2015, then Prime Minister Abadi ordered that all Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), including the Badr Organization, be placed under his office's direct command. As al-Amiri served at the time as a senior member of the PMF, Abadi's order seems to suggest that al-Amiri had, until then, retained significant autonomy when it came to planning and executing paramilitary attacks.

Al-Amiri appeared to act without much Iraqi government oversight, but reports suggest he may have answered to the former commander of Iran's IRGC-Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani. In the fight to retake Tikrit from ISIS militants, Soleimani "was directing operations on the eastern flank from a village about 55km (35 miles) from Tikrit," according to a *Reuters* report. Another *Reuters* report noted that "Soleimani also directed Iranian-trained Shi'ite militias—including the Badr Brigade." Former *RAND Corporation* analyst Alireza Nader has written that the Badr Organization "appear[s] to be taking direct orders from Tehran." Al-Amiri himself has been photographed with Soleimani as the two discuss battle strategy and celebrate victories.

Hamas

Hamas is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that was responsible for the October 7, 2023, terrorist attack against Israel, the deadliest attack on the Jewish community since the Holocaust. Since the early 1990s, the Palestinian terrorist group had killed hundreds of Israeli citizens, as well as Americans, in suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks, but this single attack claimed at least 1,200 lives in Israel. Hamas has governed the Gaza Strip since it violently expelled the Palestinian Authority in 2007, allowing it to build up its military capabilities and tunnel infrastructure with Iranian financing. Iran has provided Hamas with financing, weapons, and military training in order for the group to carry out its deadly campaigns and administer Gaza.

- **Type of Organization**: Political, religious, social service provider, terrorist, violent
- **Ideologies and Affiliations**: Islamist, jihadist, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group, pan-Islamist, Qutbist, Sunni
- **Place of Origin**: Gaza Strip
- **Year of Origin**: 1987
- **Founder(s):** Ahmed Yassin
- **Places of Operation**: Gaza Strip, West Bank, Israel, Qatar, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran

Ideology and Tactics

Hamas is a Palestinian armed group, terrorist organization, and political party that has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, when it violently expelled its rival Fatah and the Palestinian Authority from the coastal enclave. According to its 1988 Charter, Hamas considers itself to be the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and rejects Israel's right to exist in any part of historical Palestine, seeking to violently replace the Jewish state with a Palestinian state comprising all territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. In 2017, Hamas issued a "Political Document" in which it made no mention of its Brotherhood links but maintained its rejection of Israel.

In the 1990s, Hamas began conducting suicide attacks and other armed operations against Israeli soldiers and civilians, both in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Hamas' attacks have also led to the deaths of dual-nationals and foreigners—including Americans—residing in Israel. At least 31 American citizens were killed in Hamas' October 7 attack. In addition to violence, the group controls a social services apparatus, which it uses to bolster its popular support.

Despite temporary tensions that arose over the Syrian Civil War, Hamas enjoys close ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its offshoots, including its Lebanon-based extension Hezbollah. Mohammad Saeed Izadi, the head of the Palestinian Office of the IRGC's Quds Force in Lebanon, has played a central role in strengthening the ties between Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran provides both the Palestinian group and its proxy Hezbollah with funds, weapons, and military training.

The United States Department of State designated Hamas as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on October 8, 1997. On March 6, 2019, Israel designated the Gaza-based, Hamas-controlled Al-Aqsa TV

station as a terrorist entity. On August 20, 2019, Paraguay said it had officially recognized the military wing of the Palestinian group Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah as terrorist organizations.

Structure

Hamas's leadership is split between its political bureau and its local government in Gaza. The political bureau constitutes the party's internal leadership, whereas the Gaza government consists of Hamas officials conducting day-to-day governance in that territory, which Hamas has ruled since 2007. The political bureau is the organization's principal authority and was previously based in Syria until 2012, when Hamas leaders fled after endorsing the rebellion against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Hamas also fields a military wing, known as the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, founded in 1992, which fields an estimated 20,000 fighters, with another 20,000 in Gaza's Hamas-run police and security forces.

According to political scientists Ilana Kass and Bard O'Neil, "The Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade is a separate armed military wing, which has its own leaders who do not take their orders [from Hamas] and do not tell [Hamas] of their plans in advance." Ismail Haniyeh, who was elected to another term as leader of the group's political bureau in 2021, is located in Qatar; whereas Hamas' military wing commander, Mohammed Deif, is thought to be somewhere in Gaza.

Hamas: Rulers of Gaza

Hamas entered Palestinian politics in January 2006, winning a majority in that month's Palestinian Authority Legislative elections. The international community largely refused to deal with Hamas unless it renounced violence, recognized Israel, and abided by past Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Despite its role as Gaza's government, Hamas rocket fire led to three wars with Israel in 2008-09, 2012, 2014, and 2021. Hamas also participated in the 2006 kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

In June 2007, Hamas ousted the Palestinian Authority from Gaza and took control of the coastal enclave. Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh, who had until then served as the Palestinian Authority prime minister, became the prime minister of Hamas's Gaza government. Hamas and the Palestinian Authority signed a reconciliation agreement that led to Haniyeh stepping down and the appointment of a new PA prime minister. The reconciliation agreement notwithstanding, the PA has yet to reassert its authority over Gaza, where Hamas remains in control.

Iranian Support of Hamas

Hamas has served as Iran's most important Palestinian partner for over two decades. Hamas' military ties with Tehran have involved intelligence sharing, provision of arms, organizing, and training—largely through Hezbollah. Iran has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in military and financial aid to Hamas since the 1990s.

Former Hamas political chief Khaled Meshaal began coordinating his group's ties with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) during the 1990s. Iran provided generous funding for Hamas' attacks against Israeli targets, aimed at derailing the U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace process. A 2002 US court case described 1995–1996 as "a peak period for Iranian economic support of Hamas," because the group was delivering on Iran's desire to torpedo peace talks by carrying out successful attacks, including a February 1996 twin suicide bombing in Jerusalem that killed two American citizens.

Yet, despite the financing of discrete projects and strident overtures from Hezbollah and Tehran, Hamas otherwise kept its distance from Iran at the insistence of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Hamas's co-founder and spiritual leader. After Yassin's assassination in 2004, though, Hamas began accepting more aid from Iran and Hezbollah, including funds and logistical support.

As the Second Intifada waned in 2005, Iran used its Lebanon-based extension Hezbollah to strengthen Hamas' military posture vis-à-vis Israel. According to pro-Hezbollah newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, the group's military commander, Imad Mughniyeh, visited Gaza after Israel's 2005 disengagement, meeting with 'resistance' leaders, inspecting rocket production facilities and launchpads, and establishing contact with Hamas' tunnel operatives. After Hezbollah's 2006 war against Israel, Mughniyeh, with Iran's approval, returned to Gaza and spent months there training Palestinian factions in rocket warfare. This expertise would serve Hamas well in future conflicts against Israel.

When Hamas won a majority in the Palestinian Authority's legislative elections in 2006, Iran provided Hamas an estimated $23 million a month in financial and military aid.

Relations between Hamas and Iran cooled for several years in the early 2010s after the onset of the Syrian civil war. In 2012, Iran reduced its aid to Hamas by approximately $10 million a month after the Palestinian group sided against Tehran's ally Bashar al-Assad. However, the 2013 military coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate, Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi, left Hamas without an ally, forcing it to restore its relationship with Iran, a relationship which, in any case, the group's representatives claimed: "had never been conclusively severed." The Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military wing, particularly pressed for the full restoration of ties.

Hamas' reconciliation with Iran experienced intermittent setbacks. Iran armed and supported the Palestinian group during the latter's 2014 conflict with Israel, including by providing Hamas with the means and knowledge to produce their own rockets. However, as reconciliation attempts sputtered, relations soured again in 2015. Senior Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzouk claimed at the time that Iran had halted all military and political aid to the group, and that Tehran had not given them any money since 2009. However, other Hamas officials have contradicted Marzouk. Ahmed Yousef, a Hamas leader and political adviser to former Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, claimed in 2016 that Iran had slowed, but never stopped, aid to the Qassam Brigades, and Hamas military leaders reportedly continued to receive more than $45 million annually from the IRGC.

Relations have steadily improved since 2017, when Hamas elected Yahya Sinwar as its new leader in Gaza and the late Saleh al-Arouri as the deputy chairman of Hamas' political bureau. Al-Arouri—described by pro-Hezbollah television channel al-Mayadeen as the "sponsor of reconciliation with Iran and Hezbollah"—began reconciliation efforts even prior to his election. He visited Iran and met with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The discussions reportedly centered on "reconciliation [between Hamas and Iran] and the developments of the struggle against [Israel]." After his election, al-Arouri visited Iran again with a Hamas delegation and met with senior regime officials.

Hamas now appears to have adopted a neutral stance on Sunni-Shiite regional conflicts—in contrast with its approach after the beginning of the Syrian civil war—to focus on the common ground in

combating Israel. During his visit to Iran, al-Arouri—noting the group's good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran—declared Hamas' neutrality on all the conflicts dividing the Sunni and Shiite world, including Syria. Al-Arouri added, "Palestinian factions which have involved themselves in these conflicts in the past have harmed the Palestinian cause." He stressed, however, that Hamas' "strategic relationship" with Iran and Hezbollah was based on a shared commitment to resistance.

But some Hamas officials in the Palestinian diaspora have even begun expressing friendly sentiments toward the Syrian regime, indicating a further tilt towards Iran's regional policies. In December 2018, Hamas' representative in Lebanon, Ali Baraka, described any attack on Syria as an attack on Palestine, while Maher Salah—the head of Hamas' Diaspora Office—expressed the movement's desire to cooperate with Syria, particularly by rebuilding Palestinian refugee camps destroyed during the Syrian civil war. Salah also welcomed the U.S. decision to withdraw its troops from the country as a victory.

In 2019, media reports circulated that Hamas had asked Iran to act as a mediator between itself and the Assad regime. Iran also allegedly expressed a willingness to increase its monthly payments to Hamas in exchange for intelligence on Israeli missile capabilities. According to Israel's Channel 12, during a meeting between Iran's supreme leader and Hamas officials, Tehran offered to provide $30 million per month. This was a substantial increase as a previous Ynet report listed the total as $70 million per year, with other outlets saying it was as high as $100 million per year. If accurate, it demonstrated the premium Tehran would pay for intelligence on Israeli military capabilities.

The relations continued to warm in 2020, when Hamas' leader, Ismail Haniyeh, attended the funeral of former IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Haniyeh's trip caught some observers by surprise because, in December of the previous year, Egypt had allowed him to travel for the first time since he ascended to Hamas' leadership on the condition that he would not visit Iran. At the funeral, Haniyeh spoke of Soleimani as being a "martyr of Jerusalem."

There is also evidence he met on the sidelines with the new head of the IRGC Quds Force Esmail Qaani, as Haniyeh appeared in photographs alongside Qaani and Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri. This was likely a crucial meeting to connect Soleimani's successor with the existing leadership of Iran's Axis of Resistance. Indeed, Hamas officials have made a point of continuing to praise Iran's steady support for the organization even after Soleimani's demise, with Haniyeh saying in May 2020 that "I am particularly specifying the Islamic Republic of Iran which has not faltered in supporting and funding the resistance financially, militarily, and technically."

An Iranian report provided to the Iranian news outlet *Tasnim News* on the anniversary of Qassem Soleimani's death revealed how Iranian support for Hamas was coordinated at the highest levels of the Iranian government. "We [the Iranians] coordinated with the Hamas movement on the issue of missiles and how to build missile propulsion and warheads and guided systems. All this was done with the knowledge and supervision of Soleimani, and this was a very strategic issue for him," the report says.

Sources in Lebanon told *the Arab Weekly* that a meeting in Beirut in January 2021 between Hezbollah Secretary-General Nasrallah and Hamas political chief Haniyeh was focused on coordinating Iran's regional agenda, particularly with respect to Egypt. According to this reporting, Iran opposed Egypt's

expanding influence, which owes in part to its successful brokering of the ceasefire to the 2021 Gaza Strip crisis.

In November 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned Mahmoud Khaled Zahhar, a senior member and co-founder of Hamas who has worked closely with Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. Zahhar has called for violence against Jewish civilians and the destruction of the Israeli state, and has publicly acknowledged and thanked Iran for its support.

Illegal Smuggling Operations

Hamas smuggles weapons, as well as goods, through a network of underground tunnels across the border with Egypt. The tunnels have allowed Hamas to gather up to 500 million dollars a year in tax revenue on smuggled goods, a large share of the group's annual budget, which *The Counter Extremism Project* estimated to be just under $900 million. After deposing the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013, the Egyptian government closed down the tunnels, which precipitated an economic crisis in Gaza.

Hamas also taxes goods and materials shipped over the border above land. A December 2021 *Times of Israel* piece reported that fuel and cement are among the many goods shipped into the enclave and taxed. Most of this money does not go to the Palestinian people, who are provided for largely by international aid, but is rather used to fund its powerful armed wing.

To curtail the smuggling operations of Hamas and other anti-Israel Palestinian factions, Israel enforces a blockade against the Gaza Strip. Despite the blockade, weapons and weapons components still make their way into the enclave. The tunnels are utilized to escape notice of the Israeli intelligence agencies. *Reuters* reported in May 2021 that Israeli officials said it was impossible to completely seal off the Gaza Strip. Moreover, rockets are manufactured out of such imported construction materials as metal tubes.

However, Hamas's rudimentary weapons are not the only ones at its disposal. According to an expert at *the Washington Institute,* Hamas possessed up to 15,000 rockets at the start of the 2021 conflict, many of which were designed with Iranian technical support, with "enhanced accuracy, longer range, heavier warheads, and improved launchers like the A-120." Additionally, Hamas is believed to have built and deployed six Shahab kamikaze drones that resemble Iran's Abadil model. Iran is thought to be providing drones to its proxies in the region, including Hamas, though they are not "balance altering" weapons.

In addition to the smuggling networks, Hamas operates an extensive underground tunnel infrastructure beneath Gaza. Sometimes referred to as "the Metro," the IDF has recently assessed that the tunnels extend for 450 miles, with 5,700 separate entry shafts. As of late 2023, 500 tunnel shafts had been destroyed. Beneath civilian areas, these tunnels are the suspected hiding place of Hamas leadership. They are also used to store and manufacture weapons and ammunition, carry out ambushes, and shelter leadership to allow them to direct operations. In February 2024, a compound with computer servers and communications technology was discovered beneath the head office of the UN agency tasked with administering international aid in Gaza, namely the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Financing Hamas

Hamas has modernized its financing operations to include cryptocurrency, partly because this type of currency is more difficult to trace than hard currency and can be used to circumvent sanctions. *The Counter Extremism Project* reported that in August 2020, U.S. authorities seized more than one million dollars in cryptocurrency assets controlled by Hamas's armed wing. The May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas resulted in an increase in donations for the group, including through bitcoin. Cryptocurrency also has been routed through financial institutions in the West Bank to Hamas. Israeli forces raided foreign exchange and money transfer agencies in Ramallah, based on intelligence acquired by a special cybercrime unit. The IDF operated alongside police and Shin Bet personnel, seizing millions of dollars intended for Hamas.

A U.S. lawsuit filed in June 2020 alleged that Qatar funneled money to Hamas through Qatari financial institutions: Qatar Charity, Masraf Al Rayan, and Qatar National Bank. Qatar, known to be sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood—the group from which Hamas grew—permits a number of high-ranking Hamas officials to reside in the country. And it provides large sums of aid to Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. In June 2020, the residents began receiving $100 million in Qatari aid.

Qatar's warm relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, as well as Hamas' other patron, Tehran, precipitated a crisis in 2017 between Qatar and the Gulf states. Saudi Arabia played a lead role in mobilizing the other Gulf states against these Sunni terrorist organizations, viewing them as a security threat and Tehran as its chief geopolitical adversary. Qatar emerged from the Saudi-led economic and diplomatic blockade relatively unscathed (it was lifted in 2021), while continuing to demonstrate its full-fledged support for Hamas, including by blaming Israel for Hamas' October 7 attack.

Palestinian residents in Gaza and the West Bank are also recipients of U.S. economic aid. The Trump administration ended funding for UNRWA, a U.N. program focused on providing food and education in Palestinian territories, in 2018, but President Biden dedicated $150 million to the program, reversing the Trump administration's policy. Additionally, in April 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the U.S. would provide $75 million in economic and development assistance, and $10 million in peace-building programs. The U.S. Department of State claimed that the economic aid would not benefit Hamas. But this will be difficult to ensure, especially noting that Hamas has the ability to manufacture weapons out of everyday construction materials.

After news broke that a significant number of UNRWA workers are in fact Hamas operatives and that some of them were involved in the October 7 attack, the Biden administration reversed its policy and said that it was temporarily freezing funding to the entity. Some assessments indicate that there were 190 Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives that had been employed by UNRWA.

Israel has also in the past planned on providing economic aid to Gaza if certain conditions are met. In April 2021, Hamas was holding four Israeli hostages. The Israeli authorities, then, made clear that they must be returned before Israel releases reconstruction aid for the Gaza Strip. This is not the first time Hamas abducted Israeli citizens. In September 2021, an Israeli court ordered Hamas to pay millions of dollars in compensation to the families of teenagers their group kidnapped and murdered in 2014.

As of February 2024, over 100 hostages remained held in Hamas captivity, who were kidnapped on October 7. Six of the remaining hostages are thought to be American. The IDF has continued to engage in searches to identify their location and rescue them. U.S. intelligence agencies, including the CIA, may also be contributing to this effort, as ODNI raised Hamas' threat level in January 2024, allowing for additional resources for a reported CIA task force to develop human assets in Gaza.

May 2021 Conflict with Israel

In early May 2021, Hamas's military leader, Mohammed Deif, said that if the Palestinians in Sheik Jarrah were evicted, Hamas "will not stand by helplessly and the enemy will pay a heavy price." Israel's Supreme Court was set to decide on a case regarding the eviction of Palestinians living in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Deif's commentary was followed—on the same day that the Supreme Court's ruling was slated to be heard—by indiscriminate rocket fire into Israel. In the end, over 3,300 rockets were launched by Hamas into Israel, killing ten people. *Human Rights Watch* referred to the attacks, which hit civilian population centers, as "war crimes."

Israel's "Iron Dome" missile defense system intercepted nearly ninety percent of the rockets, but it was at times overwhelmed by the barrage, the military said. The eleven-day conflict between Israel and Hamas (and Palestinian Islamic Jihad) ended in an Egypt-brokered ceasefire on May 21, 2021.

Ahead of the conflict, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh wrote to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to request Iranian support against Israel. Iran appears to have obliged because, on May 21, Haniyeh praised Iran for supporting the war effort, saying that Tehran "did not hold back with money, weapons, and technical support." Separately, Iran's Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani sent a letter during the fighting to Mohammed Deif praising him as a "living martyr."

The conflict boosted Hamas's image among people in the Middle East, as the group was able to propagandize itself as a victim of Israeli aggression (even though it had attacked) and a victor in the war (even though Israel killed many Hamas terrorists and destroyed miles of underground tunnels). Hamas's propaganda influenced news outlets like *Shehab News*, with which Hamas is affiliated. The mainstream Qatari news agency, *Al Jazeera,* has also adopted their narrative, for Hamas praised their coverage of the war. Over the course of this conflict, Hamas's Qassam Brigades Telegram channel increased by 261,000 followers.

After Israeli airstrikes began, pro-Palestinian sentiment flooded social media and culminated in street protests throughout the Arab world, including in countries that agreed to normalize relations with Israel. The Muslim-majority countries that signed the Abraham Accords came under pressure to "show solidarity with the Palestinians after being accused of turning their backs on them when they originally agreed to normalize relations with Israel," said one analyst at the *Middle East Institute.* Some cities across the U.S. and Europe also witnessed protests.

Referencing its support and praise of Hamas's rocket attack, the Iranian regime signaled to conservative groups in Iran that it had taken action against Israel. It appealed to these groups, while perhaps also seeking to avoid provoking Israel or risking a derailment of the Iran nuclear negotiations. In recent years,

pressure has grown on Iran to take action given Israel's sabotage of Iran's nuclear facilities and strikes on IRGC personnel in Syria.

Hostilities broke out again in June 2021, as Hamas lofted incendiary balloons into Israel in response to a march through Palestinian parts of Jerusalem organized by far-right groups. The Israeli military confirmed that it carried out airstrikes in retaliation.

From mid-March into April 2022, a series of terror attacks were committed against civilians in Israel. Arab-Israelis inspired by ISIS claimed attacks in Beersheba and Hadera. Hamas praised the acts of terrorism, while Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas condemned them. "We commend the valor and courage of the perpetrators of this heroic operation, which comes as retaliation for the blood of the martyrs, and in response to the aggression and terror of the occupation," Hamas said in a statement referring to the Hadera attack.

On March 7, 2022, Hamas took credit for a stabbing in Jerusalem's Old City. Later that month, Hamas vowed to escalate hostilities on account of the death of a Palestinian in an Israeli counterterror raid in the West Bank. Hamas' threat occurred against the backdrop of heightened fears of violence due to the convergence of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious holidays in the month of April. A similar pattern continued in April 2022—particularly in the April 7, 2022 attack in Tel Aviv—with Hamas praising attacks despite the terrorists having no known affiliation to the organization.

The October 2023 Hamas Terrorist Attacks on Israel

At dawn on October 7, 2023, the Iran-backed Hamas terror group launched a coordinated multi-front terrorist assault on Israel. An estimated 1,000 Hamas militants infiltrated Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, massacring hundreds of civilians and abducting dozens of women, children, and elderly as hostages. Hamas forces blew holes in the Gaza border fence. An airborne unit flew into Israeli territory using motorized hang-gliders, and speedboats carrying Hamas militants attempted to penetrate Israeli territory from sea. The terrorists deployed drones to map out Israeli positions and identify targets. As Hamas gunmen carried out the ground operation, 2,200 rockets were simultaneously fired from the Gaza Strip into southern and central Israel. The rocket barrage exhibited a higher degree of lethality and precision than previous attacks, indicating how the terrorists' capabilities have rapidly improved.

Once inside Israel, Hamas carried out horrific acts of terror. An army of militants targeted a musical festival near Kibbutz Reim, firing machine guns into the crowd and killing over 260 people. Graphic videos emerged on social media of savage humiliation and barbarity. In one instance, Palestinian militants "stamp[ed] on [a] man's [dead] body, cheering and lifting their guns up into the air."

In another video, a mutilated body was paraded through the streets in the back of a pickup truck, and a Palestinian onlooker spat at the body. In Kfar Azar, Israeli soldiers found babies and children murdered; many of them beheaded. A baby was found still attached to the umbilical cord, as Hamas terrorists cut open a pregnant woman's stomach and removed the living fetus. Hamas burned Jewish children alive. They sexually assaulted and raped civilians next to dead bodies, which amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Reports suggest that they have begun to torture hostages, possibly including women, children, and elderly people. The full scale of the savagery may yet to be fully revealed, but over

900 Israelis were slaughtered; 2,500 were wounded; and at least 150 were taken hostage. A total of 30 U.S. citizens were counted among the dead, and Americans are currently being held hostage by Hamas.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared war against the Iranian-backed Hamas terrorist group in response to the unprecedented assault against Israel. There is no question that Iran's regime bears ultimate responsibility. Without the financial, logistical, technical, and operational support from the Iranian regime, particularly through the support of the IRGC and its Lebanon-based proxy Hezbollah, Hamas would not have been able to execute such a deadly and well-coordinated attack.

Iran's regime did not only enable the assault through its various forms of support over decades. Rather, it likely took a direct role in the planning of the coordinated assault from air, land, and sea. The sophistication and coordination of this attack suggested significant Iranian involvement. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that senior Hamas and Hezbollah operatives said that IRGC officials planned the attacks over the course of several weeks at meetings in Beirut, and then finally greenlit the attacks.

In particular, high-ranking IRGC officials, including Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani, met with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Hamas military leader Saleh al-Arouri, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad chief Ziad al-Nakhalah. The Iranian regime's foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, an IRGC-Quds Force affiliate and colonel of the IRGC's Basij militia, also played a key coordinating role in the attacks, according to the *Wall Street Journal* report. The interviewed operatives also described how the attack was intended to disrupt progress in U.S.-brokered efforts to expand the Abraham Accords with Saudi-Israeli normalization.

The Washington Post separately reported that the planning for the operation took place over a year, with the buildup of arms and equipment purchased with tens of millions of dollars provided by Iran. As well as this, it is important to underscore that Iran's role in orchestrating and coordinating the October 7 terrorist attacks is also consistent with recent changes to the IRGC's structures and doctrines, all of which was geared towards confrontation with Israel. Hamas fighters reportedly received combat training in Iran in the weeks and months leading up to the October 7 attack and sought technical training on how to manufacture explosives at universities in Iran.

The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei's first statement since the attack read, "We kiss the hands of those who planned the attack on the Zionist regime." He praised the attack as an "irreparable" defeat of Israeli military and intelligence capabilities. At the same time, he denied that Iran was involved in their planning, utilizing plausible deniability to avoid any direct consequences. After the assault, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi spoke with the leaders of the Hamas and PIJ and publicly expressed his support for them.

Israel's Military Operations in Gaza: Dismantling Hamas

Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel was soon followed by Israel's aerial assault and a ground invasion, aimed at degrading and dismantling Hamas' capabilities. If and when that outcome is achieved, it will be a major loss for the Iran-helmed Axis of Resistance.

As of early January 2024, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had rendered Hamas battalions in northern Gaza ineffective, while continuing with operations in the south, including those in the critical Hamas stronghold of Khan Younis, and more recently Rafah, at the border with Egypt. An IDF spokesperson said that around 8,000 of the groups initial 25,000 fighters had been killed, in addition to thousands who have been wounded, arrested, or detained for ties to the group, in both Gaza and the West Bank. At around this time, the IDF withdrew some of its forces from northern Gaza, possibly considering threats from other fronts, in particular Lebanon.

Israel's political and military leadership are united in their determination to destroy Hamas so that it can never again pose a threat to Israel. Hamas' tactic of sheltering in civilian areas and its tunnel network represent two challenges that the IDF has faced in achieving its war aims.

Among the highest priority targets thought to be in Gaza is head of Hamas in Gaza Yahya Sinwar, head of Hamas' military wing Mohammed Deif, and his deputy Marwan Issa. Further, Hamas' political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh and former Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal are residing in Qatar. The highest-ranking Hamas operative killed to date is Saleh al-Arouri, who was Haniyeh's deputy. He was neutralized in a presumed targeted Israeli strike in Lebanon in early January 2024.

Hamas and the Abraham Accords

In October 2020, the leader of Hamas's political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, called PA President Mahmoud Abbas to express his "absolute rejection" of the normalization of diplomatic ties between the UAE and Israel in the Abraham Accords. Part of the impetus for the Abraham Accords, signed between Israel and a number of Muslim-majority countries, was countering Iran.

The effect of these accords can be observed in the UAE's response to the 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas. Seeking not to be too critical of the Israeli government, the UAE criticized Israel's decision to enter the al-Aqsa mosque on the holiest day of the year, but did not condemn Israel's airstrikes on the Gaza Strip. At the same time, the UAE has offered to provide funding to help rebuild Gaza in an effort to counter Qatar's influence. However, the UAE is challenged, like the U.S., to provide funding in a way that does not benefit Hamas.

Hamas opposes any form of rapprochement between Jews and Muslims. A shooting that took place in December 2021 may have been Hamas' response to Abbas's trip to Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz's residence, the first such trip in over a decade; for the attack took place shortly after Hamas condemned the meeting. "This behavior by the leadership of the Palestinian authority deepens the Palestinian political divide… and weakens the rejection of normalization," said Hamas's spokesperson Hazem Qassem. As a result of the talks, the Israeli Defense Ministry announced: "confidence-building measures" that would streamline the entry of Palestinian business people into Israel.

Turkey hosted Israeli President Herzog in Ankara in the first trip by an Israeli head of state to the country since 2007. Experts believe that economic ties were among the topics discussed at the meeting. This meeting may have frayed relations with Hamas's leader, who in the past visited Turkey often.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a Lebanon-based, transnational, Shiite Islamist terrorist organization founded by Iran in 1982. The group's common appellation "Lebanese Hezbollah" is a misnomer. Hezbollah's primary loyalty is to Iran and its supreme leader, not to Lebanon. The organization adheres to the ideology of "guardianship of the jurist" (Velayat-e Faqih), as expounded by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's first supreme leader.

Since its inception, Hezbollah has engaged in terrorism against Iran's enemies and its own, both in Lebanon and abroad. These activities have led the U.S. and other countries to designate the group as a terrorist organization. The U.S. Department of State designated Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in 1997. Unlike the European Union, the U.S. did not differentiate between the group's political and military wings, and instead designated the group in its entirety. While the U.K. and Germany are exceptions, the European Union has only sanctioned Hezbollah's military arm. The EU's decision not to follow suit with the U.K. and Germany has created tension with the U.S. and Israel.

Indeed, Hezbollah does operate as a political party in Lebanon, holding parliamentary and cabinet seats. For this reason, reports indicate some EU countries are opposed to proscribing the group in its entirety. The group, acting in concord with other parties in its coalition, exercises de facto veto power over the formation and operations of the Lebanese government.

In predominantly Shiite areas of Lebanon, especially its stronghold in southern Beirut, Hezbollah also runs a vast social-services network—including hospitals, schools, vocational institutions, and charities—to compensate for the Lebanese state's incompetence in providing such services. These welfare efforts have earned Hezbollah gratitude and support from Lebanese Shiites.

Velayat-e Faqih and the 1985 Open Letter: Hezbollah's Khomeinist Doctrine

Hezbollah's service to Iran stems from its adherence to Khomeini's teachings on Islamic government, and his religio-political ideology of Velayat-e Faqih. The group first revealed its adherence to this Khomeinist doctrine in its 1985 "Open Letter," the group's foundational document which officially announced its existence. In the letter, it declared its obedience to "one leader, wise and just," the Wali al-Faqih, and itself a continuation of the Islamic Revolution "made victorious by God in Iran."

Hezbollah updated its Open Letter document in 2009 with the release of its "Political Document." However, both before and after the latter document's release, Hezbollah's senior leaders stressed that it would not alter their adherence to Velayat-e Faqih. While unveiling the 2009 document, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stressed that it had no impact on his group's "creed, ideology, or thought"—particularly Velayat-e Faqih—which he said is "not a political stance that can be subjected to revision." In 2016, Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem reaffirmed the party's adherence to the Open Letter and its doctrines, calling it a "permanent and continuous document," and downplaying the 2009 manifesto as merely "minor" or "trivial" adjustments with no impact on the group's core ideology.

Iran's Support for Hezbollah

Hezbollah makes no secret of receiving extensive financial backing from Iran. Estimates of Iranian annual funding range from $100 to $200 million per year in cash outlays alone, according to the U.S. intelligence community. However, total financial support is closer to $800 million per year, according to a former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff.

Iran also provides Hezbollah with weapons—everything from small arms and Katyusha rockets to more advanced platforms, including anti-tank rockets, longer-range surface-to-surface missiles, and anti-ship missiles. Hezbollah stands today as the most heavily armed and technically capable sub-state actor in the world, but its conventional capabilities still are no match for Israel. Hezbollah has thus relied heavily on psychological warfare designed to terrorize Israeli civilians as part of its military doctrine to bridge the gap. Most infamously, the Iran-backed terror group indiscriminately lobbed up to 160 Katyusha rockets per day at Israeli population centers during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war.

Iranian assistance has grown Hezbollah's rocket arsenal from an estimated 12,000 projectiles in 2006 to a current estimate of over 150,000 rockets—the majority of which are inaccurate, short-range, and low-payload Katyushas. Concurrently, Iran has expanded Hezbollah's arsenal of mid- and long-range missiles from dozens of each to thousands and hundreds, respectively. Its rocket arsenal serves as the group's primary deterrent against Israel. All of Israel is currently within range of Hezbollah's rockets.

Reports in 2017 claimed the IRGC had built Hezbollah weapons factories in Lebanon capable of producing surface-to-surface, land-based anti-ship missiles and torpedoes launched from light water craft. The IRGC also reportedly trained Hezbollah's military specialists in producing arms at the IRGC-affiliated Imam Hussein University.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israeli intelligence and military efforts have prevented Hezbollah from acquiring large quantities of precision-guided missiles—limiting this arsenal to "a few dozen." Maj. Gen. Tamir Hyman, chief of the IDF's Directorate of Military Intelligence, noted that the group lacks the ability to produce such missiles in Lebanon.

Tehran also trains Hezbollah's fighters and commanders at IRGC-run camps in both Lebanon and Iran, and has fought alongside the group in multiple engagements—including in the Second Lebanon War against Israel, and in the Syrian Civil War. Additionally, Iran has reportedly built-up Hezbollah's cyberwarfare capabilities.

Hezbollah in Action: In Service of Iran

Iran exploited the chaos of Lebanon's Civil War and the subsequent 1982 Israeli invasion, which aimed to root out the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), to catalyze the rise of Hezbollah. Hezbollah's formation extended Tehran's influence to Lebanon and the Levant and fulfilled Khomeini's imperative to export the Islamic Revolution. Tehran's longstanding financial support has proven critical to the quality of Hezbollah's fighting capabilities. The group's steadfast loyalty provides Tehran with the ability to extend its regional and global reach and threaten Israel from forward bases in Lebanon and Syria.

Iran's investment has paid off. Since its founding, Hezbollah has operated as the spearhead for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) far beyond Lebanon's borders in order to protect Tehran's interests. In the 1980s, for example, Hezbollah targeted Europe-based officials of the deposed Pahlavi monarchy and attacked France for supporting Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War.

Hezbollah also incubates Iranian-backed proxies throughout the region. At Tehran's behest, the group created Unit 3800 in 2003 to train and assist pro-Iran Iraqi Shiite militias fighting American and multinational forces. Particularly since ISIS seized territories in Iraq and Syria in 2014, these militias have multiplied, with most joining Iraq's state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The late PMF deputy commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, once said that his fighters have "benefited greatly" from the support of Hezbollah, which continues to play a "central" and "very important role" in the PMF's battle readiness, and has even "offered martyrs" for the Iraqi battlefield. Al-Muhandis even claimed Hezbollah's presence in Iraq dated back to the 1980s, when its storied commanders Imad Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine came to Iraq to train Shiites to fight Saddam Hussein.

Since 2011, Hezbollah has also led the effort to defend Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, whose downfall would pose a strategic threat to Tehran. Hezbollah played a critical role in important battles—particularly the Qusayr, Qalamoun, Aleppo, Badiat al-Sham, and Eastern Ghouta campaigns. The group has also recruited and trained Shiites—from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere—and other fighters to buttress Assad's forces, including the National Defense Forces militia.

Hezbollah's advisers have also traveled to Yemen to provide aid—in the form of funds, arms, technical, and operational support—and train the Zaydi Shiite Houthi rebels in their war against neighboring Saudi Arabia. While the Houthis do not share Hezbollah's religious views—for example, they don't adhere to belief in the Velayat-e Faqih—Hezbollah aided the Houthis when the latter were fighting against Riyadh, a leading rival of Tehran, and are likely to continue to support the group in the context of its disruptive attacks against international shipping, which it claims are a response to Israel's war against Hamas. Houthi control of Yemen at first sought to weaken the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; it has grown into a major threat to maritime security and global commerce.

Hezbollah Attacks against Israel

Although Hezbollah agreed to cease hostilities with Israel in 2006 and to remove its troops from southern Lebanon in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1701, the group has continued to launch attacks against Israel's homeland. In September 2019, Hezbollah launched attacks directly on the Israeli military, firing anti-tank missiles at an army base and vehicles near the border. In June 2020, Israel's Shin Bet security agency alleged that Hezbollah was seeking to recruit Arab citizens of Israel to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel. In July 2020, Israel reportedly repelled a Hezbollah attempted border infiltration with heavy shelling. Several days prior, Israel announced it had thwarted a terrorist plot masterminded by Hezbollah and Iran to abduct an Israeli soldier. The plot was to be carried out by a cell of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine operating in the West Bank.

On October 8, 2023, one day after the Iran-backed Palestinian terrorist group Hamas conducted its deadliest terrorist attack against Israel in the state's history, the Iranian proxy group Hezbollah launched guided rockets and artillery strikes on Israel's Shebaa Farms "in solidarity" with the Palestinian terrorists.

On October 9, 2023, several Hezbollah militants were killed in a cross-border shelling by Israel following an incursion by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorists from Israel's northern border with Lebanon. Hezbollah returned fire, launching a barrage of rockets into Israel.

Senior Israeli officials informed *The Times of Israel* that Iran had directed Hezbollah to prepare to engage Israel. This would open a second front against Israel as it conducts war in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The threat of a multi-front terror attack against Israel has been at the heart of the Iranian regime's strategy and one they have consistently communicated before, during, and after the October 7 attacks.

Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah praised the Hamas attack in a statement that read, "[the Hamas operation] sends a message to the Arab and Islamic world, and the international community as a whole, especially those seeking normalization with this enemy, that the Palestinian cause is an everlasting one, alive until victory and liberation." He reportedly played a role in the operational planning of the assault, alongside his Iranian patrons, over the course of months, if not more than a year, at meetings in Beirut.

Because Hezbollah's troops are amassed near Lebanon's southern border with Israel, hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens have evacuated from their homes in northern Israel. There have been daily skirmishes consisting of cross-border fire since Israel's war against Hamas began, with the Lebanon-based group declaring its support for Hamas and ostensibly seeking to shift Israel's attention away from dismantling Hamas toward its northern front.

In an effort to prevent Iranian efforts to surge arms to Hezbollah, Israel has presided over an intensifying air campaign in Syria targeting Hezbollah operatives, and it eliminated Wissam Tawil, an elite Hezbollah fighter who was responsible for aerial attacks against Israel, in a strike in southern Lebanon. Further, Israel severely wounded Abbas Al-Debes, a commander in Hezbollah, in a strike targeting his car in southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah in Lebanon: "Lebanonization" vs. Pragmatism

In line with its adherence to Velayat-e Faqih, Hezbollah has aimed from its inception to replace the Lebanese Republic with an Iran-style Islamic state. Since the end of the Lebanese Civil War, Hezbollah has adopted a pragmatic approach to Islamizing Lebanese governance, participating in and increasingly influencing Lebanese politics.

Hezbollah's purportedly moderate path has inspired two erroneous and alternative narratives. The first is that the group has fully integrated into the Lebanese system and shed its desire to replace it. The second narrative is that Hezbollah controls Lebanon entirely, rendering any distinction between the group and the Lebanese state meaningless and artificial—that in practice, Lebanon is Hezbollah. In fact, both views misunderstand Hezbollah's place in Lebanese society and the group's long-term goals.

In its early years, Hezbollah openly declared its revolutionary aims and refused to work within the Lebanese political system. But as Lebanon's Civil War waned, Hezbollah recognized the limits of its own

power and realized that a confrontational approach would isolate the group domestically and put it at odds with the new dominant power in Lebanon: Syria.

The organization, therefore, changed course, seeking to achieve its Islamist goal by operating within the Lebanese political system's confines and gaining popular support, instead of imposing an Islamic state by force. The roots of this pragmatic approach are contained in Hezbollah's Open Letter, wherein the group prioritized popular support over territorial control, calling on the Lebanese people and government to willingly adopt an Iran-style Islamic republic. According to Hassan Nasrallah and his deputy, Naim Qassem, this grassroots strategy remains in place today, buttressed by the extensive social services the group provides to its Shia constituency.

Hezbollah also sought to grow its strength by focusing on issues of Lebanese popular consensus. Therefore, Hezbollah rebranded from the "Islamic Revolution in Lebanon" to the "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon," centering its military activities on fighting Israel and ending the latter's occupation of south Lebanon. By positioning itself as the defender of Lebanon against Israel, Hezbollah forced the Lebanese government to tolerate the group's growing autonomous military strength until, by the time Israel withdrew from the south in 2000, the group was too powerful for Beirut to disarm or control.

Complementing its military strategy, Hezbollah likewise has cultivated a "host environment" to transform itself from an impermanent band of guerillas into a social movement and fixture of Lebanese society. Hezbollah set about filling the state's void and neglect in caring for impoverished Lebanese Shiites, establishing schools, hospitals, and other social institutions. Large parts of the Shiite community have repaid this debt by becoming the group's political constituency, providing it with governmental representation and influence. Equally important, Hezbollah draws on Lebanese Shiites to fill its fighting ranks.

At the same time, Hezbollah and Lebanon have not become one indistinguishable entity. The organization has never hesitated to harm Lebanon whenever Hezbollah's interests, or Iran's, are jeopardized. For example, evidence implicates Hezbollah in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri, who threatened Hezbollah and Iran's position in the country by opposing their ally Damascus' hegemony over Beirut.

Hezbollah also allegedly timed the 2006 Second Lebanon War with Israel—which devastated Lebanese infrastructure and civilians—to distract international attention from Iran's nuclear weapons program. In 2008, Hezbollah even turned its weapons on the Lebanese and invaded Beirut when the government attempted to shut down the group's telecommunications network and remove Beirut Airport's pro-Hezbollah security chief. Hezbollah's subordination of Lebanon's interests is most evident by its entry into the Syrian civil war, where the group has fought to preserve the Assad regime and, consequently, Tehran's regional hegemony, despite the damage to Lebanon's standing in the Arab world.

According to the U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, Hezbollah remained Iran's most powerful terrorist partner and the most capable terrorist organization in Lebanon, controlling areas across the country.

In 2013, the European Union branded Hezbollah's armed wing a terrorist organization but distinguished it from Hezbollah's political wing. Ahead of the designation, Europe's leaders were divided over the label out of fear of complicating their relationships with Lebanon. Though the EU distinguished between Hezbollah's political and armed wings, the terror group considers itself a singular organization, and its leadership has continued to pursue a terrorist agenda with Iranian aid. In early 2020, Germany joined the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in designating Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist group. Argentina, Paraguay, Guatemala, Honduras, Kosovo, Lithuania, Serbia and Colombia also designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in 2019 and 2020.

Hezbollah's "Resistance Economy"

Hezbollah does not depend solely on Iran for financing. The group has established its own shadow economy in Lebanon that is semi-impervious to U.S. financial sanctions. Part of this economy takes the innocuous cover of legitimate businesses, religious and social charities, and the Islamic Resistance Support Association (IRSA). The IRSA, purportedly controlled by Hezbollah's "political wing," is Hezbollah's official domestic and international fundraising arm for its military activities, with funds going toward everything from purchasing military gear to weapons platforms to providing for the families of fallen fighters.

The group also allegedly derives income from involvement in transnational criminal activities, including counterfeiting currencies, documents, and goods; credit card fraud; money laundering; arms smuggling; and drug-trafficking—particularly of marijuana, cocaine, and Captagon.

Houthis

The Houthis, which belong to the Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam, are an Iranian-backed and armed religious and political movement in Yemen. The Houthis waged a series of bloody insurgencies against the Yemeni government for over a decade, leading to that regime's overthrow in 2015. The movement is known for its virulently anti-American and anti-Semitic rhetoric, including the group's motto: "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!"

Beginning in 2004, the Houthi rebels waged a low-level insurgency against the Sunni-dominated, internationally-recognized Yemeni central government, a key U.S. counterterrorism ally. Iran and Hezbollah offered limited assistance to the Houthis, whose ideology emulated Khomeinism. Since at least 2009, assistance came in the form of arms and training, with the IRGC's Quds Force organizing crude Iranian small-arms shipments that were occasionally intercepted by Yemeni and U.S. naval patrols.

The Houthis made significant territorial gains in 2014 and 2015, including the capture of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in September 2014, resulting in the removal of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi from power. Hadi fled from the capital to Aden, which he declared the capital of Yemen, but he was soon forced from Aden as the Houthis advanced on the city. He went to Saudi Arabia. Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, remarked that the fall of Sana'a represented a "golden opportunity" for Iran. An allied Shi'a force now controlled the capital of a neighboring country to Saudi Arabia, Iran's primary geostrategic adversary in the region. In conjunction with Hezbollah, the Quds Force set about remaking the Houthis in Hezbollah's image, building up their military capabilities, and dispatching senior Quds Force advisors to train them.

On October 2, 2015, the United Nations announced it would broker talks between the Houthis and the Yemeni government in Oman. At the time, government officials stated the Houthis were merely maneuvering tactically by showing their willingness to engage in talks. The Houthis have refused to relinquish territory they have occupied—a stipulation to end Yemen's civil war under United Nations (U.N.) Security Council Resolution 2216.

Iran's relationship with the Houthis plays into Iran's strategy of controlling key Arab waterways. Control of Yemen and its strategic ports affords control of vital commercial and energy shipping lanes that connect the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East to Europe. Control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait poses a strategic nuisance for Israel, enabling Iran to cut off its naval trade routes to Asia and opening up a new conduit for Iran to smuggle weapons to Hamas and other terrorist proxies. Iran's foothold in Yemen has allowed it, despite the weakness of its naval forces relative to others in the region, to sabotage international commerce and energy markets when its interests are threatened, while denying its links to the Yemen-based terror group to protect against reprisals.

In December 2017, the Houthis assassinated former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, their erstwhile enemy and then ally, after he turned against them again and proposed reconciliation with the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition. Iranian leaders and regime-affiliated media outlets celebrated Saleh's killing and

said the Houthis are inspired by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and similar to Iranian-supported militant groups in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Iran's aid to its Houthi proxies has provided a low-risk, cost-effective avenue for it to increase its political and military influence in Yemen. The Houthis have consolidated their hold on power, including in the capital Saana, with U.N.-brokered ceasefires beginning in April 2022 leaving them with control of large parts of the country though not the entire country. They also control the crucial Red Sea port of Hodeidah.

The April 2022 U.N.-brokered ceasefire between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition was followed by a decline in cross-border missile and drone strikes against Saudi Arabia. Although the ceasefire did not end hostilities in Yemen, the Houthis reduced their attacks against the Saudi homeland. The ceasefire, extended in June 2022, lapsed and was not extended in October 2022, but the Houthis nevertheless continued to show restraint. In April 2023, one month after Iran and Saudi Arabia normalized relations in a China-brokered deal, Saudi Arabia reportedly convinced key players in the Saudi-backed Yemeni coalition government to accede to an eight-month ceasefire and met with Houthi officials for the first time in public to discuss the ceasefire.

With arms and training provided by Iran, the Houthis have begun to act increasingly belligerent. In an effort to deter the Houthi rebels from attacking international shipping, in December 2023, the U.S. led an effort to build a coalition of navies to deploy assets to the region, dubbed Operation Prosperity Guardian. The U.S. has subsequently carried out unilateral strikes as well as strikes with the U.K. to degrade and deter the Houthis. However, damage assessments suggest that a large majority of the rebels' military assets still remain intact. Since its opening missile and drone salvo launched against Israel on October 19, 2023, the Houthis have launched over 65 attacks against Israel, the U.S. Navy, and merchant vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden as of February 2024.

Organizational Structure

The Houthi movement's organizational structure is unclear and likely continues to evolve. The movement began as a grassroots religious organization aimed at youth in the 1990s, but over time it has entered politics and developed military capabilities. Following the killing of movement founder Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi by Yemeni forces in 2004, the Houthis were led by Hussein's father, spiritual leader Badr al-Din al-Houthi. The movement's current leader is Hussein's younger brother, Abdul Malik al-Houthi.

In 2021, the U.S. Department of State sanctioned three of the Houthis leaders, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim as Specially Designated Global Terrorists. Likewise, the Houthi group was designated in its entirety as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT). The Biden administration, however, later revoked these designations, citing humanitarian considerations—only to restore the SDGT designation a few weeks after the Houthis began attacking international shipping but not the FTO designation.

In 2020, Iran dispatched a new ambassador to the Houthis in Yemen, Hassan Eyrlou. Eyrlou was reportedly an IRGC Quds Force officer, whom the U.S. Department of the Treasury accused of

supporting "the group's operations throughout the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen" and also trained members of Hezbollah in Iran. Eyrlou's arrival was a significant development, with some observers believing Tehran was trying to establish a similar ambassadorship to the one it holds in Iraq, with an IRGC officer embedded as a diplomat to run Iranian operations in the country.

Eyrlou's tenure was marked by Houthi advances in Yemen and increasingly aggressive attacks against Saudi Arabia. He had an imperious posture while in Yemen, which reportedly resulted in tensions with the Houthis, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. In December 2021, reports began to emerge of these strains, and attempts to remove him from his post. But then Eyrlou reportedly died from coronavirus that same month after a last minute scramble to find an aircraft, which later transferred him to a Tehran hospital. Iran has yet to replace Eyrlou, but the Iranian Foreign Ministry has indicated of its intention to do so.

Iranian Material and Financial Support of The Houthis' Violent Activities

Beginning in 2004, Shi'a Houthi rebels waged a low-level insurgency against the Sunni-dominated, internationally-recognized Yemeni central government, a key U.S. counterterrorism ally. Iran and Hezbollah offered limited assistance to the Houthis, whose ideology emulated Khomeinism, since at least 2009 in the form of arms and training, with the Quds Force organizing crude Iranian small-arms shipments that were occasionally intercepted by Yemeni and U.S. naval patrols. The Quds Force had also provided guidance to the Houthis to set up an affiliated political party, Ansar Allah, mimicking the Hezbollah model of fusing militant and political power.

Yemeni officials have long accused Iran's Shiite Islamist regime of providing political, financial, and logistical support to the Houthi rebels and other secessionist movements in Yemen. Despite a 2009 U.N. report confirming such claims, both Iran and the Houthis have denied engaging in past cooperation.

For instance, the Iranian ship *Jihan I* was seized in 2013, allegedly en route to Yemen with arms meant for the Houthis. The cache, as *Reuters* reported in December 2014, included "Katyusha rockets M-122, heat-seeking surface-to-air missiles, RPG-7s, Iranian-made night vision goggles and 'artillery systems that track land and navy targets 40km away,'" as well as "silencers, 2.66 tons of RDX explosives, C-4 explosives, ammunition, bullets and electrical transistors."

Subsequent reports confirmed Iranian support for the Houthis, including a *Reuters* article in December of 2014. One source stated, "We think there is cash, some of which is channeled via Hezbollah and sacks of cash arriving at the airport." Only in 2015 did Iran finally acknowledge providing "direct support" to the Houthis.

The Houthis have historically trained their fighters in Yemen's mountainous north. The Quds Force of Iran's IRGC has trained Houthis in Yemen and Iranian military leadership is also believed to be present in Yemen to provide strategic military advice. In March 2015, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubair alleged that Hezbollah operatives were also advising the Houthis. In the same month, Syrian military officials reportedly were in Yemen assisting the Houthis as well. In early 2015, U.S. officials reported that the IRGC's training of Houthi rebels covered the use of advanced weapons, which the Houthis seized from Yemeni military bases.

The Houthi takeover of northern Yemen and subsequent overthrow of the Hadi government created an opportunity for Iran to establish a foothold as the dominant influence in Yemen, and it responded by escalating its material and advisory support to the Houthis. The Quds Force stepped up illicit arms exports of increasingly sophisticated weaponry, including Sayyad 2C surface-to-air missile, guided anti-ship missiles, Qiam-1 ballistic missiles, kamikaze aerial drones, landmines, Kalashnikov variant rifles, RPG-7 and RPG-7v rocket-propelled grenade launchers, machine guns, AK-47 assault rifles, precision rifles, and anti-tank missiles. Iran reportedly also provides roadside bombs found in Yemen that resemble the ones used by Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain, according an independent watchdog organization in March 2018.

In January 2019, the U.N.'s Panel of Experts on Yemen reported that they had "traced the supply to the Houthis of unmanned aerial vehicles and a mixing machine for rocket fuel and found that individuals and entities of Iranian origin have funded the purchase. The Quds Force's support has helped the Houthis overcome some core deficiencies, including strategic planning, political mobilization, and operating advanced weaponry.

In addition to bolstering the Houthi forces, the Quds Force has also reportedly mobilized elements of its foreign legion of proxy militias, injecting Shi'a mercenary forces into the Yemen conflict, mirroring its strategy in Syria. According to a March 2017 *Reuters* report, "Iranian and regional sources said Tehran was providing Afghan and Shiite Arab specialists to train Houthi units and act as logistical advisers. These included Afghans who had fought in Syria under Quds Force commanders."

In March 2017, former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani reportedly convened a meeting of senior IRGC military officials to explore ways to further "empower" the Houthis. An official at the meeting noted that "Yemen is where the real proxy war is going on and winning the battle in Yemen will help define the balance of power in the Middle East." Since that time, Iran has introduced increasingly complex weaponry into the Yemeni theater, and the Houthis have stepped up their aggression in accordance with Iranian foreign policy objectives. The Houthis' value to Tehran as a member of its Axis of Resistance has expanded as the group launched its assault against shipping in October 2023.

Missile and Drone Attacks on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

In a similar vein to Iran's efforts to establish forward operating bases in Syria and Lebanon from which to encircle, threaten, and provoke Israel, Iran's relationship with the Houthi rebels in Yemen offers Iran a staging ground to attack another key U.S. ally and Iranian adversary, Saudi Arabia, and to threaten maritime security at a global shipping chokepoint.

Since 2015, the Houthis have used Yemeni territory under their control as launching pads to fire more than 100 missiles and drones at Iranian rival Saudi Arabia. Such strikes have landed on multiple cities, including Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Targeted locations include the king's official residence, military bases and encampments, oil refineries, the Riyadh international airport, and shopping malls. Further, as the Congressional Research Service notes, "Since 2016, the Houthis have periodically targeted commercial and military vessels transiting and patrolling the Red Sea using naval mines, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, anti-ship missiles, and waterborne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs). Some of the

weapons used reportedly have been supplied by Iran, including sea-skimming coastal defense cruise missiles."

Iran is arming and, in some cases, directing the Houthis in their missile campaign, contrary to Tehran's denials and in violation of an arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council in April 2015. An independent U.N. monitoring panel stated in November 2017 that remnants from four ballistic missiles fired by the Houthis into Saudi Arabia likely came from the Iranian-made and designed Qiam-1 missile.

In December 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley and Pentagon officials displayed debris from missiles fired into Saudi Arabia, claiming that the markings on and designs of the missiles demonstrated that they were made by Iran. The U.N.'s finding of Iranian origins in the Houthis' missiles continued well into 2018, with panel after panel confirming the Iranian connection. One U.N. report from January 2018 found that recently inspected missiles and drones "show characteristics similar to weapons systems known to be produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran," and, therefore, the panel "continues to believe" that Tehran is giving missiles and other arms to the Houthis.

In May 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned five Iranian individuals affiliated with the IRGC and its Quds Force for their role providing ballistic missiles and related technical expertise to the Houthis. Later that year, Iran bragged openly about its support for the Houthis, with an IRGC general telling IRGC-controlled media that the IRGC had instructed the Houthis to attack two Saudi oil tankers in July 2018.

Drones have also played a significant role in the Houthis efforts to sow terror against coalition targets both inside Yemen and within Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In March 2019, U.S. CENTCOM Commander Joseph Votel testified before the House Armed Services Committee, "The ballistic missile threat and armed UASs (Unmanned Aerial Systems) emanating from Yemeni territory continue to pose a significant risk, as the Houthi's consider civil infrastructure as legitimate military targets." The group's frequent usage of UAVs and demonstration of long-range drone suicide attack capabilities places them in league with Hezbollah as among the world's most active and sophisticated non-state actors in the drone space.

Beginning in April 2019, following the U.S. Department of State's designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization, Iran initiated a campaign of escalating its malign activities and regional aggression. As a key Iranian proxy, the Houthis were heavily engaged in this campaign, escalating their missile and drone attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure, airports, and military sites to unprecedented levels. The following timeline of attacks provides an overview of this escalation against Saudi Arabia.

On May 14, 2019, unmanned aircraft systems targeted two pumping stations on the East-West pipeline carrying crude oil from Dhahran to Yanbu. Yemen-based Iran-backed Houthi militants claimed responsibility. On June 12, 2019, Saudi-led coalition senior officials reported a cross-border cruise missiles attack at Abha International Airport, injuring 26 civilians. Yemen-based Iran-backed Houthi militants claimed responsibility for this attack. On August 17, 2019 Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi militants struck a natural gas liquids plant at Shaybah oilfield in the Kingdom's Empty Quarter with drones. The drone strike damaged the facility and caused a fire. No deaths or casualties were reported.

Although initially blamed on the Houthis, the September 2019, drone and cruise missile attack that took major Saudi Aramco oil facilities offline and impacted global markets, was later blamed on Iran, with reports indicating that the swarm configuration was likely not launched from Yemen but from the north—either Iran or Iraq.

On January 29, 2020, the Iran-backed Houthi's said it had fired rocket and drone strikes at Saudi targets including Aramco oil facilities. On March 18, 2020, the Saudi-led Arab coalition intercepted and destroyed two explosive-laden boats that were launched by the Iranian-backed Houthi's from Yemen's Hodeidah province. On June 23, 2020, Saudi Arabia announced that Houthi rebels had launched a simultaneous ballistic missile and explosives-laden drone attack on various targets throughout the Kingdom, including on the cities of Najran and Jizan. Saudi Arabia reportedly intercepted three missiles and eight drones, but it was unclear whether any drones made it to their targets. The incident underscored the danger posed by simultaneous missile and drone barrages, a tactic the Houthis have apparently mastered and which can potentially overwhelm air defense systems.

On November 12, 2020, Saudi Arabia reportedly thwarted an attempted Houthi attack against an oil products terminal in the port city of Jizan. The Houthis used unmanned boats laden with explosives in the attempted attack, which Saudi forces intercepted and destroyed, but which still caused a small fire at the facility. The Saudi energy ministry released a statement on the attempted attack, declaring "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia strongly condemns the cowardly attack, adding that such criminal acts directed against vital facilities do not target the Kingdom alone, but they also target the security of oil exports, the stability of energy supplies to the world, the freedom of international trade, and the entire global economy."

In 2021, after the Biden administration's rescission of the Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist designations that the Trump administration had imposed on the Houthis, the Houthis became more empowered on the ground in Yemen. They renewed an offensive to retake Marib, as well as engaged in repeated ballistic missile and drone-related attacks on civilian areas in Saudi Arabia as well as Aramco energy infrastructure.

At the same time, while the Houthis have claimed responsibility for targeting installations like the Ras Tanura port on March 7, there is evidence that some of these attacks may be originating from Iraq, with the Houthis covering for Iran's proxy network there, by claiming they carried out the operation. An advisor to the Saudi royal court told the *Wall Street Journal* that "[a]ll indications point to Iran." He said it wasn't clear whether the origin for the March 7 attack was Iraq or Iran, but that it hadn't come from the direction of Yemen.

This attack came as the Biden administration held its first direct meeting with the Houthis on February 26, 2021. With the Houthi leadership divided, these attacks on Saudi Arabia could be indicative of an internal struggle over strategy.

In a particularly audacious attack, in January 2022, the Houthis used ballistic and cruise missiles and drones to launch an attack on the United Arab Emirates. This was a similar swarm attack configuration which was employed during the above-mentioned attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure in 2019. They

targeted civilian areas, killing three civilians while an international business conference was taking place in the Emirates as well as when South Korea's president was on an official visit. According to *Reuters*, the Houthis said they fired four Quds cruise missiles at an oil refinery in Musaffah district and the airport in Abu Dhabi, a Zulfiqar ballistic missile at Dubai airport, and several drones at those and other sites. This happened while the Houthis chief negotiator was reportedly on a visit to Tehran, with some accounts in Axis of Resistance media indicating he actually met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on the day of the attack.

This attack likely had to do with ongoing advances by the UAE-backed Giants Brigade, which has retaken Shabwa Province from the Houthis. It served as a warning shot by the Houthis about its red lines as well as from Iran over its leverage over the Gulf Arab states amid the Iran nuclear negotiations in Vienna.

Houthi Attacks against Israel

On October 19, 2023, the Houthis launched cruise missiles and drones at Israel, effectively declaring war on Israel and displaying the range of its arsenal. The USS Carney, a U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer positioned in the north of the Red Sea, intercepted four cruise missiles and 14 drones heading in the direction of Israel. An air defense system in Saudi Arabia also reportedly engaged one of the cruise missiles fired towards Israel. On October 27, the Israel Defense Forces indicated that a missile which hit in Egypt likely was launched from Yemen.

On October 31, 2023, the Houthis for the first time claimed a missile and drone attack on Israel. Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree announced, "Our armed forces launched a large batch of ballistic missiles and a large number of drones at various targets of the Israeli enemy." This time, Israeli fighter jets shot down several cruise missiles, and its "Arrow" missile defense system shot down a ballistic missile.

The Houthis have also targeted shipping vessels, often claiming that they have links to Israel as part of its messaging to show support for Hamas. In some cases, these vessels have links to Israeli companies, however in many they do not. For example, Ray Shipping is an Israeli company whose assets have been attacked on three occasions. On November 20, 2023, Houthi rebels rappelled from a helicopter and hijacked Galaxy Leader, a car carrier that is reportedly owned by Ray Shipping. The vessel was redirected into Yemeni waters, along with the 25 hostages on board. Ray Shipping vessels were attacked twice in 2021; once in April, when the Iranian regime allegedly fired missiles at the Hyperion vessel; and once in February, when limpet mines detonated on the side of the Helios Ray vessel.

Houthi Attacks against the U.S.

On November 8, 2023, the Houthis shot down a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone operating off the Yemeni coast. The same type of U.S. military drone, which is primarily used for surveillance purposes but also has combat functions, was downed by the Houthis on August 20, 2019. U.S. CENTCOM said the August incident occurred in "authorized airspace over Yemen."

The U.S. Navy on a near-daily basis has engaged incoming missiles or drones launched by the Houthis from Yemen. After initially focusing its attacks against merchant vessels transiting the southern Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, it has expanded its targeting of vessels in the Gulf of Aden and has also

conducted attacks further in the Indian Ocean. In November 2023, for example, an Israeli-owned ship was targeted with the Iran-made and designed Shahed-136 'suicide' drone. In an effort to protect these vessels, U.S. Navy has established a defensive presence, intercepting dozens of projectiles launched from Yemen. The U.S. Navy has itself been targeted in 8 separate attacks as of late January 2024, none of which have yet to cause damage or injuries. Nevertheless, given Houthi aggression, major shipping companies have decided to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, Africa to avoid the Red Sea. This has raised the shipping companies' operating costs, threatening a core U.S. regional interest.

Hezbollah's Assistance to the Houthis

The Iranian proxy group Hezbollah, a terrorist organization operating in Lebanon and elsewhere, also has longstanding ties to the Houthis, who are from the Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam. Working with Iran, Hezbollah reportedly operates on the ground in Yemen, arming, training, and even fighting for the Houthis. Analysts have speculated that the Houthis seek to replicate in Yemen Hezbollah's Lebanese model of a "state within a state."

Hezbollah operatives themselves have reportedly admitted that the group has a ground presence in Yemen and fights directly against the Saudi-led coalition. A Hezbollah commander told the *Financial Times* that the group began training with the Houthis in 2005. "They trained with us in Iran, then we trained them here and in Yemen," he said. A Hezbollah commander reportedly told researchers in 2016, "After we are done with Syria, we will start with Yemen, Hezbollah is already there. Who do you think fires Tochka missiles into Saudi Arabia? It's not the Houthis in their sandals, it's us." A Houthi militia leader confessed after surrendering to coalition forces in 2017 that Iran and Hezbollah operatives were operating covert training facilities in Yemen.

The Saudi-led coalition and United Nations officials have also claimed that Hezbollah is aiding the Houthis. Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi claimed in 2016 that Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah wrote to him that "Our fighters arrived in Yemen to teach the Yemeni people the essence of governing." In June 2018, the anti-Houthi coalition stated that coalition forces had killed eight Hezbollah members in Yemen. That August, Khalid bin Salman, the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., said that not enough attention was paid to "not only the direct assistance the Al Houthi militia receives from the Iranian regime, but also the existence of Hezbollah commanders on the ground." He added that a coalition raid on a Houthi site had "revealed a Hezbollah operative training, advising [the Houthis] on asymmetric warfare, and showed background portrait [sic] of Iran's 'Supreme Leader' on militia's computer [sic]."

Ambassador bin Salman also tweeted evidence of ties between the two groups, including footage of a "Hezbollah operative in Yemen advising the Houthis to use deception tactics such as using water tanks to store weapons, and smuggling fighters through civilian vehicles; endangering the lives of Yemeni civilians." Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir has repeatedly accused Iran and Hezbollah of being responsible for missile attacks targeting Saudi territory.

In 2018, Hezbollah stepped up its support for the Houthis. In July 2018, a coalition spokesman said "Hezbollah is the Houthis' greatest arms supplier" and added that the coalition had

evidence that Hezbollah experts were on the ground in Yemen, training the Houthis and giving them military communications systems. On June 29, 2018, Nasrallah also paid tribute to the Houthis in a public speech, even saying, "I wish I could be one of your fighters and fight under the guidance of your brave and dear leaders."

In mid-August of that year, Hezbollah used its annual commemoration of its 2006 war against Israel to display pro-Houthis propaganda—namely, as the National reported, "a reconstruction of a bus hit by a coalition airstrike which had killed a number of civilians and children in Saada province several days earlier...Organizers used the bus for journalists to photograph, complete with actors impersonating the victims, special effects smoke, red lighting and fake blood in an evocative image of the war." And on August 19, 2018, Hezbollah disclosed that Nasrallah had met recently with a Houthi delegation in Beirut. Finally, in October 2018, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen.

Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi has reciprocated, praising Iran and thanking Nasrallah for his "solidarity." He also at the time promised that the Houthis would fight alongside Hezbollah or Palestinian militants in a future war against Israel and has since then raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Lebanon-based terrorist organization. In July 2019, the Houthis self-reported that they had fundraised roughly $500,000 for Hezbollah after calling for donations to offset the effects of U.S. sanctions. In a statement, a Houthi radio station said the funds would "support, aid, and assist the resistance in Lebanon." The Houthis defended their provision of funds to Hezbollah despite widespread poverty, hunger, and disease in Yemen, stating, "This is what Yemeni donors prefer of their own will, despite the siege and the cutting-off of their salaries."

At the same time, the Houthis have diverted donations thought to be for the local war effort to Hezbollah and used pilfered funds from excessive taxation of populations under its control. The diversion of funds away from Yemen, suffering under a humanitarian crisis, to Lebanon demonstrates the subservience of the Houthis to Iran's hegemonic regional project and underscores the group's lack of concern for the welfare of its own subject population.

In December 2021, the Saudi-led coalition released a video detailing Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen, purportedly showing a Hezbollah commander meeting with the Houthis' senior military commander Abu Ali Al-Hakim, whom the United States has sanctioned. The Hezbollah commander indicates on the tape that he spoke directly with Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, whom reportedly said that "he wishes he could come for (Jihad) himself in Yemen." In the tape, the Hezbollah commander also notes "the Syrian War is about to end, and most of the Mujahideen will come to Yemen."

This statement portended increasing coordination and interoperability within Iran's Axis of Resistance, a long-term objective of the IRGC-Quds Force under its former commander Qassem Soleimani and its current commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani. The portend has played out in reality, particularly as the Houthis have launched attacks against Israel and Israeli interests since the war in Gaza began. At the same time, Hezbollah operatives have continued their support, which includes a presence in Yemen.

Designation As Terrorist Organization and Rewards for Justice

In 2014, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates designated the Houthis as a terrorist organization. In July 2019, the Arab Parliament, the Arab League's legislative body, designated the Houthi movement as a terrorist organization and called upon the United Nations to follow suit.

In December 2019, the U.S. Department of State designated Yemen's Houthi movement as an "Entity of Particular Concern" for violations against religious freedom based on recommendations by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The USCIRF had previously raised alarms over acts of persecution by the Houthis against Yemen's Bahai minority, blaming Iran for exporting religious intolerance to the Houthis. The designation would open the door for the U.S. to impose human rights sanctions targeting the Houthis and its leadership.

Furthermore, in December 2019, the U.S. Department of State offered a $15 million reward for information leading to Abdul Reza Shahlai, an IRGC-Quds Force operative based in Yemen. U.S. Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook said: "[w]e remain gravely concerned by his presence in Yemen and potential role in providing advanced weaponry of the kind that we have interdicted to the Houthis." The next month, in January 2020, the Trump Administration attempted to strike Shahlai, given his destabilizing role in Yemen. Reports indicate this mission was unsuccessful.

In January 2021, the United States designated the Houthis as both a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT). In February, however, in one of its first major foreign policy decisions, the Biden administration rescinded the Trump administration's designation of the Houthis as a FTO, citing humanitarian concerns and the need to deliver aid, including via the vital Yemeni Port Hodeida controlled by the Houthis. Biden also reversed the SDGT designation, while maintaining sanctions on Houthi leadership under Executive Order 13611.

In January 2022, the Biden administration indicated it was considering redesignating the Houthis under counterterrorism authorities after the above-mentioned attacks on the United Arab Emirates, but did not take the decision. The Emiratis reportedly requested that the Biden administration put the Houthis back on the Foreign Terrorist Organization list. This is a move Saudi Arabia would likely support as well.

Despite the Houthis' attacks against the state of Israel, U.S. naval assets and international shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, the Biden Administration has not re-designated the Houthis as an FTO. Instead, the administration has conducted several self-defense and retaliatory strikes against the Houthis in Yemen in partnership with the U.K. and other Prosperity Guardian coalition members. Further, the Biden administration restored the SDGT designation, which is less severe than the FTO designation.

IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) that seeks to fulfill Tehran's ambition to become the Middle East's dominant political and military power. Iran's hegemonic aims are detrimental to U.S. national security interests and regional stability. To understand the threat this transnational organization poses to U.S. interests, this resource first highlights a few events shaping the IRGC's transformation from a hastily-organized militia into the Islamic Republic's dominant military institution, responsible for exporting the Islamic Revolution abroad and protecting it from opponents at home. This resource also introduces the IRGC's organizational structure and leadership before considering how each of the six core branches—the Basij, the Ground Force, the Navy Force, the Aerospace Force, the Intelligence Organization, and the Quds Force—advances Tehran's internal security and foreign policy priorities. This report will provide an account of the commander of each branch, followed by the branch's historical background, domestic activities, role in national defense, and foreign deployments. Finally, it looks at Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, an economic conglomerate and a main source of funding for the IRGC.

- **Type of Organization**: Military, terrorist, transnational, violent
- **Ideologies and Affiliations**: Islamist, Khomeinist, Shiite, state actor
- **Place of Origin**: Iran
- **Year of Origin**: 1979
- **Founder(s)**: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
- **Places of Operation**: Global, concentrated in the Middle East

Historical Background

On May 5, 1979, the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, ordered the formation of the IRGC (Sepah-e Pasdaran in Persian) out of approximately 700 revolutionaries that were trained in Lebanon. From the early years of the Islamic Republic, which was proclaimed by Khomeini in April after his victory in a national referendum, these revolutionaries acted in accordance with their mission as stated in the preamble to the 1979 constitution. Specifically, they formed an "ideological army," defended the country's frontiers, and grew into an aggressive military institution devoted to "the ideological mission of jihad in God's way."

Moreover, the group controls extensive economic assets across all major sectors of Iran's economy, though the total value of this portfolio is not publicly known. It also enforces conservative social rules, such as the mandatory hijab, as an auxiliary to the so-called Morality Police, a unit in Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) dedicated to monitoring compliance with Islamic laws and responsible for enforcing rules in particularly brutal and violent fashion. The Morality Police was holding Mahsa Amini in its custody when she was killed, sparking the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in September 2022, against which the regime has deployed its security forces and agents, leading to the death of over 500 individuals in connection with the anti-regime movement, the most significant threat to the regime since its 1979 founding.

The newly-formed paramilitary was, at first, intended to serve as a check against a potential *coup d'état* attempt by the Army, which Supreme Leader Khomeini and his loyalists viewed with deep suspicion due to its ties to the former Pahlavi monarchy. Counterrevolutionary groups, such as the People's Mujahedeen of Iran (MEK), also posed a threat to the regime, but the IRGC was able to suppress their resistance to the direction of the Revolution. And, critically, the IRGC asserted Tehran's control over the country's borders, conducting a brutal counterinsurgency against Kurdish separatist groups in 1979-1980.

The most important role served by the IRGC in the early years of the Revolution, though, was to defend Iran against an invading Iraqi army. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iraq, designed to thwart the Revolution from metastasizing in the region, gained the support of most Western powers, including the U.S. and Europe, leading to a two-year Iraqi offensive that met with little success.

In the spring of 1982, Iran repelled Saddam's forces and attempted to press a counteroffensive into Iraq that dragged the war into a stalemate for another six years. The Iran-Iraq War, which came to be known to IRGC commanders as the "Sacred Defense," is known for its brutality and high death toll, and transformed the IRGC into a more classical and effective military institution, while appearing to prove the mettle of the IRGC's pious and revolutionary values.

After the war, battle-tested IRGC officers ascended to the top military and security posts in the Islamic Republic and established a stranglehold over the economy. This process continued after the Assembly of Experts selected Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the supreme leader in June 1989. From key positions and often acting at the behest of the supreme leader, the IRGC swayed political decision-making in the other branches of the elected government. On one occasion, senior IRGC commanders threatened a *coup d'état* if then President Mohammad Khatami did not take a more forceful stance against anti-regime student protesters in 1999. Then commander of the Quds Force Qassem Soleimani, and its current commander Esmail Qaani, along with other IRGC top brass signed onto this letter, staking out their positions as Khamenei's lieutenants, who would take action against the populace and the elected state if either threatened the revolutionary regime.

The IRGC also acquired extensive financial stakes in all major sectors of Iran's economy in part because of its political clout. During the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), the IRGC received a succession of huge no-bid government contracts, leading to an expansion of its economic portfolio.

Additionally, the IRGC also became a dominant force in social contexts. The Basij militia promoted and enforced the Islamic Republic's severe interpretation of the Quran throughout Iranian society using violence and intimidation. The IRGC thus became a dominant political, economic, and social institution, indispensable to protecting and extending the Islamic Revolution and preserving Khamenei's supreme leadership.

Organizational Structure

The Iranian military structure remains bifurcated to this day, with the IRGC continuing to receive preferential treatment from the supreme leader. The IRGC today exercises influence that dwarfs the Army (Artesh in Persian). However, it does not answer to the president. It answers directly to Iran's

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the commander-in-chief. He has final authority on all matters of religion and state, according to the Islamic Republic's foundational doctrine: *velayat-e faqih*. The supreme leader appoints the overall IRGC commander and installs clerical representatives in each of its branches to ensure their revolutionary character The Armed Forces General Staff, dominated by IRGC commanders, administers the IRGC, Army, and national police.

Top IRGC Commander Hossein Salami

The top commander of the IRGC, Major General Hossein Salami, and his six branch commanders oversee the implementation of the IRGC's mandate. According to Iranian law, the IRGC's purpose is "to protect the Islamic Revolution of Iran and its accomplishments, while striving continuously…to spread the sovereignty of God's law." To these ends, the IRGC combines conventional and unconventional military roles with a relentless effort to pursue and punish domestic dissenters. Salami believes violence is justified as an instrument to impose conservative Islamic law and suppress opposition movements. He claims that the U.S. should be evicted from the Middle East, and the "Zionist regime" wiped off the map. The other IRGC commanders parrot similar statements, reflecting the goals that drive this hyperaggressive institution.

In 2007, the U.S. government designated Salami as a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferator while he was in charge of the IRGC's missile program as commander of the IRGC's Air Force (later renamed Aerospace Force). Salami replaced Mohammad Jafari in 2019 as the overall commander, two weeks after the U.S. designated the IRGC as an FTO. The U.S. has not designated Salami based on his human rights crimes, despite the Basij's and Ground Force's killing of protesters while he was in office in November 2019. The E.U. designated him for human rights abuses in 2021, citing his responsibility for this use of lethal force. In November 2022, the E.U. levied additional sanctions against Salami for overseeing the provision of Iran-made unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Russia for use in its war against Ukraine. Before becoming commander-in-chief of the IRGC, Salami served as deputy commander-in-chief, and prior to that, commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force.

Iranian Military Structure and Size Estimates

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)		Regular Forces (Artesh)	
IRGC Ground Force (IRGCGF)	150,000	Islamic Republic of Iran Ground Force (IRIGF)	350,000
IRGC Navy (IRGCN)	20,000	Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN)	18,000
IRGC Aerospace Force (IRGCASF)	15,000	Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF)	37,000
IRGC Qods Force (IRGC-QF)	5,000	Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force (IRIADF)	15,000
Basij (Reserves)	450,000	**Total:**	**420,000**
Total (excl. Basij)	**190,000**		
Total (incl. Basij)	**640,000**		
Total Military (Active): 610,000			
Total Military (incl. Reserves): 1,060,000			

Source: 2019 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency Report: "Iran Military Power"

The Basij

The Basij Seal

The office of the commander of the Basij oversees and deploys one of the regime's most important resources: an abundant, loyal youth following. The first part of this section introduces the Basij commander. The second part discusses the Basij's first major role in the history of the Islamic Republic, namely defending the country's frontiers in the Iran-Iraq War. The final section covers the Basij's recruitment, training, law enforcement, and business operations; and its role in national defense and foreign military operations.

The Basij Commander: A Dedicated Human Rights Abuser

Basij Commander Gholamreza Soleimani

Brigadier General Gholamreza Soleimani—a U.S.- and E.U.-designated human rights abuser in charge of the Basij when it massacred peaceful Iranians protesting abrupt gas price increases, repression, and corruption in November 2019—commands the volunteer paramilitary. Previously, he served as commander of the Saheb-Al-Zaman Provincial Corps in Esfahan Province. While there, he hailed the need for the formation of a resistance economy for development and lashed out against the then-Rouhani government. Like most other IRGC commanders, Soleimani assumed his post with a commitment to the regime's hegemonic aspirations. However, his branch focuses on maintaining internal security, more than promoting outward expansion. He professes that Iran's unique democratic system of government with spiritual elements should serve as a model of governance for other countries. In this view, the pursuit of hegemony is not only achieved by way of force, but also by the supreme leader's interpretation of Islam, which is the foundation of the Islamic Republic's system of government.

Historical Background: The "Sacred Defense"

The charismatic Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini created the Basij in November 1979 as a militia made up of his pious youth followers—some of whom had fought against the Shah—to help manage property confiscated from the former elite and royal family. Much of the wealth seized in the revolution was supposed to be redistributed to lower-class families, but the Basij soon found itself in another role when Saddam Hussein's army invaded, attempting to seize territory amid the post-revolution instability. The supreme leader's call for the creation of a "twenty-million-man-army," though never realized did foretell an effective mass mobilization effort in response to the invasion.

The ranks of the Basij swelled as hundreds of thousands of Iranians volunteered to fight in the Iran-Iraq War in the name of the nascent revolutionary government and its supreme leader. Of the 300,000 Iranians killed in action, loyal Basijis—as members of the Basij are called—died at staggering rates. Often undertrained, if trained at all, Basijis were "martyred" in so-called human-wave offensives in which they unwittingly swept minefields with their bodies and sought to overwhelm enemy forces by rushing into machine gun fire and artillery without support. Infamously, young children were sent to die in these horrific attacks, which proved to be an effective means of repelling Iraq in mid 1981.

The Basij's sacrifice in the war contributed to its leadership's belief that they should assume key miliary and security posts in the Islamic Republic. Notwithstanding ambitions to operate the paramilitary organization autonomously, the Basij was brought under the command of the IRGC chief in 2007, and then incorporated into the IRGC's Ground Force in 2009 after its poor performance in suppressing the

"Green Movement," a protest movement opposed to electoral manipulation in the reelection of hardline conservative figure Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) led to the empowerment of the Basij and an expansion of its domestic mandate; the Basij was called upon to exert greater social and moral control over society. Basijis were elevated to key government and security posts during this period, and the Basij's budget increased drastically. President Ahmadinejad, a former member of the Professor Basij Organization, allocated many cabinet seats to professors from this organization. They subsequently purged university leadership and installed more conservative figures, who were deeply opposed to western academic influences and culture.

As the Basij enforced religious precepts more strictly, it became increasingly viewed as a partisan actor, part of the fraudulent reelection of Ahmadinejad, and responsible for the implementation of his policies. The Basijis were also correctly seen as brutal enforcers deployed against the "Green Movement." What was once a disorganized group of young fighters serving as cannon fodder had become a vigilante terror squad known for using iron bars, clubs, truncheons, chains, and firearms, against protesters.

However, the Basij did not effectively quell the "Green Movement." In some cases, local Basijis failed to attack their fellow citizens, particularly if they saw them expressing their piety with loud proclamations that "God is great." Nevertheless, the attacks on dissidents continued. Wikileaks reported in 2010 on an eyewitness account from inside a Basij camp of the use of sadistic forms of torture against dissidents, including crushing people to death and disembowelment. Amid the overall failure to suppress the movement, then-Basij commander, Hossein Taeb, was removed from his post. He was later made the head of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization.

The Basij's Functions: Internal Security and National Defense

The Basij fulfills several internal security and national defense functions. The first, and arguably most important is recruitment for public service. The Basij oversees a vast recruitment network that penetrates all segments of society. Typically, poor, uneducated, young, and devout Shia are targeted in this campaign with promises of upward mobility. They are enticed by a small stipends, loans, housing, welfare, and pilgrimages. The Basij members are also allowed to bypass mandatory conscription; they are provided with preferential university placement; and sometimes promoted to military and security posts. The Basij also offers technical training, which is appealing in underdeveloped areas.

Basij members run clubs, known as Paygahs, at virtually every mosque across the country, and use religious studies and recreational activities such as sports and field trips to lure potential recruits. The underlying aim of these programs is to build a loyal political constituency, whose average age and strong religious beliefs are meant to guarantee the longevity of the Islamic Republic.

Today, there are approximately 450,000 active reservists in the Basij, and hundreds of thousands more who are inactive but mobilizable. Estimates of the total number of active members run as high as three million, with an average age between 15 and 30 years old.

Once recruited, Basij members are trained in ideology. Manufacturing an enemy whose existence represents a threat to the survival of the Islamic Republic is central to indoctrination. The existence of an external threat is essential to any revolutionary regime because it provides legitimacy and a higher purpose for existing. That enemy, of course, is the United States, also known as the "Great Satan," and its partner Israel, known to the IRGC as "Little Satan."

Domestically, the Basij carries out a grassroots campaign to counter influences that are opposed to the regime. This insidious campaign depends not only on brute force, but also Basij presence in all areas of society; its members are well-organized and represented at schools, workplaces, factories, mosques, and every major public institution. They work as recruiters and proselytizers and spy on and harass critics, dissidents, intellectuals, bloggers, and activists. On university campuses, they organize against leftists, reformists, traditional (less radical) conservative groups, and student unions. At workplaces, they bust strikes, with branches devoted to countering unions and professional organizations.

The Basij also operates as an auxiliary law enforcement unit deployed—sometimes alongside the IRGC's Ground Force—to support the Law Enforcement Force (LEF) in times of acute crisis at home, entrusted to employ violence against fellow citizens. They shot and killed hundreds of protesters in 2019 and have deployed to suppress the Mahsa Amini protests, armed with anti-riot weapons such as tear gas, pellet-loaded shotguns ("Birdshot"), and paintball guns, riding on motorcycles and pickup trucks. Basijis often carry out their abuses and destroy vehicles and property without showing any government identification, reportedly to afford the regime some degree of plausible deniability.

As an auxiliary law enforcement unit, the Basij also serves alongside the so-called "Morality Police," a unit under the LEF that pursues and punishes women and men for transgressions against conservative Islamic law. Like the "Morality Police," which was responsible for beating Mahsa Amini to death, the Basij often target and brutalize women for removing the compulsory hijab. To the regime, the hijab and mandatory gender segregation in public places, are a bulwark against decadence, corruption, and promiscuity associated with Western infidels.

Moreover, the Basij polices relationships, opposing same-sex behavior and certain dating practices, and enforces bans on some types of music, movies, and art—especially those with Western influences. Alcohol and drug use, theft, and other criminal activity, including the use of satellite antennae, also fall under its purview.

Though some are motivated by materialistic interests, Basijis tend to be true believers in the view of Islam as put forward by clerical figures in the regime and in particular the highest religious leader, the supreme leader. They are like the ruling party of an authoritarian government, working to amplify pro-regime propaganda and organize pro-regime rallies and religious ceremonies, which invariably call out the "Great" and "Little Satan." They work with other suppression entities, such as Ansar-e Hezbollah, who in 2009 countermobilized against the "Green Movement," advocating for the punishment of peaceful protesters whom they perceived to be seditious rioters and conspirators. By supporting the Islamic Republic, they contribute to the perception, however deceiving, of regime legitimacy. The Basij and the IRGC comprise the Islamic Republic's core constituencies and political power base.

Less ideologically-driven Basijis also achieve their aims because the regime funnels wealth, power, and prestige into their ranks. The Basij conducts its economic activities through the foundation Bonyad Taavon Basij ("Basij Cooperative Foundation"), which receives preferential loan and tax treatment and government subsidies.

In 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated a vast financial network supporting the volunteer paramilitary, and assessed that the Basij held multiple billions of dollars-worth of assets in a network of shell companies in major industries, such as metals, minerals, automotive, and banking. The Basij owns at least 20 corporations and financial institutions, including Mehr Eqtesad Bank, a financial offshoot of Bonyad Taavon Basij that pays dividends and provides hundreds of millions of dollars-worth of interest-free lines of credit for Basij members, helping them to develop businesses. As the Basij became more wealthy and powerful, its brutality and oppression have generated a strong public backlash against its activities. The anger and resentment against the regime and its enforcers in response to Mahsa Amini's death is only the most recent manifestation.

Another function served by the Basij is national defense. In the event of an invasion by a military power capable of quickly destroying communications and the command-and-control structure inside Iran, the Basij would be called upon to conduct asymmetrical warfare throughout the country. These operations would aim at thwarting an occupation and repelling the foreign power through attrition. If the Basij mounted an effective mobilization effort and its units dispersed throughout the country remained loyal to the Islamic Republic, a modern war in Iran could resemble the 2003 Iraq War in which the U.S. and coalition forces fought a domestic insurgency to establish a democratic form of government.

Although the Basij tends to serve domestic interests, in the context of the Syrian Civil War and Iran's involvement in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Basij also supported foreign military operations. In 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury noted that the Basij had recruited child soldiers who later deployed to the Syrian battlefield. The Basij's Imam Hossein Battalion—a light infantry unit trained in counterinsurgency tactics—offered support to the IRGC's Ground Force in Syria at the height of the civil war. The Basij and IRGC officers also deployed to Iraq to coordinate the fight against ISIS, gather intelligence, and sometimes fight themselves.

Finally, it is notable that the Basij serves as a model for foreign militias, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and the pro-Assad National Defense Forces (NDF) in Syria, in that it doubles as a social welfare provider and organizes cultural and religious events. The Basij uses social welfare to build a patronage network. In one such instance, the Basij sent medical practitioners to rural areas to provide care to sick people unable to afford treatment. The export of this model—more commonly known as the "Hezbollah model"—helps Tehran create spheres of influence. Iran-backed militias gain influence not only through the use of violence, but by organizing formidable constituencies and fielding candidates for government posts.

THE GROUND FORCE

The IRGC's Ground Force Seal

This section begins with a brief account of the U.S. and European perspectives on the current commander of the Ground Force, Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour. The second part includes a historical account of the Ground Force's national defense doctrine, which is based on assumptions similar to those of the Basij. The third part covers the Ground Force's role in internal security, national defense, and foreign military operations.

The Ground Force Commander: An Unpopular Regime's Muscle


IRGC's Ground Force Commander Mohammad Pakpour

Mohammad Pakpour is the commander of the IRGC's Ground Force; former IRGC top commander Mohammad Ali Jafari promoted him to the post in 2009. The 2015 nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), lifted U.S. sanctions against him. However, the Trump Administration designated Pakpour in 2019 under counterterrorism authority Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, noting that the Ground Force deployed to Syria to support the Quds Force under his command—a mission that Pakpour publicly admitted to in 2017. The U.S., however, has not sanctioned Pakpour under human rights authorities, even though he commanded the Ground Force when it indiscriminately gunned down hundreds of peaceful protesters in November 2019. The E.U., on the other hand, sanctioned Pakpour as a human rights violator in 2021, citing his command role during that slaughter. Before heading the IRGC's Ground Force, Pakpour served as the deputy for coordination of the IRGC's Ground Force, commander of the IRGC's 8th Najaf Division, and commander of the IRGC's 31st Ashoura Division.

Historical Background: "The Mosaic Doctrine"

Four years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, Mohammad Jafari took the helm of the IRGC. He implemented a plan, the "Mosaic Doctrine," that originated as a response to the U.S.'s

lightning-speed toppling of Saddam Hussein. The "Mosaic Doctrine," assumed that if Iran was invaded next, the invading forces would have technology and conventional capabilities that far surpassed Iran's. The "Mosaic Doctrine" is an asymmetric warfare concept that envisages a protracted and dispersed insurgency to compensate for Iran's weaknesses. To that end, in 2007, the year in which the Basij was brought under the command of the IRGC, the Ground Force was divided into 31 provincial units plus one for Tehran, in addition to its operational combat units that include infantry, artillery, engineering, airborne, and special operations. The decentralization was intended to improve unit cohesion at the local level and command-and-control in the event of a devastating air campaign against operational centers and to enable the Ground Force to rapidly deploy to hotspots in urban areas in times of unrest.

The Ground Force's Functions: A Foreign Fighting Force?

Like the Basij, the IRGC's Ground Force preserves internal security, protects the nation from foreign invasion, and participates in military operations abroad. The Ground Force, with its 100,000 to 150,000 active personnel, split between provincial and operational units, can implement larger operations at home than the LEF and Basij and larger operations abroad than the Quds Force.

The Ground Force's internal security focus involves protest suppression through the use of excessive force. It has deployed tanks, armored vehicles, and military-grade weaponry against protesters. It also conducts counterinsurgency campaigns against Kurdish militant separatists in northwest Iran and Baluchi separatists in the southeast. The Ground Force's special operations unit, known as the Saberin, often takes the lead on such operations, and has been deployed in discrete areas against protesters in the aftermath of the death of Mahsa Amini.

The Saberin's skills blend well into the irregular warfare approach to national defense called for in the "Mosaic Doctrine." It specializes in airborne operations, which could assist attacks on the enemy's rear area supply-lines and communications. This unit is also skilled in explosives, a low-cost and effective means of targeting enemy convoys with roadside bombings, and demolition, which enables it to destroy roads and bridges needed by the enemy for supplying its troops. Furthermore, the Saberin is trained in mountain warfare, an advantage in Iran's mountainous terrain.

The Ground Force appeared to deviate from its fighting doctrine in deploying to Syria to rejuvenate a faltering ground campaign against anti-Assad rebels. Its forces fought alongside the Artesh, the Basij, the Quds Force, its proxies, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's army and pro-Assad militias in key operations such as "Dawn of Victory," which led to the fall of Aleppo in 2016. The Syrian Civil War, therefore, motivated the IRGC's Ground Force to adopt expeditionary and conventional power projection roles. Some Ground Force soldiers remain in the country at permanent bases run by the IRGC.

The Navy Force

The IRGC's Navy Seal

The IRGC's Navy Force, under the leadership of Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, is a threat to international maritime security. First, this section highlights Tangsiri's aggressive disposition, which has endeared him to the supreme leader. Then, it identifies the role that this branch would likely play in the event of military escalation. Finally, it points out some of the operations the IRGC's Navy Force conducts to intimidate and retaliate against its enemies and deter military action against Iran.

The Navy Force's Commander: Khamenei's Favorite

IRGC's Navy Force Commander Alireza Tangsiri

The Navy Force Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri was appointed to lead the branch of approximately 20,000 active personnel in 2018. He is known to be one of Supreme Leader Khamenei's favorite commanders, which is not surprising given his antipathy toward the U.S. He sometimes boasts that Iran is willing and able to retaliate at sea for what he perceives as acts of aggression against his country. The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Tangsiri under E.O. 13224 in 2019, noting his threats to block the Strait of Hormuz—a strategic channel through which 30 percent of total global oil consumption flows. He directs the branch's sabotage of commercial vessels in international waters and occasionally echoes Khamenei in asserting ownership over the Persian Gulf. He disdains world order, once saying that the "law of the world is the law of the jungle," an implicit affront directed toward U.S. global leadership. Before becoming commander of the IRGC's Navy, Tangsiri served as Navy deputy commander and commander of the IRGC's 1st Naval District.

The Navy Force's Function: A Threat to Maritime Security

The IRGC's Navy has developed anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, including the use of airborne, coastal, undersea, and surface warfare assets, to prevent enemy vessels from operating in the strategic Persian Gulf. In 2019, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency's report on Iran's military power listed some of these assets. The IRGC's Navy has contact and influence mines; an arsenal of drones, or

unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs); unmanned sea vessels (USVs), including unmanned submarines; fast attack crafts (FACs) and fast inshore attack crafts (FIACs); and shore-launched anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), anti-ship ballistic missiles, and anti-radiation missiles. It operates out of several bases, including Bandar-e Abbas on the Strait of Hormuz.

In the event of military escalation, the IRGC's Navy could conduct asymmetric attacks against a superior navy, for example, using FACs equipped with machine guns, unguided rockets, torpedoes, and ASCMs. Many of these speedy vessels, seeking to avoid direct or sustained confrontations, could ambush and overwhelm large enemy vessels, the mainstay of an advanced navy. Moreover, since large vessels cannot maneuver well in the Strait of Hormuz, a 30-mile-wide chokepoint, Iran could deploy its A2/AD capabilities to try to shut down the Strait of Hormuz, but doing so could inflict major costs on its own oil-dependent economy. Iran could also target its adversaries' naval assets, such as ports, oil installations, and desalination facilities. Tehran's asymmetrical capabilities at sea, and its potential to obstruct key shipping lanes, add to its naval deterrent.

Tehran continues to signal that it remains a threat to maritime security by conducting attacks against commercial vessels in international waters as well as harassing the U.S. Navy. The IRGC's Navy has seized foreign vessels that it claims are freighting smuggled oil, often as part of an effort to retaliate and seek leverage against governments worldwide. In 2021, for example, the IRGC's Navy boarded and took control of a South Korean vessel as tensions flared over frozen Iranian assets held in South Korean banks. In May 2022, it seized two Greek vessels in the Persian Gulf a month after Athens impounded an Iran-flagged, Russian-operated tanker in the Aegean Sea that the U.S. had designated for its ties to a Russian bank. Greece later handed over the vessel to the U.S., which confiscated the Iranian oil onboard.

The IRGC has since at least 2016 patrolled the waters near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, supporting and enabling the Houthis with intelligence to conduct attacks on international shipping. The first vessel that was tasked with this responsibility, the Saviz, was attacked with a limpet mine in 2021, which caused damage to the vessel and forced it to return to Iran. Tehran replaced the Saviz with another cargo vessel, likely equipped with ship-tracking and other intelligence capabilities, that has been present in the waters near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait throughout the Houthis' assault on international shipping and is providing the Houthis with data they need to accurately target ships with missiles and drones.

The Aerospace Force

The IRGC's Aerospace Force Seal

This section opens with an account of the Aerospace Force commander's ascent through the ranks of the IRGC. The remainder is organized around the Aerospace Force's core capabilities—missiles, air defense systems, and drones. These capabilities are discussed in terms of establishing deterrence against Iran's enemies and setting up the option for an unprovoked strike.

Amir Ali Hajizadeh: The Next Soleimani?

IRGC's Aerospace Commander Amir Hajizadeh

Since 2009, Amir Ali Hajizadeh has commanded the IRGC's Aerospace Force. He began his military career in the Iran-Iraq War as a "special unit" sniper, but he was closely associated with an artillery division. With the backing of Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam, the renowned "godfather" of Iran's missile program, Hajizadeh ascended the ranks of the IRGC, and soon became commander of a missile unit in that war. In 2003, he was elevated to command Iran's air defense systems.

In the years since becoming the Aerospace Force commander, Israeli security officials have begun to question whether Hajizadeh is taking on the role formerly played by the revered late Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. Hajizadeh is responsible for drone strikes against Israeli-linked vessels in international waters—attacks which the former Quds Force general may have likely assigned to proxies. His close relationship with the supreme leader, indicated by his longevity at the helm of the Aerospace Force, has increased his stature at home.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Hajizadeh in 2019, explaining in a press release his role in overseeing Tehran's missile program and his responsibility for the shooting down of civilian airliner MH17 on July 17, 2014 with a surface-to-air missile, which caused the death of 300 people. Three years later, the E.U. designated Hajizadeh, citing his role in UAV-related defense cooperation, including the supply of Iranian-made drones to Russia. Iran's drones are not only a threat to regional security, but therefore also a threat to European security.

Iran's ballistic missile arsenal—the largest and most diverse in the region—poses a major challenge to regional security as well, especially as the regime improves the range, accuracy, and lethality of these munitions. Hajizadeh once said, "the reason we designed our missiles with a range of 2,000 km is to be able to hit our enemy the Zionist regime from a safe distance."

The Aerospace Force's Function: Deterrence?

Hajizadeh's appointment to lead the Aerospace Force coincided with an expansion of the branch's scope to include Iran's missile and space programs, the latter which is dedicated, in part, to testing missile systems and technologies. Iran is seeking to improve the accuracy of its ballistic missiles to enhance the credibility of a long-range strike against targets in Israel from secure positions inside Iran. This capability would compensate for the weakness of its air force, which has degraded over time because Iran cannot import the materials it needs for its planes.

Iran's missiles have already proven accurate enough to strike U.S. targets in the region. For example, in January 2020, Iran hit an Iraqi military base housing U.S. troops in retaliation for the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. The Aerospace Force's ballistic missile arsenal expands Iran's options for retaliation or an unprovoked strike against targets in the region.

Iran has also claimed ballistic missile attacks on the Kurdistan region of Iraq in March 2022 and January 2024; in both, it claimed to be targeting Israeli spy posts when in fact it hit civilian housing belonging to wealthy Kurdish businessmen. Iran also fired ballistic missiles at alleged ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria in January 2024, claiming retaliation for a deadly ISIS bombing in Kerman, Iran on the anniversary of Soleimani's assassination by the U.S. Additionally, Iran struck Baluchi groups in Pakistan in January 2024, to which Pakistan responded with its own strikes in Iran against separatist groups.

Operational control of Iran's ballistic missile arsenal is delegated to the Aerospace Force's Al-Ghadir Missile Command, first designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in June 2010 under E.O. 13382, which is intended to block the property of persons and their support networks engaged in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This element within the IRGC Aerospace Force has been involved in medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) test launches since at least 2008.

Al-Ghadir Missile Command works with Iranian entities that develop and produce ballistic missiles, such as Shahid Bagheri Industrial Group (SBIG), which produces Iran's solid-propellant ballistic missiles. It has participated in SBIG's Fateh-110 short-range ballistic missile and its Ashura medium-range ballistic missile projects. The Al-Ghadir Missile Command is currently under the direction of Mahmud Bagheri Kazemabad, whom the U.S. Department of State identified as a WMD proliferator in March 2022. Most of Iran's missiles are known to be nuclear-capable. If Iran produces a nuclear-armed ballistic missile, its deployment and management would likely fall to this element in the Aerospace Force.

Iran's air defense systems have been strategically deployed in Iran to increase the potential costs of aerial incursions or strikes on its homeland. In 2019, Iran fired surface-to-air missiles and struck a $100 million U.S. Navy RQ-4A Global Hawk reconnaissance drone allegedly infringing on Iran's airspace. The U.S. claimed the drone was flying over the Strait of Hormuz, an international waterway.

Iran's air defense systems also protect nuclear installations, which Iran already goes to great lengths to shield by building underground and deep within mountainsides. These systems also protect missile silos, which are sometimes called "missile cities" due to their proximity to population centers. In recent years, the Aerospace Force has displayed advanced air defense capabilities. In October 2021, for example, in the Velayat Sky 1400 air defense drill, Iran showcased several surface-to-air missile systems, along with upgraded radar, surveillance, communications, and electronic warfare systems.

Iran's UAVs serve a function similar to its missiles; allowing Iran to strike distant targets in the region. Iran launched the Shahed-136 drone—the same type being shipped to Russia—at the Israeli-linked oil tanker Mercer Street in the Gulf of Oman in 2021, killing two Europeans and denying that it played a part. This attack is what led one analyst to surmise that "the balance of power" within the IRGC had shifted toward the Aerospace Force's preference for overt retaliatory strikes, as opposed to proxy wars. Again, in a separate incident in November 2022, a U.S. Navy forensic investigation revealed that the

Shahed-136 was used to attack an Israeli-linked tanker. Some analysts believe the attack may have been retaliation for an Israeli strike on a convoy at the Iraq-Syria border a week prior. If viewed as retaliation, these attacks might be understood as an effort to deter Israel from future strikes. However, Iran's true intentions are seldom clear; its attacks could also be intended to seek leverage or for intimidation.

The Intelligence Organization

This section begins by pointing out the recent leadership transition in the IRGC's Intelligence Organization. Then, it mentions the impetus behind Supreme Leader Khamenei's decision to rename and expand the scope of the IRGC's Intelligence Branch in 2009. Finally, it indicates the entity's roles at home and abroad.

The IRGC's Intelligence Organization Seal

IRGC's Intelligence Organization Chief Mohammad Kazemi

The IRGC's Intelligence Organization is led by Mohammad Kazemi, who replaced Hossein Taeb in June 2022 after a series of intelligence failures, including the high-profile assassination of Quds Force Unit 840's deputy commander Hassan Sayyad Khodaei that Iran blamed on Israel. Kazemi was previously the head of the IRGC's Intelligence Protection Organization, which is responsible for counterintelligence and is separate from the Intelligence Organization. In June 2009, shortly after the reelection of Ahmadinejad, Supreme Leader Khamenei established the IRGC's Intelligence Organization, expanding the scope of the former IRGC Intelligence Branch, and putting it in charge of suppressing the "Green Movement."

The new intelligence and security organization was brought under the leadership of Taeb after he was removed from his post as the head of the Basij. It incorporated seven separate divisions, including Khamenei's personal intelligence body known as Department 101, a Basij volunteer unit, a cybersecurity unit, and a directorate in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).

Domestically, the IRGC's Intelligence Organization pursues, arrests, interrogates, and tortures dissidents, even running its own section at the notorious Evin Prison. Abroad, it provides material, logistical, technical, and operational support to the Quds Force, which takes the lead on external military operations. The IRGC's Intelligence

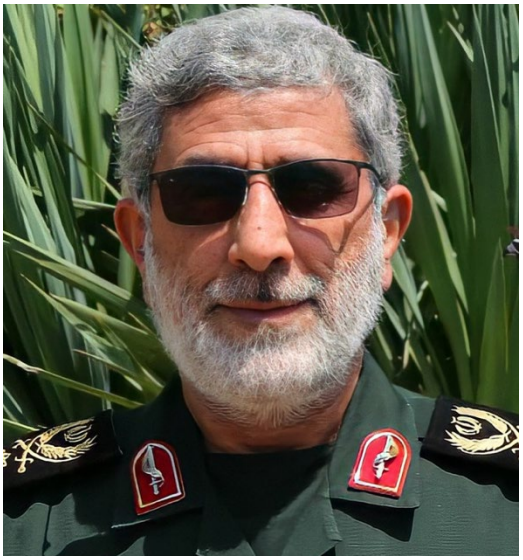
Organization also conducts counterintelligence operations, the primary goal of which is to protect IRGC personnel, operations, and facilities from infiltration, espionage, and leaks.

In June 2023, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Rouhallah Bazghandi, the former IRGC-IO Counterespionage Department Chief, for planning and overseeing operations in Iraq and Syria, and targeting Israeli nationals. Additionally, Reza Seraj, the IRGC-IO Foreign Intelligence Chief, was sanctioned for his role in unsuccessful intelligence operations in Asia, as well as targeting U.S. and Israeli nationals. Both individuals have been designated under the counterterrorism authority E.O. 13224.

The Quds Force

The Quds Force is the IRGC wing responsible for external operations. Thus, this section focuses on foreign activities, although it should be noted that the Quds Force's training and skills would lend well to the "Mosaic Doctrine" and its focus on unconventional tactics. The first part describes Esmail Qaani, the current Quds Force commander, in comparison with the former Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani. The second part discusses the IRGC's operations abroad; and its focus on proxy warfare, the primary way in which Tehran advances its foreign policy objectives in the region. The third part touches upon Quds Force operations in the strategic countries of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The Quds Force Commander: Soleimani's Successor



IRGC's Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani

Esmail Qaani commands the Quds Force, the expeditionary wing of the IRGC made up of between 5,000 and 10,000 special operations personnel. Its operatives typically keep a low profile to afford Tehran plausible deniability when operations fail or have the potential to escalate hostilities. Qaani ascended to this position in January 2020 after a U.S. Reaper drone struck and killed then commander Qassem Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport while he was plotting to kill Americans. Upon assuming this post, Qaani became the commander not only of the Quds Force but of the proxy forces stood up by Soleimani.

Qaani lacks several of the characteristics that made Soleimani effective in the Levant. First, he does not have the same experience in the Arab world, as he was earlier in his career a member of the Quds Force's Ansar Corps, which operates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Soleimani had longstanding relationships with militia leaders in Iraq, some of whom had roots in Tehran's support for rebels fighting against Saddam Hussein dating back to the Iran-Iraq War. Qaani also does not speak Arabic, the language used by militia leaders, as well as Soleimani did. Moreover, Qaani, Soleimani's longtime deputy commander, is known to be more bureaucratic than his former boss, whose charisma made him a symbol of "resistance" against Western powers and Israel.

Still, the Quds Force is a global enterprise with directorates and cells in every region of the world. The U.S. government and its allies have uncovered and disrupted plots in Africa, Germany, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Kenya, Bahrain, and Turkey. But the Quds Force, sometimes working in coordination with terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, criminal organizations, or drug cartels to mask its activities, has been implicated in many other violent activities worldwide. Soleimani's death was a major blow to the effectiveness of the IRGC's proxy operations in the Levant. However, the Quds Force will continue to pose a grave threat to international peace and security for the foreseeable future.

Qaani may have exceeded expectations in terms of his ability to unite the Axis of Resistance in a quasi-military alliance that resembles NATO Article 5. An attack on one is supposed to trigger the intervention of all other Iran-backed militias in the network. Like his predecessor, Qaani has coordinated among various factions across the Middle East, each of which has their own domestic circumstances and pressures. Qaani's contributions, though, have deepened the Axis of Resistance's integration. This has been shown in that other members have joined in war against Israel, ostensibly in defense of Hamas, which the Israeli military and political establishment vowed to destroy. This is the case with Hezbollah, launching daily missiles and drones across the border into Israel, and also the Houthis, who claim to be attacking international shipping to harm Israel.

Iran and the militias it stood up are not only aligned in terms of strategic vision, but also coordinate at an operational and even tactical level of warfare, where Qaani as Tehran's emissary has authorized and directed anti-Western and anti-Semitic attacks worldwide, including the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks via a series of meetings in Beirut that hosted Qaani, along with Hezbollah and Hamas officials in the months leading up to the assault.

Unconventional Warfare Operations

Using subversion, kidnapping, assassination, bombings, sabotage, and proxy wars, the Quds Force continues to target dissidents and journalists in foreign countries; Jewish, Israeli, American, and Western targets; and regional adversary governments, particularly those bordering the Persian Gulf. Tehran's subversion of foreign adversary governments typically relies on terrorist organizations. This is the case in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, for instance, where Tehran sponsors violent groups that oppose the ruling monarchies. These groups are known to carry out attacks on civilians and government officials alike, often using weapons and training provided by the Quds Force.

Kidnapping and assassination plots against Western targets are often thought to be the responsibility of Quds Force Unit 840, though personnel from the IRGC's Intelligence Organization also assist in these operations. On several occasions, kidnapping plots have targeted American journalists but were uncovered and disrupted by U.S. law enforcement agencies. In August 2022, for instance, a man armed with an AK-47 showed up at the home of an outspoken Iranian-American activist and journalist named Masih Alinejad, allegedly to abduct or kill her. More recently, the IRGC has targeted London-based journalists working at Iran International and BBC Persia for their coverage of the Mahsa Amini protest movement. The Islamic Republic has no qualms about killing activists or journalists who expose its malign domestic and foreign activities.

In April 2022, a Quds Force operative from Unit 840, held at an unspecified location in Europe, admitted to plotting attacks against an Israeli national working at the Israeli consulate in Istanbul, an American general in Germany, and a French journalist. He claimed he was offered $150,000 for organizing the assassinations and $1 million if they were carried out successfully. A month later, Colonel Hassan Sayyad Khodaei—believed to be Unit 840's deputy commander tasked with planning antisemitic attacks around the world—was assassinated in Tehran. Shortly after his assassination, the Mossad foiled three Iranian plots to use terrorist cells in Turkey to attack Israeli citizens there, possibly in retaliation for the assassination of Khodaei.

More recently, the U.S. Justice Department revealed that the Quds Force had tried to kill former National Security Advisor John Bolton in a murder-for-hire scheme, an act of war interpreted as retaliation for the Soleimani assassination. In early June 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Mohammad Reza Ansari, a member of a Quds Force external operations unit, as an accomplice in the assassination plot. Ansari's involvement in intelligence gathering, as well as planning and executing of lethal operations against Iranian dissidents and non-Iranian nationals in the U.S., the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, was also highlighted. Furthermore, the U.S. Treasury designated Hossein Hafez Amini, an IRGC affiliate in Turkey, for providing material assistance to Quds Force operations in Turkey through his connections in the airline industry.

In December 2023, Quds Force Unit 400 was recruiting Afghans and working with al-Qaeda to target Israelis. Israel's intelligence services have also uncovered plots targeting Jewish people in Turkey, where the government of Israel warned its citizens not to travel because of active plots backed by Iran in June 2022. Kenya foiled a terrorist plot against Israeli interests in 2021 and in 2012 discovered 33 pounds of RDX explosives, stored by Iranians who were deemed by Kenya to be Quds Force operatives. A report from the time added that Kenya suspected the highest levels of the regime approving of an operation to target public gatherings, Kenyan officials, and foreign establishments.

The U.S. and Israel discovered an operation in Ethiopia to surveil and gather intelligence on the Israeli and Emirati embassies, though public reports did not clarify which intelligence branch was responsible, whether the Quds Force, the IRGC's Intelligence Organization, or the Ministry of Intelligence, or some combination. There have also been thwarted Iran-backed attacks in Georgia, Thailand, and India.

Proxy war, however, is Iran's favored means of achieving its foreign policy interests. Its proxy network, sometimes referred to as the Iranian Threat Network (ITN) or Axis of Resistance, comprises between 80,000 and 200,000 radicalized individuals, many who adhere to the Shia sect of Islam and are dispersed throughout the strategic countries of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The main groups in the Quds Force-led proxy network are Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, the Houthis in Yemen, the Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Zainabiyoun Brigade, and Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). These groups loyally conduct operations at the behest of Tehran, but some operate independently—even at times against Tehran's interests. These trends have become exacerbated in the aftermath of Soleimani's death and Qaani's difficulty in managing the sprawling terror enterprise.

The Quds Force recruits from mosques, cultural centers, shrines, and universities. For example, the Quds Force is believed to recruit foreigners in Qom, one of the holiest Shia locations in Iran. Recruits are identified at religious seminaries and transferred to Quds Force training centers, such as the Manzariyah training center near Qom. Foreigners from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria frequently travel to Iran on religious pilgrimages and sometimes find themselves motivated to join the Axis of Resistance.

Iran's Al-Mustafa University also doubles as a recruitment site. In December 2020, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated the university, which has branches in more than 50 countries, because Afghan and Pakistani students were recruited for intelligence purposes and for brigades deployed to Syria. The Quds Force's ability to implement violence worldwide depends on effective outreach to grow the numbers of loyal, radicalized individuals. It also depends on the propaganda campaigns of its proxies, which the Quds Force manages and coordinates through its Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU).

As with Basij recruits, however, Quds Force recruits are not all equally loyal to Tehran. Materialistic motives compete with ideological motives, the latter which can be more powerful in promoting subservience to Tehran's interests. Therefore, the Quds Force's training regimen relies heavily on inculcating recruits with the Islamic Republic's unique brand of antisemitism, anti-Americanism, and

anti-Westernism—concepts often cloaked in the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and anti-Muslim oppression.

Iran vows to support the *muqawama* ("resistance") movement, opposed to what it perceives as imperial powers present primarily in the Middle East. However, the notion also aligns with anti-capitalist, anti-American leftist groups in the Western hemisphere. To intensify the commitment to "resistance" and thus grow the propensity for violence, the IRGC also perverts the commonly-held Shia belief in the eventual return of the Twelfth ("Hidden") Imam from occultation, transforming it into an apocalyptic fantasy in which Imam Mahdi returns and leads an army of good to triumph over evil.

This framework convinces members of the IRGC and its proxy network that violence against the U.S. and Israel is justified as part of Mahdi's crusade. The religious and ideological training regimen also incorporates *velayat-e faqih,* the Islamic Republic's foundational doctrine, which contends that Iran's supreme leader is the preeminent Shia religious authority and should be emulated and followed by all Muslims worldwide.

These aspects of Iran's radicalization campaign, focused on creating hatred against Iran's adversaries, are part of Tehran's long-standing policy of exporting the revolution. However, it should also be noted that the Quds Force extends its outreach and recruitment to Sunnis, such as the Palestinian terrorist groups, as well as Kurds. Tehran seeks legitimacy through pan-Islamism, calling for the unification of the *ummah* ("the Muslim community"). These pan-Islamic appeals broaden the pool of potential candidates for recruitment.

The Quds Force carries out military training as well. Basic weapons training typically lasts 20 to 45 days, but some recruits are introduced to more advanced weaponry, including explosives, mortars, and drones; logistics and support; and strategy. The Imam Ali training complex, west of Tehran, features a firing range for rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and other weapons; and driver and combat training courses, which include simulations of cityscapes and mountainous terrain. Facilities in Esfahan provide demolition and sabotage training. The Quds Force also trains its trusted proxies to facilitate training courses. Lebanese Hezbollah has become an ideal recruiter, trainer, and commander, given its ability to communicate in Arabic, like most potential Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian, and Yemeni recruits; its religious and ideological ties to the Islamic Republic; and its guerilla, UAV, cyber, and propaganda capabilities.

Furthermore, the Quds Force arms and equips its proxies and partners. Quds Force Unit 190 is believed to be tasked with weapons transfers, according to a Fox News report from 2017. To deceive foreign intelligence services, it has used front shipping companies to smuggle weapons and equipment, oil tanker convoys, and even heavily-guarded pilgrim convoys that cross into Syria ostensibly to visit religious shrines—some of which Iran built. Among the weapons it provides are UAVs; USVs; rockets; cruise, ballistic, and anti-tank guided missile systems; small arms ranging from machine guns to sniper rifles; land and limpet mines; improvised explosive devices (IEDs); explosively formed penetrators (EFPs); explosive materials; mortars and artillery systems; RPGs; claymores; man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs); and radars, night vision goggles, and armored personnel carriers.

In addition to Quds Force Unit 190, Israeli media reported in June 2023 on a separate unit responsible for weapons smuggling and logistical operations, known as Unit 700. The newly-identified unit, headed by Gal Farsat, who is known to have extensive connections to senior officials in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, is believed to be responsible for transferring military equipment to Iran-aligned militias, particularly in Syria and Lebanon. These responsibilities appear to overlap and could conflict with those of Unit 190.

The Quds Force's mission to build up its proxies and partners' military capabilities is a low-cost way to project power, but Tehran takes a risk that these entities, once empowered, will pursue divergent interests. The following part of this section looks in more detail at how the Quds Force accomplishes its aims in major theaters of operation. It offers a historical account of the Quds Force operations in Iraq during the U.S. occupation and a description of the challenges facing the proxy leadership structure in Iraq. Then, it turns to Syria, with an account of the Quds Force's role in the Syrian Civil War and a view of the assets, capabilities, and personnel under its management in Syria. Finally, it touches upon Quds Force activities in Lebanon and Yemen.

Iraq: Pulling Baghdad into Tehran's Sphere of Influence

While U.S. and coalition forces occupied Iraq in 2003, the Quds Force under Soleimani's leadership was transferring weapons, including the IEDs frequently used as roadside bombs against the U.S. and later the even deadlier EFPs, to insurgent militias. In overseeing the transfer of these weapons, Soleimani was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 600 U.S. servicemen and women, a staggering 17 percent of all U.S. deaths in the war. Iraqi militias were also trained in Iran in guerrilla tactics, light arms, IEDs, marksmanship, and anti-aircraft missiles to bolster the insurgency against U.S. and coalition forces.

A powerful Iran-backed militia during the Iraq War, Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, was responsible not only for the death of many Americans but thousands of Iraqis in a bloody two-year sectarian civil war that began in 2006 after Shia militants retaliated against Sunni civilians for an al-Qaeda attack on the al-Askari shrine, considered to be one of the holiest Shia sites. Today, unlike most Iran-backed militias, the Mahdi Army, rebranded as the Peace Brigades, opposes Iranian meddling in the Iraqi political system and society.

The U.S. completed the withdrawal of most of its troops in 2011. Three years later, Mosul fell to ISIS, a Sunni extremist offshoot that emerged from the remnants of Abu al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). After the U.S. withdrawal, ISIS eventually took control of one-third of the country. In response to this metastasizing terrorist group, then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki established the Popular Mobilization Forces in 2014. The PMF was dominated by Iran-backed militias, some of which were loyal to Iran's supreme leader; others were loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr. Shia youth responding to Grand Ayatollah Sistani's *fatwa* calling for young men to join the fight against ISIS also joined the ranks but retained their loyalty to Sistani.

Therefore, the PMF groups were united in their opposition to ISIS but not in their allegiances. Both the U.S. and the PMF fought against ISIS separately, and it was largely defeated in 2017, but the PMF remained divided regarding its loyalties to these three powerful Shia figures. Today, despite divergent loyalties, the PMF is a government-funded state institution, nominally under the command of the Iraqi

prime minister. At the same time, the pro-Tehran militias in the PMF, such as the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Kataib Hezbollah (KH), often act in Tehran's foreign policy interests, undermining Iraqi independence and sovereignty.

These militias rank among the most powerful of Iran's proxies. Their management remains the Quds Force's responsibility. Supreme Leader Khamenei, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and the IRGC's Intelligence Organization each recognize the Quds Force's primacy in Iraq. A Quds Force unified command structure, the Ramazan Corps, manages military, intelligence, terrorist, diplomatic, religious, ideological, propaganda, and economic operations in Iraq. Qaani implements policy in Iraq and is probably more powerful than the current Iranian ambassador. With that said, it should be noted that diplomatic posts are often appointed to members of the IRGC, rather than the foreign ministry. A former ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, was, prior to his ambassadorship, a Quds Force operative and confidant to Soleimani. Iran's current ambassador to Iraq, Mohammad Kazem Al-e Sadeq, was also close with Soleimani. He served in several positions in the Iranian embassy in Baghdad, at one point a member of the board of directors of an association which honors IRGC martyrs, particularly those who have served in its Intelligence Organization.

Qaani manages the Iraq file in a way similar to Soleimani, paying attention to the religious, political, and military dimensions of Tehran's interests in Iraq. For example, he meets with Iraqi clergy in Najaf; influential politicians and PMF commanders in Baghdad; militia commanders in Samarra; and Kurdish leaders in Erbil. However, though he is in charge of Iraq's proxy and partner network, other senior Quds Force commanders have likely stepped into the void created by Soleimani's death. This is not to mention that other Iranian entities like the IRGC's Intelligence Organization and the Ministry of Intelligence are also playing a role in managing the Iraq file. Qaani cannot command the many roles that Soleimani played, so a sort of committee may emerge atop the proxy leadership structure in Iraq.

The leadership vacuum in the proxy network in Iraq resulted not only from the death of Soleimani but also from the death of the PMF's former de facto commander, the Persian-speaking KH commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in the same January 2020 U.S. drone strike in Baghdad. Muhandis administered personnel, coordinated logistics, and set and implemented policy within the PMF. The absence of Muhandis and Soleimani—who together mediated between militia leaders inclined to compete for state resources, prestige, and rank in the PMF—inflamed divisions in the Iraqi proxy network. Competition between KH and AAH has occasionally devolved into internecine turf wars and assassinations. The Iraqi militias became less cohesive in the absence of these two individuals.

They also became more disobedient. The PMF militias have an interest in remaining on good terms with their benefactor Iran. However, they also face internal pressures to conduct attacks that may not be in Tehran's interest. The regular attacks against Iraqi government assets and U.S. diplomatic and military personnel could be a response to demands from the groups' radicalized elements. They could also have been directed by the IRGC. The Iraqi government remains a target of KH and AAH, despite Qaani's efforts to rein them in. Throughout the Biden Administration's nuclear negotiations with Tehran, Iraqi proxies picked up the tempo of missile and drone strikes against the U.S. military—which remains in Iraq to advise, assist and train its partners in preventing the resurgence of terrorist groups. The increased

frequency of attacks demonstrates a lack of deterrence, likely resulting from the Biden Administration's reticence to use force in response.

Therefore, Iran's interests may have shifted, but that does not mean the militia members will adjust their religious and ideological motivations. With the obedience of the militias in question, the Quds Force adopted a new approach. Beginning after the death of Soleimani and Muhandis, the Quds Force began to identify its most ardent loyalists from the larger groups and re-form them into smaller, elite units that report directly to the Quds Force. The recruits are often sent to Quds Force or Lebanese Hezbollah-run training camps and receive instruction in core capabilities, such as drone and information warfare. The newly-formed groups are sometimes mistakenly identified as KH front groups, but they are often in fact separate entities.

Despite its occasional disobedience, KH remains one of Iran's most trusted Iraqi proxy groups. The Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point reported in late 2021 that KH and groups linked to it coordinate logistics in Iraq with the support of the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah. PMF Brigade 17's commander Hassan al-Sari, aka Saraya al-Jihad, is a key logistician for KH in southern Iraq. He oversaw missile systems deployed in Iraq's Maysan governorate, near its southeast border with Iran, as of October 2020, along with then Quds Force commander of operations in southern Iraq, Brigadier General Ahmad Forouzandeh. The Quds Force trusts KH to help manage the weaponry it deployed in Iraq.

The CTC reported that rockets and missiles are brought into Iraq in their constituent parts—body, engine, and warhead—and then reassembled, probably with the help of Quds Force engineers and technicians. By transporting them in parts, they are easier to conceal. The weapons deployed to Iraq—particularly missiles, rockets, and drones—severely undermine internal security and stability. Iraqi officials accused KH and AAH of ordering a drone strike on former Prime Minister Mustafa al-Khadimi's residence, weeks after pro-Iranian groups were routed in national elections in late 2021, to demonstrate their willingness to resort to violence if political outcomes are unfavorable. The officials added that Tehran probably did not direct the attack, given that it wishes to avoid an escalation of hostilities between Shia groups in Iraq. However, it is seldom clear where orders originate, allowing Tehran to disavow any knowledge of them.

Pro-Tehran political figures—often from Shia militias—hold high-ranking posts in the government that they are willing to defend with violence. From these posts, the militias can advance Tehran's security interests. On one such occasion, the Obama Administration could not convince Iraq's prime minister to close down its air space to Iranian planes flying supplies to the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War, as then-Minister of Transport Hadi al-Amiri came from the powerful Iran-backed Badr Organization.

Up to 70 percent of personnel in the Interior Ministry, which controls the Iraqi police force, reportedly owe their loyalty to Iran-backed militias. In 2014, the ministry came under the effective control of Badr Organization commander Hadi al-Amiri. Given the Interior Ministry's personnel composition, the police force tends to permit the militias to operate freely in strategic areas of Iraq. This helps them secure the "land corridor" through Iraq for the transshipment of weapons and equipment to Syria and Lebanon. According to a U.S. Department of Defense report, Iraq's police and emergency response division, both

subunits of the Interior Ministry, as well as the Iraq Army's Fifth and Eighth Divisions, "are the units thought to have the greatest Iranian influence." However, the report notes, "officers sympathetic to Iranian or militia interests are scattered throughout the security services."

Through the IRGC, Iran has built a network of proxies and partners in Iraq that are well-represented not only in Iraq's security agencies, but also in the elected branch of Iraq's government. While formally integrated within the Iraqi government's chain of command, which is headed by the prime minister, the Iran-backed Iraqi militias operate independently of the Iraqi state. They often do the bidding of Tehran, thereby eroding the sovereignty of Iraq's government. In other words, they operate outside the chain of command to conduct attacks against the U.S. military in Iraq.

There have been over 70 attacks against U.S.-operated facilities in Iraq, between Hamas' October 7 terrorist attack against Israel and early February 2024. These attacks were launched without the approval or directive from Iraq's government. The cues and directives for these attacks come from Tehran.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani has implored the militias to stop attacking, as he likely wants to avoid tit-for-tat escalation between the militias and the U.S. He said in mid-January 2024, ahead of planned bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and Iraq regarding the U.S. troop presence, that "halting all [militia] attacks…is our objective." Then, he added that "we [also] call for stopping the coalition's drone flights across Iraq." Yet, the militias have continued to advance their rocket and drone campaign in Iraq, with the aim of evicting the U.S. military from the region and particularly Iraq. This goal is shared by the militias and Tehran.

Sudani is aligned with the Iran-backed militias, but he seeks to balance the interests of his hardline constituency, which advocates for more attacks on the U.S. and demands a complete U.S. troop withdrawal, with broad Iraqi foreign policy interests that include maintaining relations with the U.S. He has condemned the U.S. retaliatory strikes in Iraq, calling them a violation of Iraq's sovereignty, and he has publicly stated that the U.S. military presence in Iraq is no longer necessary, while at the same time asking for strong relations with the U.S.

The U.S. is not the only foreign power that has received Sudani's ire for military actions taken inside Iraqi territory. Iran has also conducted missile attacks inside Iraq. One such attack took place in January 2024, leading Iraq's prime minister to recall the ambassador to Tehran. The Iranian regime conducted these attacks to relieve pressure from hardliners to take action against Israel and ISIS, because the regime had blamed Israel for being involved in the above-mentioned ISIS suicide bombing in Kerman, Iran.

Syria: Assets, Capabilities, and Personnel

Syria is another major theater that demonstrates how the Quds Force thrives in an environment of instability and weak central governance. Just as Tehran's influence in Iraq rapidly grew out of the chaos it fueled and promoted after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Arab Spring-inspired uprising against Assad provided a ripe opportunity for Iran to expand its presence in Syria. The Arab Spring hit Syria in 2011—the same year the U.S. withdrew most of its troops from Iraq.

The IRGC quickly came to the defense of its longstanding ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. At first, the Quds Force advised, assisted, and trained the Syrian army and pro-regime militias, but as the rebels gained the upper hand, the IRGC increased its presence in Syria. In 2015, Soleimani was dispatched to Russia to request its air support. Russia obliged, then began dropping barrel bombs—often on civilian populations—in support of Iran-backed proxy groups and Assad's army. The IRGC supplied its proxies with weapons and heavy-equipment and provided artillery support.

In 2016, the IRGC's Ground Force, the Basij, and the Artesh, participated in operations that led to the fall of Aleppo, turning the tide of the war in Assad's favor. Quds Force operatives then transformed Syria into a forward operating base to threaten Israel. In 2018, more than 2,000 Quds Force operatives and tens of thousands of proxy fighters remained in Syria. Their mission evolved from being covert and plausibly deniable to overt military entrenchment.

The Quds Force set up assets and capabilities in Syria that give Iran strategic depth, or the ability to fight a war closer to enemy territory. A study published by the Jusoor Center at the end of 2021 identified an IRGC presence at more than 180 sites in Syria, including military, security, and operational bases, and logistics hubs and outposts. The study shows a heavy concentration in the Damascus countryside, Aleppo, and the western banks of the Euphrates River in Deir Ezzor province.

The Quds Force oversees the IRGC's construction of permanent basing, and then often runs the facilities. Among the most significant bases in Syria is the Imam Ali compound in Deir Ezzor province, near the strategic Al-Qaim-Abu Kamal border crossing with Iraq. On September 3, 2019, Western intelligence sources revealed that the compound, then under construction, would soon become operational. Six days after this report, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) struck the base, reportedly causing severe damage, and again in March 2020 strikes were carried out against the base. A human rights organization on the ground claimed that the U.S.-coalition conducted the latter strikes, but the U.S. denied the allegation.

An October 2022 Alma Center report notes that the base remains "very significant in bringing weapons [including ballistic missiles] into Syria." The Imam Ali compound is the largest IRGC base in Syria, with the capacity to house thousands of personnel and store missiles underground. After the IDF struck the base in 2019, the IRGC reportedly began expanding the base's underground storage facilities. The base is equipped with missile launch platforms and air defense systems.

Also strategically positioned in Deir Ezzor, the Al-Kum ("T-2") base was assessed to hold high-value to the IRGC as recently as February 2022. The Tiyas ("T-4") airbase—positioned 60 km west of the historic desert city of Palmyra, where another key IRGC compound is located—serves as a drone operations center. It was equipped with a Khordad air defense system in 2018, the same year in which the Israeli Air Force bombed the facility on two separate occasions. The Imam Ali compound, the T-2, and the T-4 bases are positioned along a straight line running through Syria from the border with Iraq to Homs. The network also crosses through Palmyra.

Iran's forward deployment of air defense systems is the responsibility of the Quds Force and the Aerospace Force working together. Soleimani reportedly led efforts to coordinate their shipment, but the Aerospace Force's deputy coordinator, Brigadier General Fereydoun Mohammadi Saghaei, took the

lead on deploying them and possibly managing them, with the assistance of Lebanese Hezbollah. Israel insists that Iran withdraw these systems, along with its long-range missiles, as they impede its freedom of action and pose a threat to Israel's homeland.

The Quds Force's central command headquarters in Syria, known as Beit al Zajaja ("the Glass House"), was operational as of 2020, despite being struck by the IDF in late 2019. Located near the Damascus International Airport, militia commanders and government officials are believed to convene at the Glass House to plan, coordinate, and conduct military operations across the country. Additionally, field communications are received, and intelligence is aggregated here. There are also departments dedicated to military intelligence, counterintelligence, logistics, propaganda, communications, and operational command and control. Israel has struck Damascus International Airport on multiple occasions since 2019 to prevent its use as a transshipment hub, though public damage assessments have not indicated the command headquarters' condition. On January 3, 2023, Israel fired missiles at the international airport, putting it out of service and causing material damage in nearby areas.

In addition to permanent basing, the Quds Force operates a network of research and manufacturing facilities in Syria. The Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah continue to implement Qassem Soleimani's plan, dubbed the "Precision Project," to assert control over the weapons facilities in Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center (CER). Iranian mechanical engineers in the past led efforts to develop Scud missiles with North Korea in a project known as "Project 99" at CER's Institute 4000, located in Masyaf, Syria. Critical operations were moved there during the civil war.

The IRGC was tasked with rebuilding Institute 4000 after Israel bombed it in August 2022. A month later, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz revealed the location of ten production facilities used for "mid- and long-range, precision missiles and weapons," four of which were located outside the city of Masyaf, near the Lebanon-Syria border in northern Lebanon. These sites intend to secure the transfer of advanced weaponry. They enable engineers to reassemble missile, rocket, and drone components shipped from Iran, and upgrade existing arsenals with precision technologies. Quds Force Unit 340 oversees tech transfers, its proxies' missile development, and the export of production capabilities.

The Quds Force, furthermore, operates a complex network of hubs and warehouses woven throughout Syria that allow it to ship weapons westward, toward the Israeli front. This logistics network, known as the "land corridor," was a core interest motivating Iran's intervention in the Syrian Civil War. The network has been used to move weapons to Assad, IRGC bases, and Lebanese Hezbollah, further enhancing the credibility of a threat to Israel's homeland.

The IRGC coordinates logistics in Syria via an operations center, known as Unit 2250, located in Damascus, with satellite offices throughout the country. The Quds Force's extensive involvement in logistics was revealed by the targets struck in a massive IDF missile and aerial campaign launched in 2018, after Israel's air defense batteries intercepted 122-mm Grad rockets and 333-mm Fajr-5 rockets launched by the Quds Force at Israeli assets in the Golan Heights. In response to this unprecedented Quds Force rocket attack, the IDF hit 50 Quds Force targets, including a logistics complex in the Damascus countryside, and a weapons storage facility at Damascus International Airport.

The Iraqi Heyadrioun Division, stood up in 2015, supports Quds Force logistics operations in Syria. This division was trained to specialize in moving personnel and military cargo across borders en route westward from Iran and through depots at major Syrian airports; it is also responsible for escorting officials in Syria. Additionally, the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun, largely made up of Afghanis and Pakistanis respectively, facilitate cross-border weapons transfers from the "Afghani security square," near Albu Kamal's city center in Deir Ezzor.

Senior Quds Force operatives embed in these units in a command role. They aim to create a cohesive proxy army out of an amalgam of languages, cultures, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities. Like its ballistic missiles, its proxy network in Syria allows Tehran to more credibly target Israel's homeland in lieu of a modern air force. The proxies add to the asymmetric deterrent Iran seeks to establish through the use of terrorist organizations in Lebanon and Gaza.

Syria has also been the focus of an intensifying Israeli air campaign, designed to strike at senior IRGC commanders, Hezbollah operatives, and other Iran-linked targets. In the last three months of 2023, the Israeli Air Force killed 19 Hezbollah members, twice as many as in the remainder of the year. In January 2024, Israel successfully targeted a group of five IRGC commanders. The head of the Quds Force intelligence unit in Syria was among those killed. Israel also killed Quds Force Unit 2250 commander, Razi Mousavi, who was in charge of logistics, in December 2023 in a strike in a Damascus neighborhood.

The U.S. has also conducted strikes in Syria, typically striking at proxy interests in eastern Syria, but it does not appear to have engaged high-profile targets from the IRGC. Two of the three strikes that the U.S. carried out in the Deir Ezzor province, where there is a heavy IRGC and IRGC-backed militia presence, took place at the Abu Kamal border crossing with Iraq.

Lebanon: Reinforcing the Southern Front with Israel

In June 1982, the same year the IRGC transitioned to offensive operations against Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC dispatched hundreds of its personnel to organize a guerilla resistance against Israel's invasion of Lebanon. The IRGC trained Shia groups in political and religious indoctrination and military and terrorist tactics. Those groups became Hezbollah, a dominant political party and military power in Lebanon today, and Iran's most trusted partner. Hezbollah is the main beneficiary of Tehran's largess, receiving up to $700 million each year. However, the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal and the reimposition of sanctions on Iran drained the budget of Hezbollah (and the IRGC), forcing it to close offices and furlough fighters.

Over the years, Iran transformed Hezbollah into a formidable military force armed with a diverse range of rockets, missiles, and UAVs. With Quds Force support, Hezbollah is setting up underground, industrial-scale facilities to enhance the accuracy of its missiles and rockets. Iran funds the "Precision Project" in Lebanon, directs the construction of these secret facilities, provides technical know-how, and transfers equipment banned under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231. A key facility is located in the Beqaa Valley, eastern Lebanon. These production capabilities may be less vulnerable to the Mossad and the Israeli Air Force, as they are positioned in Lebanon, than weapons transfers through Syria. Over the years, as a result of Iranian assistance, Hezbollah has extended the range, enhanced the accuracy, and

increased the lethality of its munitions. Hezbollah is an Iranian proxy that can credibly strike inside Israel in the event of military escalation.

In April 2023, Quds Force commander, Brigadier General Qaani, held a series of meetings with militia leaders across the region. At least one of those meetings took place at the Iranian embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, where Qaani met with the heads of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The alleged goal of these meetings was to prepare to strike Israel, which in fact occurred at around the same time as the meeting, with a large Hezbollah rocket attack from southern Lebanon. It was the largest rocket salvo launched since the 2006 war, indicating that aggression towards Israel had been building in the months before the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks against Israel. The *Wall Street Journal* later reported that Hamas' assault had been authorized by IRGC senior officials at a meeting in Lebanon earlier that month.

Yemen: A Geostrategic Threat

Yemen is strategically positioned beside the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, an international waterway connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, and borders Tehran's adversary Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni Houthis threaten international trade traversing the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. They possess Iran-supplied mines, USVs, anti-ship cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, as well as anti-tank guided missiles, UAVs, Katyusha rockets, man-portable air defense systems, and RDX high explosives. Their A2/AD capabilities can be deployed to obstruct shipping in the Red Sea. Iran's ability to direct such actions is another potent deterrent against its enemies. Furthermore, the Houthis menace Saudi Arabia—whose Aramco oil facilities were struck in a sophisticated cross-border drone and missile attack in March 2022—and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). That the Houthis have forced Saudi Arabia to wage an expensive air campaign to protect its national security benefits Iran, because that campaign steals resources that could otherwise be directed toward building its capabilities.

The Quds Force has a long history of operating in Yemen. The on-the-ground presence allows it to facilitate weapons transfers and production in Yemen. With the technical assistance and supplies from Tehran, the Houthis have built up a formidable arsenal of missiles and drones, to become one of the most well-armed Iranian proxies in the region. Since effectively declaring war on Israel by launching a salvo of cruise missiles and drones in its direction, the Houthis have unleashed its capabilities on international shipping, relying on targeting information from an IRGC spy ship that has patrolled the Red Sea since 2017. The rationale they claim for attacking shipping is to harm Israel's economy, as the Shia proxy in Yemen claims it is supporting Hamas, another member of the Iran-helmed Axis of Resistance. Another commander likely in Yemen, who has been the target of U.S. assassination attempts, is Abdul Reza Shahla'i. He led Iran's military support to the Houthis.

Khatam Al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters

The Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters Seal

Khatam al-Anbiya Commander Abdolreza Abed

The Khatam al-Anbiya ("Seal of the Prophet") Construction Headquarters is the IRGC's engineering and construction branch. Under the command of an IRGC general, the economic conglomerate is one of the IRGC's main sources of revenue. First, this section introduces the commander of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters (herein referred to as Khatam al-Anbiya), Brigadier General Abdolreza Abed. After that, it briefly describes how the former military engineering corps amassed such wealth. Finally, it turns to the core function of Khatam al-Anbiya: funding the IRGC operations discussed throughout this resource.

In January 2023, Brigadier General Abdolreza Abed replaced Hossein Hoosh al-Sadat as the head of Khatam al-Anbiya. Abed's roots in the IRGC extend to the early years of the Iran-Iraq War. In the early 1980s, he served as a senior commander in an engineering unit of the IRGC deployed to the western Kurdistan Province of Iran and he later was the executive officer of Khatam al-Anbiya's oil, gas, and petrochemical holdings. Previous Khatam al-Anbiya commanders include such high-profile figures as Rostam Ghasemi, who became an oil minister in the latter years of the Ahmadinejad Administration. The current Speaker of Parliament Mohammad Ghalibaf, a former mayor of Tehran, also served in this role.

After the Iran-Iraq War, Supreme Leader Khamenei formally established Khatam al-Anbiya. Through this new branch, the IRGC took the lead on industrial and development projects, which helped sustain its revenue amid government budget cuts, secure a role for troops in the post-war economy, and also rebuild the country's damaged infrastructure. Khatam al-Anbiya's economic portfolio—and that of the IRGC's more broadly—expanded after the war with the support of then-President Rafsanjani, despite tensions between him and IRGC commanders arising from his efforts to marginalize the IRGC politically and his insistence that the IRGC be combined with the Artesh. An effort to "privatize" government industries essentially meant the transfer of public property and government resources and organizations to regime insiders.

In the 2000s, a succession of no-bid government contracts offered to the IRGC during the Ahmadinejad presidency accelerated the growth of its financial interests, and further enriched regime loyalists. In one contract, Iran's oil ministry awarded Khatam al-Anbiya a $1.3 billion no-bid contract to build a 900-km gas pipeline from the Bushehr province to the Sistan and Baluchestan provinces. Khatam al-Anbiya signed a $2.5 billion government contract to finish phases 15 and 16 of the South Pars oil field without a

bidding process; the IRGC also dominated later phases of construction. As of 2009, the year of Ahmadinejad's fraudulent reelection, Khatam al-Anbiya had been awarded 750 construction contracts for dam projects, water diversion systems, highways, tunnels, buildings, heavy-duty structures, trusses, off-shore construction projects, and water, gas, and oil pipelines.

Khatam al-Anbiya controls a large share of the IRGC's financial assets, estimated to be worth tens of billions of dollars, or between one-third and two-thirds of Iran's total gross domestic product (GDP). This estimate's broad range indicates the difficulty of knowing who owns what in the Iranian economy. In some cases, the construction headquarters may not technically own an entity, but still exercises control over it. Such influence might be rooted in direct personal links to IRGC officials, or other forms of corruption in which an individual owner is rendered beholden to the IRGC. For example, Etemad-e Mobin, a consortium reported to have bought a 51 percent share in Iran's telecommunications business in 2010 minutes after it was privatized and the main competitor was disqualified for "security" reasons, is known to have close ties to the IRGC.

These ties give the IRGC potential access to every phone conversation in the country. As of 2010, Khatam al-Anbiya had control of more than 812 registered companies inside or outside Iran, and had been the recipient of 1,700 government contracts. Thus, between 2009 and 2010, the number of Khatam al-Anbiya's government contracts appears to have increased substantially not only in the construction sector, where it already had 750 contracts, but also in other sectors of the economy.

Approximately 40,000 people were estimated to work for Khatam al-Anbiya as of 2015, not all of whom are members of the IRGC. A large share of this workforce is made up of civilian contractors. Like most other branches of the IRGC, Khatam al-Anbiya plays domestic and foreign roles. In sum, it is a vital funding mechanism that directs state resources to IRGC coffers via contracts with government ministries, including its main clients the Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Oil, Ministry of Roads and Transportation, and Ministry of Defense.

Khatam al-Anbiya monopolizes strategic sectors of the economy, displacing private sector competitors in the process. Khatam al-Anbiya has acquired monopoly power in the agriculture, construction, mining, transportation, and energy sectors, through a flawed government contract bidding process that favors the IRGC. The scale of Khatam al-Anbiya allows it to underbid private sector competitors and its connections with public banks give it greater access to capital. Its reported tax exemptions widen its advantage over the private sector.

Khatam al-Anbiya's accounting practices receive no oversight from independent firms, allowing officials to embezzle state resources. The firm that audits Khatam al-Anbiya is owned by Khatam al-Anbiya. The IRGC's Intelligence Protection Unit is believed to be the only entity that oversees Khatam al-Anbiya. But Khatam al-Anbiya's wealth is not only squandered, it is also used to fund IRGC operations, including terrorism, and the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile and nuclear programs. Furthermore, it plays a role in poverty alleviation, building mosques, schools, housing, clinics, transportation infrastructure, and sports centers in underdeveloped areas often in cooperation with the Basij, to advance the IRGC's political interests. And it implements research programs geared toward technological development and

economic self-sufficiency. Abroad, it works to project soft-power by funding and carrying out development projects.

Khatam al-Anbiya has thrived in both hardline and more pragmatic Iranian administrations. As noted, its economic portfolio rapidly expanded as the Ahmadinejad Administration handed over lucrative government contracts and privatized government entities, but that process did not slow down when former President Hassan Rouhani came into office in 2013. Contrary to the commonly-held belief of some Western audiences that Rouhani's reform program would disempower the IRGC, he continued to enable and fuel its growth, while boxing out private investors and robbing resources from the Iranian people. Today, the IRGC is poised to continue to grow under the current hardline administration of President Ebrahim Raisi.

Often-quoted, Rouhani once referred to the IRGC as "a state with a gun," insinuating that it uses coercion and intimidation as a business practice. This statement encouraged the Western view of Rouhani as a relatively moderate reformer. But that view must be reexamined in light of government contracts awarded to the IRGC by his ministries. As just one example, in 2018, the Ministry of Petroleum awarded Khatam al-Anbiya 10 projects in the oil and petrochemical industries valued at $22 billion, four times the official budget of the IRGC. It is noteworthy that foreign firms did enter the Iranian market while Rouhani was president. However, the notion that poor economic performance can be blamed on sanctions does not hold up under close scrutiny, as it becomes apparent that corruption, mismanagement, and structural problems are to blame. The IRGC's efforts to steal wealth from the Iranian people and amass power is the group's modus operandi.

U.S., E.U., and U.N. sanctions reduce Khatam al-Anbiya's revenues, and thus hinder the IRGC's activities. The U.S. Treasury Department first designated the holding company in 2007, and has since occasionally designated its leadership and some of its subsidiaries; however, many still operate free of sanctions. During nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 in Vienna in June 2022, the Islamic Republic reportedly demanded that U.S. sanctions against the construction headquarters be lifted as a condition of reviving the 2015 nuclear pact. Such a decision would neuter the panoply of sanctions Khatam al-Anbiya is under pursuant to U.S. law, and would resource the IRGC's efforts to sow fear, death, and destruction at home and abroad in the furtherance of its ideological mandates.

The E.U. first levied sanctions against Khatam al-Anbiya in 2008, noting that it was linked to Iran's nuclear proliferation activities and its production of nuclear-weapon delivery systems. The U.N. maintained its sanctions from 2010 until after the implementation of the JCPOA in 2015. Its sanctions list contends that Khatam al-Anbiya "undertakes a significant amount of work on Passive Defense Organization projects," and that its subsidiaries were heavily involved in the Fordow nuclear enrichment site. If the JCPOA is revived, E.U. WMD-related sanctions on Khatam al-Anbiya would be lifted in October 2023.

Recommendations

In the last two years of the Trump Administration, the U.S. government issued several rounds of sanctions against the IRGC, targeting its revenue sources. As noted earlier, the Treasury Department

sanctioned Bonyad Taavon Basij, a network of businesses and financial institutions supporting the Basij, under E.O. 13224 in October 2018. But perhaps the most significant designation—and the most detrimental to the IRGC's reputation and its ability to procure financial resources through business activities around the world—came in April 2019, when the U.S. State Department designated the IRGC in its entirety as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). The IRGC thus joined a group that includes ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah. In September 2019, the State Department's "Reward for Justice" program announced a $15 million reward for information leading to the disruption of the IRGC's financial mechanisms. The next month, the State Department sanctioned Iran's construction sector, which is dominated by the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters.

Though the U.S. government has long viewed Tehran as a "state sponsor of terrorism," the FTO designation was unprecedented; it was the first time the U.S. government designated an entire branch of a foreign government as an FTO. As a result of this designation, those who provide material support to the IRGC are criminally liable. The Treasury Department was empowered to block the IRGC's assets; and IRGC members were prohibited from entering the U.S. This initiative, along with the Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal and reimpose sanctions on key sectors in Iran's economy, severely dented the IRGC's revenue, and weakened its proxies, which received less funding. Sanctions enforcement undermines the Islamic Republic of Iran's power, as the government is deprived of the resources to sustain its patronage network reaching into the IRGC.

In April 2022, then-U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley said, "I believe the IRGC-Quds Force to be a terrorist organization, and I do not support them being delisted from the Foreign Terrorist Organization list." Efforts to reverse the sanctions imposed on the IRGC, or a failure to target the individuals and entities enabling it, will resource the very entity that is brutally repressing its own people and undermining regional security, U.S. regional interests, and European security.

The IRGC may further challenge European security in the coming months by transferring surface-to-surface missiles to Russia in addition to the attack drones it has already sent. The E.U., however, has not yet followed suit in designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization. On January 3, 2023, reports revealed that the U.K. government intends to proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organization, which will make belonging to the group or supporting it a criminal offense in the U.K., but as of one year later the U.K. has not taken such action.

Other non-kinetic options are available to the U.S., including building up the capabilities of our allies and partners in the region and promoting interoperability between them. U.S. intelligence assistance to regional allies to determine the locations of high-value targets in Iraq and Syria is essential to any campaign to assassinate IRGC operatives. Deepening regional networks will only improve the ability to identify and strike land-based weapons, supply-lines and convoys. The U.S. would also benefit from continuing to provide the arms that its partners need, ranging from air defense systems to offensive weaponry, with the hope of deterring Tehran. For instance, the U.S. should transfer to Israel the massive ordinance penetrator, which is capable of destroying hardened Iranian assets, to enable it to destroy nuclear facilities in Iran or weapons production facilities in Syria. The Abraham Accords should also serve

as a foundation for diplomacy and military cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia.

There are also kinetic options that may be employed to retaliate against Iran's proxies for their attacks on U.S. diplomatic and military personnel. U.S. deterrence has eroded significantly because the Axis of Resistance has escalated its aggression sharply, while eliciting a minimal U.S. retaliatory response. Of the dozen or less airstrikes that the U.S. carried out in Iraq and Syria since the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack to early February 2024, none of them appear to have eliminated Iranian personnel. The IRGC, though being responsible for arming and directing the proxies, has faced minimal to no consequences, which creates a severe deterrence deficit and invites further aggression. That is why targeting the IRGC is recommended. Unless and until Iran receives severe consequences for its escalation, it will continue to push the threshold.

Conclusion

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the IRGC has faithfully executed its duty to protect the revolution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. The IRGC is a core constituency in the regime's support base that can be relied upon to use repressive violence to maintain stability in times of unrest. The IRGC is also the vehicle through which Tehran exports the revolution, deters its enemies, and pursues regional hegemony. Its ideology is rooted in fear and hatred of free, Western nations. The Islamic Republic of Iran's *raison d'être* depends on a perpetual external threat, namely the U.S. and Israel, endangering its subjects' way of life.

The military objectives pursued by the IRGC demonstrate that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not merely implement a defensive doctrine, though defense and deterrence are undoubtedly important goals. Iran attempts to establish a forward presence and a long-range strike capability to increase the costs Israel and the U.S. would pay in the event of military escalation. Its asymmetric naval capabilities discourage a sea conflict. A partisan paramilitary organ at home and the mountainous terrain along Iran's borders deter a ground invasion. Its ballistic missiles could be used against countries perceived as supporting its enemies in the event of a conflict, potentially inflicting a psychological toll.

Iran's malign and destabilizing activities show that its concept of regime survival is inextricably linked to aggression. Its continuous unconventional warfare operations debunk the claim that Iran merely pursues deterrence. Tehran wants to become the dominant regional force and, consistent with that goal, is intent upon the expulsion of the foreign powers it has defined as enemies, despite the growing unpopularity of those portrayals at home.

Kata'ib Hezbollah

Iran has reportedly financed, trained, and founded Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iraqi militia which is sanction-designated by the U.S. government as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).

- **Type of Organization**: Militia, religious, terrorist, transnational, violent
- **Ideologies and Affiliations**: Iranian-sponsored, Islamist, jihadist, Khomeinist, Shiite
- **Place of Origin**: Iraq
- **Year of Origin**: 2006–2007
- **Founder(s)**: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)
- **Places of Operation**: Iraq, Syria

Kata'ib Hezbollah: A Sanctioned Terrorist Group Sponsored by Iran

Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) is an Iranian-sponsored, anti-American Shiite militia operating in Iraq with ancillary operations in Syria. During the U.S.-led war in Iraq that began in 2003, KH earned a reputation for planting deadly roadside bombs and using improvised rocket-assisted mortars (IRAMs) to attack U.S. and coalition forces. According to U.S. diplomat Ali Khedery, KH is responsible for "some of the most lethal attacks against U.S. and coalition forces throughout the [U.S.-led war in Iraq]." In August 2019, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy* fellow Michael Knights assessed that KH posed the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the country. The group's former leader, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, is the alleged mastermind behind the U.S. and French embassy bombings in Kuwait in 1983 and the assassination attempt on Kuwait's emir in 1985.

After the U.S. military withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, KH sent fighters to defend the Assad regime in Syria, allegedly at the behest of Qassem Soleimani, then head of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). As KH switched from fighting U.S. forces in Iraq to combating Sunni rebels and extremists in Iraq and Syria, KH continued to prioritize its anti-American agenda, repeatedly boycotting battles against ISIS in which the U.S. participated.

KH is sanction-designated by the U.S. government as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). It is also reportedly the "most secretive" and elite of Iraq's predominantly Shiite militias. KH has long-standing ties to Iran's external military branch, the IRGC-Quds Force, as well as to Iran's proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

KH is suspected of involvement in extrajudicial killings and abductions in Iraq's Anbar province, including the May 27, 2016 abduction of more than 70 Sunni boys and men from al-Sijir, and the murder of 49 men from Saqlawiyah. Moreover, the group has gained exclusive control over the Jurf as-Sakr area west of Baghdad where it prevents displaced Sunni residents from returning, operates private prisons, and produces, tests, and stores rockets and other explosives. This area, located in Babil province, near the holy Shi'a city of Karbala, which the group claims to protect against ISIS, "touches on numerous military industrial sites," wrote one expert at *the Washington Institute.*

Since the Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018 and implemented a "maximum pressure" campaign imposing economic hardship on Iran, Iran has pursued a strategy of gradually escalating hostilities against U.S. economic and military interests and its allies, while avoiding red lines that would have triggered devastating reprisals.

In April 2019, according to intelligence reports, then IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani met with Iraqi Shi'a militia leaders and told them to prepare for a proxy war against the U.S. KH has been at the forefront of Iran's ongoing campaign of provocations, initiating hostilities and then exercising strategic restraint to minimize or avoid repercussions.

On May 14, 2019, explosives-laden drones hit two Saudi oil-pumping facilities. The attacks were originally thought to be carried out by the Houthis from Yemen, but U.S. intelligence later revised this assessment and found the attacks emanated from KH's Jurf as-Sakr base on the outskirts of Baghdad, implicating the group in the attacks. A few days later, on May 19, a missile was launched from Amana Bridge in Baghdad, reportedly aimed at the American embassy but landing in an empty field near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. According to a senior official in the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Services (CTS) the rocket was launched by KH.

Between October and December 2019, against the backdrop of an Iraqi protest movement whose grievances largely centered on Iran's continued meddling in the country's political affairs and the unchecked influence of Iran-backed militias, the Iran-backed militias undertook a concerted campaign of rocket attacks targeting U.S. military targets in the country. According to a U.S. military official, forensic analysis of the rockets and launchers used during the spate of at least ten attacks indicated the involvement of Shi'a militias, most notably Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Katai'b Hezbollah. The attacks placed the U.S. on a collision course with the Iran-backed militias.

KH's involvement, along with the Iraqi security forces, in the suppression of the popular anti-government protests starting in October 2019 did not help its public image. Members of KH are also believed to be involved in targeted assassinations of political activists who participated in the protests. Within two months, the death toll from the protests was over 600, with allegations of mass arrests and torture. Former IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani reportedly facilitated the transfer of Katyusha rocket launchers and shoulder-fired missiles to KH to be used to provoke a U.S. attack and redirect the anger of the people toward American interests.

The situation reached a boil in late December 2019 and early January 2020. On December 27, 2019, more than 30 missiles were fired at an Iraqi military base near Kirkuk, killing a U.S. contractor and wounding four U.S. troops as well as two members of the Iraqi security forces. The U.S. accused KH of being responsible for the attack, and retaliated by launching strikes against 5 KH targets in Iraq and Syria including weapons depots and command and control centers. The U.S. strikes reportedly killed at least 25 KH militants.

On December 31, 2019, protesters, including members and supporters of KH, attempted to storm the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Demonstrators threw stones and torched a security post, prompting embassy guards to respond with stun grenades and tear gas. The militia supporters withdrew from the embassy

after prominent commanders reportedly spoke to them. On January 1, 2020, following orders from Mohammed Mohyee, KH's political spokesman, thousands of protestors dispersed from the American Embassy in Baghdad. The withdrawal was reportedly agreed to upon the condition that the Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, will move ahead with legislation to force American troops out of Iraq. KH leadership vowed to return if the group was unsuccessful in forcing a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq through the political process. In response to the attack on the embassy, former President Trump issued a statement that his administration would consider attacks by Iran-backed militias as attacks by Iran.

Then, on January 3, 2020, the U.S assassinated Soleimani in his vehicle convoy at Baghdad International Airport, claiming he was actively involved in plotting to attack Americans amid the heightened regional tensions. In the car with him and also killed was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the founder of KH and then the most powerful commander in the PMF. On February 26, 2020, as a result of the numerous terrorist attacks against U.S. and Coalition Forces in Iraq, including IED attacks, rocket-propelled grenade attacks, and sniper operations, the U.S. designated Ahmad al-Hamidawi, the Secretary General of KH, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.

On March 11, 2020, Iran-backed Shiite militias attacked Camp Taji in Iraq, killing two American and one British servicemembers, and wounding 14 others. The next day, KH released a statement saying, we "ask Allah to bless those who carried out the jihadi operation that targeted U.S. occupation forces at Taji Base in Baghdad…We assure them that we will defend them and deter anyone from targeting them." In response to this aggression, on the evening of March 12, U.S. forces conducted a defensive precision strike against KH facilities throughout Iraq, specifically five weapon storage facilities, which contained arms that have been used against coalition forces.

A KH front group known as Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq claimed a drone strike on Riyadh on January 23, 2021. This attack revealed the increasing sophistication of KH drones, as it took place over a range of nearly 650 miles. KH houses most of its drones at Camp Speicher, an Iraqi Air Force academy and former U.S. military base outside of Tikrit, and likely also stores them at the Jurf as-Sakr site. *The Washington Institute's* analysis of satellite imagery from a wrecked drone in Erbil shows that the Iraqi militias have begun using drones with twelve-foot wingspans that are similar to Iranian-designed models used by the Houthis and Lebanese Hezbollah.

In March 2021, KH is believed to have attacked U.S. forces stationed at Ain al-Asad air base in the western Anbar province of Iraq. In May 2021, the base was attacked again; this time with drones. U.S. airstrikes in June of that year, which the Pentagon said targeted KH facilities at the border of Iraq and Syria, may have been retaliation for these attacks. In August 2021, the U.S. placed additional sanctions on the Iran-backed militia for violating a U.S. law that restricts weapons transfers from Iran.

KH's anger with the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis in Yemen, as well as the Abraham Accords that were established in late 2020, was directed at the UAE in a social media statement by Musawi: "After a series of continuous assaults [against the Houthis] by those who made the Zionist dream come true… we will launch a big campaign to gather money for the Yemeni people to buy drones… to punish al-Salul and the House of Zayed [the UAE ruling family]." In January 2022, KH implemented a mostly-

ineffective fundraising campaign that purported to help Yemini youth when in actuality it was designed to raise money for drones for the Houthis to attack the UAE.

KH does Iran's bidding in Iraq in many ways, but it has continued launching attacks outside of Iraq to advance Iranian regional interests. In February 2022, Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq allegedly launched a drone from Iraq into the UAE.

In January 2024, KH was responsible for a drone attack at Tower 22 in Jordan, which killed three American troops and injured over 40 others. That attack further underscored how the terrorist group's ability to threaten the U.S. is transnational, rather than exclusively contained to Iraq. KH was also held responsible for attacks on Ain al-Assad airbase on November 20, 2023 and January 20, 2024. Both of these attacks employed ballistic missiles and represented a significant escalation as those missiles are capable of carrying heavier warheads than the rockets and drones typically used in attacks.

Three Americans were also injured in a KH attack at Erbil International Airport on December 25, 2023; one of the servicemembers was injured critically. The majority of other attacks have been claimed by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, of which KH is a member.

The U.S. has conducted multiple retaliatory strikes against KH, including inside Iraq without the permission of the Iraqi government. The U.S. hit KH targets on three occasions, as of early February 2024. One of those strikes took place at Jurf as-Sakr and another on KH positions east of Baghdad. KH likely came under attack, as the U.S. struck 85 targets across Iraq and Syria in retaliation for the Tower 22 drone strike, but reports did not indicate whether and to what extent the strikes degraded KH's capabilities or caused casualties in its ranks. In early February 2024, the U.S. deployed a Reaper drone over the skies of Baghdad and conducted a targeted strike against the moving vehicle of Abu Bakr al-Saadi, a senior member of the KH terrorist group.

Controlling Iraq's Border with Syria

KH has a prominent role, alongside Lebanese Hezbollah, in maintaining control over the al-Qaim border crossing between Iraq and Syria, after the group helped oust ISIS from the area in late 2017. While KH controls the road between al-Qaim and Akashat to the southwest, it is not the only actor on the Iraqi side of the border. According to a *Carnegie Endowment* report from 2020, "the Iraqi Army's 7th and 8th Divisions, border guard units, a counterterrorism force, federal police, various militias operating under the auspices of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and a local tribal force" are all present here. ISIS has also sought to expand its insurgency into Anbar province.

Located in the western Anbar desert of Iraq, al-Qaim is a strategically important location for Iran and difficult for the Iraqi government security forces to monitor. This crossing is a critical transit hub for weapons and supplies from Iran into Syria and the Levant. Kataib Hezbollah is also present on the Syrian side of the border in Abu Kamal.

Illegal cross-border smuggling operations, which include drug smuggling, provide vital revenue to the terrorist group. The smuggling of Captagon pills flourishes in the areas under KH control, between al-

Qaim and Rutbah. ISIS also takes advantage of the drug trade in this region. According to one resident in al-Qaim, Iran-backed militias "control all access points." KH's control of the border also allows it to ensure that weapons and other illegal shipments are not stopped by customs.

KH derives its legitimacy from the fact that it helped to liberate Iraqi cities and towns from ISIS. It frequently issues warnings that ISIS is still poised to carry out terrorist attacks so that it is still seen as being necessary. The group also alleges that the U.S. has supported ISIS to seek popular support for its mission against the U.S. military. A KH military spokesperson said in February 2022: "We have information about ISIS's intentions to enter the Karma district," and "America is facilitating the movement of terrorists on the border."

The Iraqi people, including those in Anbar province, are increasingly fed up with the activities of the Iran-backed militias. KH brigade movements reportedly sparked an outcry in the province, which has become increasingly Shiite since KH took control there. KH reportedly took farm land from locals for "security reasons" and stopped Sunnis displaced from the war against ISIS from reentering the province. A local security officer told *Al-Monitor* "All foreigners—except the Lebanese and Iranians—are enemies [to the PMF]. They [the PMF] are the same as ISIS." KH's harsh sectarian policies could fuel a resurgence of Sunni radicalism and ISIS, which continues to have a presence in the region. KH is known for its sectarianism, even more so than other Iran-backed militias.

Iraqi Politics: Countering Militia Influence

On July 1, 2019, Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Mahdi decreed that the PMF forces, including KH, must fully integrate within the Iraqi armed forces chain of command or disarm. *The Counter Extremism Project* notes that the policy may have been adopted under pressure from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, given the above-mentioned KH drone attack on Saudi oil facilities in May 2019.

Mahdi's predecessor, Prime Minister Kadhimi, also sought to limit the power of the militias, whom he referred to as "outlaws," and establish the state's monopoly on violence. KH stood in the way of his efforts, as one of the most dangerous and powerful Iran-backed militia in Iraq. KH is officially part of the Iraqi state, and as such receives government funding, however it frequently disregards the Iraqi chain of command; its loyalty rests with Iran and the IRGC. Coordinating with other PMF militia leaders, KH's Abu al-Askari claimed that Kadhimi won the premiership through "fraud" and that he was trying to postpone the elections by promoting tension between demonstrators and Iran-backed militias.

In an effort to combat the Iran-backed militias, Kadhimi launched a campaign to fight corruption at the borders and re-establish state control. In the west, the borders with Jordan and Syria are largely desert and difficult to secure. On the eastern border with Iran, the Zerbatiya crossing in the Hamrin mountains is known to be a safe-haven for insurgents. The Port Authority's efforts resulted in government revenue, but many of the border crossings are still believed to be under the control of Iran-backed militias.

Kadhimi's policies to counter the PMF militias may have provoked the failed drone assassination attempt on his residence, which some Iraqi officials blamed on KH and AAH. KH had threatened violence if parliament approved Kadhimi as prime minster; threats for which a senior leader of the militia, Abu al-

Askari, was later issued an arrest warrant. The leader of KH denied the groups involvement in the attacks, saying "no one in Iraq has the desire to waste a drone on the house of a former prime minister."

A prominent political figure, Muqtada al-Sadr, appears to support Kadhimi's approach to the militias, even though he used to command one of the most powerful Iran-backed militias in Iraq, known as the Mahdi Army (JAM). Sadr has claimed in the past to have disbanded his units in the PMF and echoed former Iraqi Prime Minister Mahdi's policy of militia integration in the Iraqi chain of command; he explained that if the militias wanted to be a part of his government, they must disband. In response to this message from "a friendly party," a senior KH official, in November 2021, said on Telegram that Saraya al-Difa al-Shaabi, a KH unit, was ordered to "stop all its activities and close its headquarters."

KH Ideology: Hostile to America, Loyal to Iran

According to the U.S. Department of State, KH is "a radical Shi'a Islamist group with an anti-Western establishment and jihadist ideology." The group is virulently anti-American and ideologically loyal to the Iranian regime.

Anti-American: During the U.S.-led war in Iraq, KH built its reputation by targeting U.S. personnel and interests and killing numerous U.S. soldiers in terrorist attacks. Since the U.S. military withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, KH has retained its anti-American ideology. In KH's efforts to fight ISIS in Iraq, KH remains opposed to any cooperation with the United States.

In 2014, the U.S. military redeployed to Iraq to fight ISIS. In September 2014, KH expressed its staunch anti-Americanism despite also fighting against the same enemy as the U.S., releasing a statement that said, "We will not fight alongside the American troops under any kind of conditions whatsoever. [Our only contact with Americans will be] if we fight each other." In March 2015, KH's military spokesman reaffirmed this position, saying, "It is not possible for Kata'ib Hezbollah or any of the resistance factions to be in the same trench as the Americans." In March 2018, KH supported the Iraqi parliament's decision to implement a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. KH had previously warned it was prepared to confront the U.S. military "at any moment" if it was preparing a long-term presence in Iraq.

In October 2020, KH agreed to a conditional ceasefire with the U.S. The PMUs made assurances that while the U.S. and Iraqi governments negotiated a timetable for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops, they would abstain from attacking U.S. forces. The total drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq is a central objective of the Iranian proxy. According to the KH website, "waging jihad against the occupation until the last American is expelled from Iraq" sits among the group's top "jihadi pillars."

But the group was not satisfied with the progress of the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, and thus resumed its attacks. "The equation has changed. Political mediation will not work… This is a new transformation in confronting [the enemy]," said KH-controlled Unit 10,000, a propaganda channel. A spokesperson for the group also claimed that the talks were "coercive." After the ceasefire broke down, KH turned to attacking Iraqi supply trucks in order to prevent the transfer of material to Iraqi security forces at the border with Syria, while at least initially avoiding redlines that could provoke U.S. retaliation.

In July 2021, KH leader, Abu al-Askari, posted a statement to Telegram that said "The decision of the Iraqi resistance is not to attack even the camp of the evil U.S. Embassy in Baghdad." Of course, this does not rule him and his group out as culprits of this recent attack, but it could show that the group does not want the embassy to be shut down in the same way that it wants U.S. troops out of the country. In January 2022, there was an unclaimed rocket attack on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

Pro-Iranian: KH's loyalty to Iran is key to the group's ideology. A *RAND Corporation* report claims that "Kata'ib Hezbollah, like Lebanese Hezbollah, is used as a tool to 'export the Islamic revolution' as practiced in Tehran." KH openly accepts Iran's vision of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurists), a strain of political theology that entrusts Iran's Supreme Leader with unique authority in the Shi'a faith. Members of KH swear an oath of loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and accept him as their own spiritual leader.

KH has actively projected Iranian power throughout the region. In June 2018, Israel targeted KH in a strike on a villa on the border of Iraq and Syria. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, KH was embedded there with the IRGC to transfer Iranian weapons to Syria. *The Congressional Research Service* also indicated in an October 2018 report that "Iran had transferred short range ballistic missiles to Iran-backed militias in Iraq, reportedly including Kata'ib Hezbollah."

KH's Organizational Structure: the "Most Secretive" Militia in Iraq

Many analysts consider KH the most secretive Shi'a militia operating in Iraq. Abu Madhi al-Mohandes was the leader of KH. He was killed in January 3, 2020, in an airstrike on Iraq's Baghdad International Airport that also killed Qasem Soleimani, then head of Iran's Quds Force. Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes is the nom de guerre of former Iraqi MP Jamal al-Ibrahimi. Al-Mohandes also served as Iraq's deputy national security advisor and the deputy commander of the Haashid Shaabi (also called the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF), Iraq's umbrella group of anti-ISIS Shiite militias. In the fight against ISIS, the PMF has coordinated military strategy among KH, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), the Badr Organization, and other predominantly Shiite and Iranian-sponsored militias.

KH: Financed by Iran

Since at least 2008, the IRGC-Quds Force has provided funding to KH, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury. The group was founded one year before this financing began. It is widely believed that Iran continues to finance KH's operations.

Such allegations against Tehran for funding the terrorist group emerged in November 2014, when wounded U.S. military veterans and family members of deceased U.S. soldiers filed a lawsuit against European banks for processing money from Tehran that bankrolled terrorist attacks in Iraq. According to the lawsuit, KH allegedly received money from Iran to finance terrorist attacks against U.S. soldiers.

KH has also used extortion to finance itself. Qatari officials reportedly paid $25 million out of a $150 million ransom to KH after it was discovered that the group had kidnapped a member of the royal family. More recently, in July 2023, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's office blamed KH for kidnapping a dual Israeli-Russian citizen, who was studying in Iraq as a student at Princeton. KH claimed that she was working as an Israeli spy with its domestic enemies and opponents, potentially in reference to Sadr.

KH Recruitment: Do You Hate Uncle Sam (but Love Assad)?

KH successfully lured recruits, first by advertising its fight against U.S. forces in Iraq, and later by advertising its fight against radical "Takfiri" Sunni groups. Following the start of the Syrian civil war, the group also promoted its efforts to support Assad's forces in neighboring Syria.

During the U.S.-led war in Iraq, KH filmed attacks against U.S. and Coalition targets, publishing the films online for propaganda and recruitment purposes. During the Arab Spring, KH and fellow Shiite militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) also attempted to attract recruits to fight anti-Assad rebels in Syria. They did so by holding public funerals for fighters in Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad, and by posting updates on the groups' Facebook pages. The two groups also posted phone numbers around Baghdad to attract potential recruits.

KH promotes itself through the prolific use of social media and puts a large quantity of resources into internet propaganda. A *Telegraph* report revealed in 2020 that Facebook received millions of dollars in advertising revenue from KH. Furthermore, the report said that KH deploys "electronic armies" to publish droves of fake news stories on the platform. KH maintained its own website, until the U.S. seized it in 2020, along with another website being used by KH to recruit new members and promote extremist propaganda.

Training from Iran and Hezbollah

KH members receive training from Iran's external military wing, the Quds Force, as well as from Lebanese Hezbollah, another Iranian proxy. By 2008, the Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah were running training camps in four locations in Iran (Tehran, Qom, Ahvaz, and Mashhad). There, KH and Iran's other Shiite militias were trained in the use of small arms and explosives.

Lebanese Hezbollah also ran training camps in southern Iraq until the group was forced to relocate the camps to Iran in April 2008. By 2010, training camps in Iran continued to provide KH with training related to small arms, surveillance, small unit tactics, and communications. By November 2013, KH members trained in either Iran or Lebanon and then flew to Syria to fight alongside Assad regime forces. By 2015, some KH members trained near the city of Samarra in northern Iraq. Over the course of its training activities, KH has developed especially close ties with Unit 3800, the Lebanese Hezbollah wing devoted to arming and training Iraqi Shiite militias.

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is a Palestinian Islamist terrorist group sponsored by Iran and Syria. Founded in 1979 as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, PIJ is the second-largest terrorist group in Gaza today (after Hamas). PIJ is dedicated to eradicating Israel and establishing an autonomous Islamic Palestinian state in the lands currently comprising Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. PIJ believes that the land of Palestine is consecrated for Islam, that Israel usurped Palestine, and, therefore, that Israel is an affront to God and Islam, and that Palestine's re-conquest is a holy task. PIJ's primary sponsor is Iran, which has provided the group with millions of dollars in direct funding, as well as training and weapons. PIJ has partnered with Iranian- and Syrian-sponsored Hezbollah in carrying out joint operations.

Ideology and Activities

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is a Palestinian Islamist group founded in 1979 as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. PIJ is the second-largest terrorist group in the Gaza Strip, after Hamas. The United States Department of State designated PIJ as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on October 8, 1997.

PIJ seeks to establish a religiously-governed Palestinian state comprising all of historical Palestine, and views its clash with Israel as a primarily religious war, rather than a mere territorial dispute. According to the "Manifesto of the Islamic Jihad in Palestine," a document discovered by federal authorities investigating a Florida man with suspected PIJ ties, the group rejects any peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, believing only violence can liberate Palestine.

Two of PIJ's founders, Fathi al-Shqaqi and Abdelaziz Odeh, initially drew inspiration from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. However, in the late 1970s, they became disillusioned with the Brotherhood over what they perceived as the latter's moderation and lack of focus on Palestine. They soon became inspired by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in Iran, and founded PIJ on Khomeinist principles, aiming to establish an Islamic state in Palestine.

Unlike Hamas, PIJ generally does not provide social services; it focuses primarily on violent attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians alike. However, as tensions mounted between Iran and Hamas in the early 2010s over the Syrian Civil War, Iran tried to use PIJ to undermine Hamas—or at least intimidate Hamas into getting back in line behind Iran by undercutting the group's popular support. As part of these efforts, Tehran tasked PIJ with carrying out Iranian-funded discrete charitable and social-welfare activities that traditionally came under the purview of Hamas and its large social-services apparatus. For example, PIJ distributed $2 million in food aid in Gaza from the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, an Iranian-regime–controlled charity.

On February 19, 2020, a PIJ sniper team fired on a group of Israeli soldiers and police officers along the Gaza-Israel border. On February 23, Israeli forces kill a PIJ member attempting to plant explosives along the Gaza-Israel border fence. PIJ launched more than 21 rockets into Israel from Gaza in retaliation. In response to the rocket fire, Israeli forces strike multiple PIJ targets in Syria, killing at least two PIJ members. On February 24, PIJ continued to launch dozens of rockets toward Israel's southern

communities in response. Israel's defense systems intercepted most of the rockets, but damage to homes and minor injuries were reported.

PIJ has become adept at transforming mundane items into armaments that were used to attack Israel in the 2021 conflict between Israel and PIJ and Hamas. As the conflict drew to a close, PIJ leader, Ziyad al-Nakhala, boasted about the weapons that were created from construction materials, like metal pipes, and effectively deployed. "The silent world should know that our weapons, by which we face the most advanced arsenal produced by American industry, are water pipes that engineers of the resistance turned into the rockets that you see," he said. Economic assistance for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip risks inadvertently supplying the materials that are needed for weapons.

According to one expert at *the United States Institute for Peace,* PIJ exhibited an unprecedent ability to "stress" Israel's missile defense system, known as "the Iron Dome," through launching larger quantities of rockets and at a faster pace than in the past. Specialist Fabian Hinz determined that most of the rockets were built in Gaza. Yet, some of them are able to reach Tel Aviv, approximately 45 miles away.

PIJ's weapon of choice in 2021 conflict was the unsophisticated Badr 3 rocket, which is believed to have been designed in Iran for the purpose of transferring the technical know-how to proxies and partners throughout the region. This know-how would allow Iran's militia network to construct their own rockets, where they cannot rely on transfers, as tends to be the case in Gaza under the Israeli blockade.

The Badr 3 rocket carries a warhead that weighs between 661 and 882 pounds. It is heavier than most Palestinian rockets, and thus results in a larger explosion; however, its range is limited. PIJ did not deploy precision-guided rockets in the recent conflict, but they did use other forms of precision-guided munitions, including the Hamas Shehab suicide drone.

The group rejects any diplomatic approach to resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict; it won't even engage in talks with Israel. In November 2021, PIJ Secretary-General Ziyad al-Nakhlah blasted Hamas for accepting aid that was approved by Israel. In an interview with Hezbollah-affiliated news network *al-Mayadeen,* he announced that Israel only approved the economic assistance provided by Egypt because it would "tame Gaza" through incentives. PIJ did participate in the ceasefire agreement brokered by Egypt that brought an end to the 2021 conflict.

PIJ and Hamas

Although Hamas and PIJ have competed for influence and resources in the past, the groups' two leaders made an agreement to coordinate between their military wings, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassem Brigades and the al-Quds Brigades, respectively, and increase terror attacks in Israel, especially in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The agreement to coordinate military activities was reached during a meeting between the leaders of Hamas and PIJ in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip in December 2021.

However, Hamas and the PIJ do not always cooperate. The former group has occasionally advocated for restraint, while at the same time the latter took a more violent route. This happened in April 2022, when Hamas prevented PIJ from firing rockets at Israel, knowing that it would be drawn into an escalation. PIJ reportedly wanted to escalate after three of its members, on their way to commit a terrorist attack,

were killed by Israeli security forces, and Hamas made it clear that it does not want another conflict with Israel at the time.

A few weeks later, tensions were heightened surrounding the overlap of Jewish and Muslim religious holidays and finally boiled over into overt conflict. Several media outlets suspected PIJ of leading the initiative, though the group did not claim responsibility for the rockets launched on multiple occasions on April 18, April 20, and April 22. Senior members of PIJ and Hamas were in contact with Iran from the start of the attacks. Hamas' political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh and the Secretary-General of PIJ spoke by phone with Iran's supreme leader's foreign policy advisor Ali Akbar Velayati.

A key difference between the two Palestinian terrorist groups is that Hamas governs Palestinian territory, whereas PIJ does not. In 2007, Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, and thus inherited the responsibility of looking after the interests of the Palestinians in Gaza. PIJ, on the other hand, does not have governance responsibilities. Where Hamas has to manage various interests, including those of Qatar, another one of its patrons, and daily life of people in the Gaza Strip, PIJ is more subservient to Iran's interests.

Tehran gives millions of dollars a year to its proxy PIJ, while promoting its attacks against Israel. PIJ has at times appeared to be more risk-ready than Hamas, perhaps given that Hamas is held responsible for Gaza's economy and the devastating consequences that attacks against Israel usually prompt from the Israel Defense Forces.

In early August 2022, PIJ launched a barrage of approximately 100 long-range rockets deep into Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, setting off alarms in several suburbs south of Tel Aviv, but causing no injuries. Unlike the May 2021 conflict, in which both Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and PIJ launched rockets into Israel, Hamas did not join PIJ in the August 2022 terrorist attacks on Israel, nor was Hamas targeted in Israel's military response. Hamas has occasionally even indicated it does not want military escalation in the Gaza Strip, given the amount of time and resources required for reconstruction after the May 2021 conflict, which saw intense Israeli airstrikes.

On August 2, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) arrested Bassem al-Saadi, the head of PIJ in the West Bank who had been arrested on multiple prior occasions and released. His arrest in the northern West Bank city of Jenin was part of a series of arrests that occurred under an Israeli operation dubbed "Break the Wave," targeting militants throughout the Palestinian territories in response to a wave of Palestinian violence in which 19 Israelis had been killed. Jenin is known as a hotbed for terrorist activity, and according to the Shin Bet, Saadi was in the process of building up PIJ fighters in the area in preparation to attack Israel when he was arrested.

Prior to the PIJ rocket attack, Israel had already begun to implement defensive measures against the terrorist threat, which had become more imminent after the arrest of PIJ's leader in the West Bank. Anticipating a terrorist attack, Israel shut down roads at the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel. When militant forces and equipment, including anti-tank units, began to move toward the Israeli border, Israel carried out preemptive air strikes against militant positions in the Gaza Strip, killing Tayseer al-Jabari, a top PIJ commander who was responsible for planning terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens.

While the strikes were occurring, PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah traveled to Tehran and met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who signaled his support for the 'Axis of Resistance' and the PIJ's rocket attack against Israel, saying "today, resistance is both defensible as an idea and has yielded results in the field of action." Nakhalah also met with the commander-in-chief of the IRGC while in Tehran. In a letter to Nakhalah, Supreme Leader Khamenei described PIJ's rocket attacks on Israel as "courageous" and stressed the importance of connecting the resistance in the West Bank to Gaza. Behind closed doors, Tehran likely encouraged the PIJ to escalate hostilities against Israel. Indeed, PIJ began launching more rockets into Israel, as the PIJ's leader was in Tehran. But Egyptian mediation, coupled with Hamas' lack of entry into the fighting, likely shifted the balance in accepting a ceasefire.

PIJ and Hamas both praised the spate of terror attacks in Israel that occurred in late March 2022 and early April. PIJ commended attacks in Beersheba and Hadera, even though they were claimed by ISIS, a Sunni radical group that is also an enemy of PIJ's patron, Tehran. PIJ's Khalid al-Batsh said "the self-sacrificing Hadera operation came in response to the summit of humiliation and shame in the occupied Negev," referring to the Negev Summit, which brought together the foreign ministers of Egypt, Israel, the UAE, Morocco and the U.S. in southern Israel to discuss concerns over Iran's regional expansionism and its nuclear program. On the heel of these terror attacks, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah met in Lebanon to discuss Palestinian "jihadist operations."

PIJ in the West Bank

In January 2022, the PA stepped up its repression of its political opposition. It attempted to bar Hamas and PIJ supporters from holding public celebrations for the release of prisoners affiliated with their groups. One political analyst, Hani al-Masry, believes that this new trend owes to the PA's decline in popularity among Palestinians, who have placed their confidence in the PA to form a state for them. Al-Masry told *Al Jazeera* that the "PA fears the growth of other factions, as well as the decline in its standing, and [potential] collapse." According to one poll, a staggering 73 percent of Palestinians want Abbas to step down. Their support for more radical approaches could grow, which would augur the success of Abbas's political opponents.

On some occasions, the PA, Hamas, and PIJ convey the same or similar messages to their followers. For example, with the convergence of Pass Over, Easter and Ramadan in April, religious tensions run high, and the three Palestinian groups each warned, according to the *Jerusalem Post,* that Jews are planning to "storm" al-Aqsa Mosque, also known as Temple Mount, during the upcoming holidays. They further encouraged Muslim worshippers to establish their presence at the mosque and "thwart" the coming "incursions."

The Jordanian foreign ministry even chimed in, calling recent Jewish events at the temple, including religious rituals performed, "provocations" and "extremist." As it regularly does, the PIJ also used this occasion to make a more radical appeal than the PA, issuing a statement that said it had discussed with Hamas "the need to confront the Israeli aggression in in Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip." This rhetoric could contribute to increased tensions surrounding holy sites and cities in Israel.

In February 2022, Israeli forces killed three members of PIJ in a West Bank raid near the city of Jenin. The suspected terrorists opened fire on Israeli troops as they moved in to arrest them, wounding four soldiers. As a result of this operation, Israeli police said that they thwarted a terrorist attack. Intelligence showed that the "terrorist cell [was] on its way to an attack," and the Israeli troops "stopped the car in which they were traveling between Jenin and Tulkarem," according to an official statement.

Also in the West Bank, a senior leader of the PIJ, Khader Adnan, survived an assassination attempt on February 26, 2022. Adnan is said to be the most prominent PIJ leader in the West Bank. The PIJ in Gaza subsequently blamed the PA for the attack and called for an investigation.

Structure

A leadership council governs PIJ. Ramadan al-Shalah, a former University of South Florida professor, assumed the title of Secretary General in 1995 after Israel assassinated cofounder Fathi al-Shqaqi. In 2018, Ziad al-Nakhalah replaced al-Shalah as PIJ's leader.

PIJ's leadership has operated from Syria since 1989, when they relocated from Lebanon after Israel expelled them a year earlier. Official representatives of the group are also stationed elsewhere in the Middle East, including Iran. In 2012, rumors circulated that the group's leadership had relocated to Iran, (despite continued good ties with the Syrian regime), but a PIJ official denied that.

PIJ's militia is called Saraya al-Quds (the Jerusalem Brigades). According to the U.S. Department of State , PIJ possesses an armed strength of about 1,000 members, though the group has claimed it commands 8,000 fighters. Saraya al-Quds' cadres are divided into several regional staff commands, which oversee different cells.

Iranian Support of PIJ's Violent Activities

Iran first established direct ties with PIJ in 1987, when Israel exiled Fathi al-Shiqaqi from Gaza to Lebanon. There, the IRGC's intelligence branch contacted him and began training the group. PIJ also established ties with Hezbollah, Iran's Lebanon-based extension, during this time.

Tehran has financed PIJ since, increasing its funding from $2 million annually in 1998 to $3 million a month in late 2013, according to PIJ sources. However, in 2014, a study claimed Iran provided PIJ with $100-$150 million annually. In February 2019, PIJ spokesman Abu Hamza told Iran's *Al-Alam TV* that "since the day of its establishment, the Islamic Republic [of Iran] has been supporting the Palestinian fighters financially, militarily, in training, and in all aspects."

Iran's tensions with Hamas as a result of the Syrian Civil War likely accounted for Tehran's increased funding to the rival PIJ. Unlike Hamas, PIJ maintained official neutrality on that conflict and remained friendly with Syria's Assad regime. However, Iran appears to have scaled back funding to PIJ beginning in 2015, when a senior leader in the group claimed it was suffering from its worst financial crisis ever. Some within PIJ attributed this cash crunch to Egypt's closure of smuggling tunnels along the Gaza-Egypt border. However, others said Iran had slashed PIJ's financing by as much as 90 percent as of January 2016 because the group refused to officially condemn Saudi-led anti-Iran war efforts in Yemen.

Nonetheless, Iran and PIJ still claim to enjoy good relations. PIJ Secretary General al-Nakhala disclosed that former head of the IRGC Quds Force Qassem Soleimani "personally" managed an operation to send weapons to Gaza, traveling to different countries to supply weapons to the Palestinians. In late 2018, PIJ's elected Secretary General Ziad al-Nakhala visited Iran and met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and senior Iranian officials—including Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani—who pledged continued support for the Palestinian Cause.

In a November 2019 video, PIJ's Al-Quds Brigade introduced a new rocket to its arsenal and thanked Iran for its support. Intelligence and Israeli military officials told *the Wall Street Journal* in May 2019 that Iran provides Hamas and PIJ $60 million annually, but that Hamas has more autonomy than PIJ in its decision-making in Gaza. During this time, reports emerged that PIJ was provoking a conflict with Israel that Hamas did not want. Officials also told *the Wall Street Journal* that PIJ controls more of the 10,000 rockets in Gaza than Hamas does. After a barrage of missile attacks in 2019, Israel launched a targeted killing against one of PIJ's top operatives, Baha Abu Al-Ata, whom Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described as a "ticking time bomb." In a separate strike, Israel also targeted another PIJ operative Akram al-Ajouri in Syria, whom Giora Eiland, a former head of Israel's National Security Council, described as the "real direct connection between Islamic Jihad and Iran."

The nexus between Iran and PIJ was made clear in a May 2021 interview with a PIJ official named Ramez al-Halabi: "The *mujahideen* in Gaza and in Lebanon use Iranian weapons to strike the Zionists. We buy our weapons with Iranian money. An important part of our activity is under the supervision of Iranian experts. The contours of the victories in Palestine as of late were outlined with the blood of Qassem Soleimani, Iranian blood. Today, the patronage of the axis of resistance has begun to prevail in the region, thanks to Allah and to the blood of the martyrs, and it has begun to make an impact, and what an impact!"

A minor discrepancy in messaging between the PIJ and the Iranian regime occurred in September 2021, when the Iranian armed forces suggested that the Palestinian militant group would protect Tehran. The PIJ responded that it exists to fight against Israel and works with Tehran to that end. "All resistance forces, including Iran, stand in one front against the Zionist enemy and its allies," PIJ urged.

Despite the insistence that PIJ is focused on Israel, its supporters gathered in a massive pro-Iran rally, chanting such slogans as "America is the Great Satan" and "Death to the House of Saud." These demonstrations are motivated, in part, through an effective propaganda machine, taught to the PIJ by its Iranian and Hezbollah mentors.

Qatar is also known to be a supporter of PIJ and the Muslim Brotherhood, which does not sit well with the Emiratis, who view political Islam as a threat to their rule. In June 2020, a lawsuit alleged that Qatar sought to "evade U.S. sanctions by channeling its funds through three entities," namely Qatar Charity and two banks controlled by the royal family, Masraf al-Rayan and Qatar National Bank. By extension, the Qataris involved in financing these terrorist groups may be liable for the violence that these groups carry out and required by court order to pay compensation to the victims.

Iranian support to PIJ is extensive and ongoing, proving essential to the terrorist group's ability to cultivate influence in the Gaza Strip and acquire the arms needed to attack Israel. In November 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury in coordination with the United Kingdom (U.K.) took action to stifle

Iranian financing to the group, targeting key PIJ officials, including the group's representative to Tehran, and a Gaza-based firm used to distribute Iranian largess to, among other things, the families of PIJ fighters and prisoners. Hamas also facilitates the transfer of laundered money to the firm, Muhjat Al-Quds Foundation. The U.S. Department of State also designated PIJ's Deputy Secretary General Akram al-Ajouri, who is the Damascus-based leader of the group's militant wing, the Al-Quds Brigades, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. According to the Treasury Department, "Ajouri coordinated the militant training and recruitment operations for PIJ in Gaza, Syria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Yemen." The IRGC is primarily responsible for the transfer of funds to such PIJ-run operations as Muhjat Al-Quds Foundation, and providing such assistance as weapons transfers and operational training.

Violent Attacks Against Israel

On May 2, 2023, tensions escalated between Israel and PIJ after a hunger striker from the terrorist group died in Israeli custody. PIJ and Hamas then fired at least 30 rockets into Israel, causing three casualties and inviting reprisals by Israel. Later that night, reports indicated that the number of rockets fired at Israel was closer to 100. Israel soon after carried out airstrikes against tunnels, arms production sites, and military installations belonging to Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Later in May 2023, PIJ escalated its attacks without being joined by Hamas after Israel killed three of its commanders in targeted airstrikes. This time the rocket salvo caused eight casualties, including one death, and was tied directly back to Iran. A PIJ source told i24 News that the Boraq 85, responsible for killing the Israeli citizen, was an Iranian-made system. Furthermore, the escalation in attacks may be connected to the Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani's meeting with PIJ leadership and leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon in April 2023. Though the details of the meeting are not publicly known, it is believed that he directed Hamas to launch rockets from Lebanon, which soon turned into a multifront attack from Syria and the Gaza Strip, targeting Israel. It was not clear based on public reporting whether PIJ took part in the rocket fire from the Gaza Strip on April 7, 2023, which occurred while Israel carried out reprisals against Hamas targets in retaliation for the Hamas rocket fire from Lebanon on the prior day.

On October 7, 2023, PIJ joined Hamas militants in assaulting Israel. PIJ participated in the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants and took hostages. PIJ chief Ziad Nakhalah claimed that his group is holding over 30 hostages who were abducted from Israel. He stated, they would not be released until all Palestinian terrorist operatives held in Israeli prisons were released. On October 9, PIJ claimed responsibility for a cross-border raid into Israel from Lebanon, stating that it had injured seven Israeli soldiers. On the same day, Israel reported that it had killed several terrorists attempting to infiltrate the border.