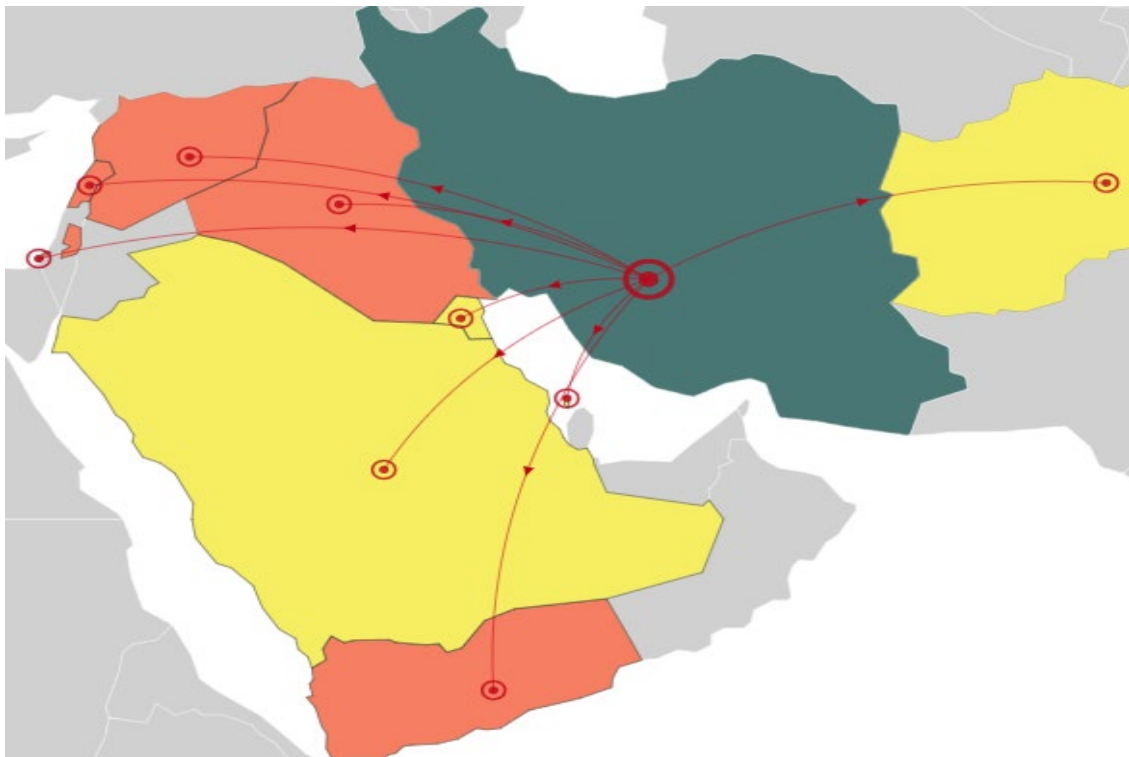


Iran's Proxy Wars: Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories/Gaza, Syria, Yemen

Updated September 2020



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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 not been able to take root, Iran has engaged in subversive activities to undermine its rivals and enhance its influence, as it has done in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Afghanistan.

Iran’s quest for regional dominance has ultimately caused tremendous instability throughout the Middle East, enflaming sectarian divisions and triggering devastating wars that have left hundreds of thousands dead.

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Country Reports

Proxy Wars

Iraq

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- [IRGC \(Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps\)](#)
- [Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#)
- [Badr Organization](#)
- [Kata'ib Hezbollah](#)



Bomb components from Iran used to make deadly improvised explosives devices (IEDs) seized by American forces in Iraq in 2007.

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.

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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." Until his death in a U.S. drone strike targeting his convoy as it left Baghdad's 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, overseeing the training and arming and coordinating the battlefield activities of various Iran-backed Shi'a militias operating in Iraq. 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 political parties. 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 IEDs, which were ["top killer of U.S. troops"](#) in Iraq. 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 Improvised Explosive Device (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 U.S. 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. The sectarian violence Iran helped unleash also claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians in the years following the invasion.

According to the [U.S. State Department Country Reports on Terrorism 2019](#), Iran-backed Shia 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 KH launched more than 30 118 rockets at an Iraqi base hosting U.S. forces in Kirkuk, killing one American contractor and wounding several American and Iraqi service members.

On March 5, 2019, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Harakat al-Nujaba (HAN), an Iranian proxy group established in 2013. HAN is an Iran-backed Iraqi militia funded by but not under the control of the Iraqi government. HAN has openly pledged its loyalties to Iran and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

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 over Mosul with little resistance from

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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 the border from Syria 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 forces in the PMF 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 with the Iraqi central government led to unprecedented coordination among the Iran-backed Shi'a militias and has helped entrench Iranian control over Iraqi affairs.

Reports on the [number of IRGC soldiers killed fighting in Iraq](#) further demonstrate Iran's intense interventions in the area. Iran has supplied Iraq with [\\$10 billion worth of weaponry](#), likely including [T-72S tanks, Safir jeeps, and Sayyad sniper rifles](#).

As a result of these interventions against ISIS, Iranian influence in Iraq has reached an "unprecedented level." 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 rivalled ISIS's as they cleared out 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 Shia militias within the PMF, their power has come to eclipse that of the central government, leading Iraqi officials to either surrender to and appease the PMF, or face reprisals. Iraq's previous 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 Shia fighters inside Iraq today](#), and the government has little recourse to bring the Iran-backed militias, which desire to retain their independence, under its command. It's this Shi'a militia infrastructure that provides Iran a vehicle to threaten U.S. interests in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. At Tehran's behest, these militias have been operationalized to push back against the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, [attacking U.S. personnel and energy interests in Iraq](#).

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 Zolfagar, which can all travel from 200-700 km. This range [places](#) U.S. allies—Israel and Saudi Arabia—within reach. Indeed, the U.S.

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government was forced to shutter its consulate in Basra in September 2018 after Iranian-supported militias [fired](#) rockets at the compound.

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

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 Ambassador to Iraq Iraj Masjedi is himself [a former general in the Quds Force](#) and has served as a top advisor to 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, 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, since he's taken office, Iran has been given 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.

Beyond the orbit of the prime minister, even the new Sunni speaker of Iraq's parliament, Muhammad al-Halbusi, [secured](#) his job after crucial backing from the pro-Iran Fatah alliance. His first positions upon taking office have been payback for Fatah's support—specifically [criticizing](#) renewed U.S. sanctions on Iran.

Outside the political realm, Iran also maintains economic [leverage](#) over Iraq. [According](#) to Ambassador Masjedi, Iran's second-largest export market is Iraq, with bilateral trade 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.

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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 subversion 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 gripping Iraq have witnessed tens of thousands of demonstrators taking to the streets to vent their dissatisfaction with the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, an out-of-touch class of political elites, and Iran-backed militias. Too often, these forces have placed Iran's interests over the public good, for instance [steering Iraq's oil resources to benefit Tehran](#) while Iraq's own citizens lack healthcare, jobs, educational opportunity, consistent electricity, and clean drinking water. Notably, the Iraqi protestors are almost exclusively Shi'a, showing that Iran's political and military maneuvering has failed to translate to winning over the hearts and minds of the core constituency it needs to continue projecting influence in Iraq. Calls for more inclusive governance were high among the protestors' demands, highlighting the unpopularity of Iran's explicitly sectarian approach.

Iran has 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.](#)"

Since Soleimani's ominous proclamation, PMF and Iraqi security forces have 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 Shia 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

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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.

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 to kill 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 Abukamal 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 at this time.

In the event of further hostilities, Iran will likely call upon the Iraqi Shi'a militias to play a role in attacking the U.S. and its allies. 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 risks has increasingly ensnarled their country as a staging ground for proxy warfare between Iran and the U.S.

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Iraq's political situation, meanwhile has continued to deteriorate, further imperiling stability in the country. On November 30, 2019, Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi resigned in response to the protest movement, leading to a two month impasse as rival political parties squabbled over designating a successor. Abdul-Mahdi stayed on as a caretaker in the interim, and in February 2020, Iraq's president [designated Shi'a politician Mohammad Allawi](#), a former communications minister in Nouri Al-Maliki's government, as interim prime minister, a move that was [backed by Iran](#). Allawi was tasked with forming a government until early elections could be called at a future date.

Allawi has attempted to stake a reputation as a reformer. He resigned from Al-Maliki's government in 2012, citing Al-Maliki's interference in his ministry and dissatisfaction with efforts to tackle corruption. Upon being designated interim prime minister, Allawi backed the protestors in their demands and insisted that he would seek justice for those who had been killed, but the protestors rejected Allawi, who they viewed as part of failed Iraqi political establishment.

On March 1st, Allawi [stepped down](#) as he was unable to gain political backing in his cabinet formation efforts. The continuing political instability and protests, as well as the sporadic hostilities between Iran and the U.S., pose formidable challenges to those wishing to restore sovereignty and democracy to Iraq, a situation which Iran will continue to exploit.

Lebanon

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- [Hezbollah](#)



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

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

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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.

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.

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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.

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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.

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 a governmental 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. 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.

It 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, in an effort 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 has backed two consecutive health ministers—Jamil Jabaq and Hassan Hamad. Jabaq, in particular, was [close](#) with its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, having served as his personal physician. The health ministry is not an insignificant position in the cabinet—it has had the [fourth](#)-largest budget. That's not to mention the other [ministries](#) that either its allies or members have occupied in the last two governments, for example the Industry and Sports and Youth Ministries. The most recent prime minister, Hassan Diab, whose government collapsed after less than a year in office amid the explosion of ammonium nitrate at the Beirut port in August 2020 and an economic crisis, was also backed by Hezbollah. In fact, his nomination was only [supported](#) by March 8 parliamentarians.

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

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[reported](#) dominance over Lebanese ports. In fact, Nasrallah himself [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 thereby furthers Hezbollah's ultimate goal—replacing the Lebanese secular system with an Islamic republic based on the Iranian model.

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, 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 the leading sponsor of Gaza-based Palestinian Islamic Jihad (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.](#)”

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Iran has also exerted considerable influence over Hamas, the Sunni Islamist terror group in control of the Gaza Strip. In 1993 Iran, pledged \$30 million in annual support for Hamas' anti-Israel operations. Hamas had consistently enjoyed this financial support, [in addition to military training](#), until [disagreements](#) over Iran's role in Syria created a rift between the two parties. However, Iranian favor has once again returned to Hamas to the tune of "[tens of millions of dollars](#)." Israeli media [reported](#) in August 2019 that Iran expressed a willingness 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 is part of an effort to restore Tehran's image in the Arab and Sunni world, damaged due to its brutality in propping up the Assad regime, through taking back the mantle of anti-Zionist resistance. 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 had also suffered fractured relations with the Assad regime and Hezbollah, the other primary actors in the Iran-led "resistance axis," over the Syrian civil war. At Iran's behest, the [Assad regime](#) and [Hezbollah](#) have mended ties with Hamas in an effort to rebuild the axis. 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-Aroui, led a Hamas delegation to Tehran in October 2017 that met with Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, who assured them that "[Iran's support to the resistance is the main priority now](#)." Aroui, 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 [complained](#) to the U.N. Security Council that it had intelligence showing that Hamas was working with Hezbollah to establish missile factories and training camps for thousands of Palestinian fighters in southern Lebanon. Hamas and Hezbollah's growing cooperation lays the groundwork for a future struggle with Israel that may encompass fighting on multiple fronts with Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies all joining the fray. 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 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."

In February 2020, Israel [seized](#) \$4 million in funds that it alleged were transferred from Iran to Hamas to help the group build its weapons infrastructure and pay its operatives.

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Iran's influence 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 ever increasingly sophisticated and powerful munitions to Hamas with [technology including UAVs](#) being delivered to these groups 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.

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."

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 State Department [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 itself has stepped up its activities in the West Bank in recent years. 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 has waged proxy warfare in the Palestinian Territories, backing the most recalcitrant 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,"

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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 to accept Israel’s existence and normalize its position in the Middle East. After Israel and the UAE announced a deal establishing 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.”



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 over three decades, constituting one of the most enduring partnerships among authoritarian regimes in the region. Iran views the maintenance of Assad’s control in Syria as a check against Sunni power in Syria and the greater Middle East. Through the Assad regime, Iran is further able to project its influence throughout the Levant.

In a testament to Assad’s utility, the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies have played a critical role in saving and sustaining Bashar al-Assad’s regime amidst the ongoing Syrian Civil War, which began as a popular uprising in March 2011 as the “Arab Spring” swept the region. Officials of the Iranian regime have gone so far as to refer to Syria as [“the 35th province \[of Iran\] and a strategic province for us.”](#)

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Syria has been so strategically vital to Iran because it provides a logistical [“land bridge”](#) to Hezbollah and access to Mediterranean ports, which is central to its regional ambitions. The regime also wants to deny a victory to its regional Sunni rivals, and further consolidate its “Shia Crescent” stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Not only does Iran remain the country's [“closest ally,”](#) declaring it will [“support Syria to the end,”](#) but Iran increasingly plays the commanding role in the Syrian Civil War against the rebel forces. In August 2012, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [General Salary About](#) declared, “Today [Iran is] involved in fighting every aspect of a war, a military one in Syria and a cultural one as well.”

This steadfast support has continued throughout the administration of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, a purported moderate. 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.”](#)

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 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.

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

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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.

Iranian Military Support to the Assad Regime

Iran has effectively been in charge of planning and leading the conduct of the conflict. The Iranian regime's support for Syria is broad and comprehensive, and [includes](#) deploying Iranian troops inside Syria, technical assistance, and training for Syrian forces. As early as December 2013, [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) Maj.-Gen. [Mohammad Ali Jafari](#) boasted, "[Iran has] special forces transferring experience and training who are doing advisory work."

[Initially](#), Iranian support was limited to advising and training Assad regime forces. Iranian support to the Syrian regime 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 has subsequently [greatly 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.

Iran has engaged in the facilitation of arms transfers to the Assad regime and proxy militia forces in Syria, including Hezbollah, in violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231. These arms transfers have helped Assad regain lost territory and have given 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 has 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 continue today. Most of Iran's arms shipments to Syria are supplied via air transport. From January 2016 to August 2017, over [1000 flights](#) departed from points in Iran and landed in Syria, indicating an ongoing complex logistical operation to resupply the Assad regime. Israel has referred Iran to the U.N. Security Council on two separate occasions for alleged violations of Resolution 2231 in Syria, once for the [launching](#) of 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.

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As the tide of the war has 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 occasionally 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 is [constructing a military complex](#), the Imam Ali compound, near the border with Iraq where it will house thousands of troops. Some of the buildings at the compound appear to be heavily fortified, heightening suspicions that they may be used to store sophisticated weaponry including precision-guided missiles. The compound was partially destroyed by airstrikes after its existence was exposed, but as of November 2019, Fox News has 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.

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, and over Iranian efforts to establish a presence in the Golan Heights, overlooking Israel's northern border. In November 2019, an Israeli military official alleged, "there are Iranian Quds forces in the Golan Heights and that's not fear-mongering, they're there." Iran's military entrenchment has eroded Syria's sovereignty and invited increased Israeli [strikes](#) on Syrian territory, indicating that as Syria's civil war calms down, the country may become embroiled as a battleground between Israel and Iran and its proxies.

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 its effort to prevent Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and weapons transfers to Hezbollah. During that period, Israel has reportedly [taken out](#) over one-third of Syria's air defenses in order to ensure its continued aerial freedom of operation.

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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, 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 Shia militias. Israel has shown repeatedly 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 of its regional proxies](#) from around the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into the country. As the Assad regime has weakened, it has become increasingly reliant on the local and foreign Shia militias beholden to Iran to seize and hold territory. Former IRGC Quds Force commander [Qassem Soleimani](#) was at the head of these forces until his death in a U.S. drone strike on January 3, 2020, coordinating activities among the various Shia mercenary forces and ensuring that their activities fulfilled Iranian foreign policy objectives.

These duties have now shifted to Soleimani's successor, [Esmail Ghaani](#). Tehran's command and control over its proxy forces in Syria has likely suffered since the transition, as Ghaani 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, Ghaani [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 U.S. Ghaani's visit was meant to show that like Soleimani, Ghaani is capable of clandestinely visiting Iranian proxies around the region, and as an opportunity for Ghaani to assert his control over and consolidate unity among the various factions Soleimani previously commanded.

Hezbollah

Under Iranian [direction](#), Hezbollah entered the Syrian Civil War on Assad's side in 2011 and has been critical to his regime's survival. Hezbollah spent the first two years of the civil war denying its involvement, but in April 2013, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah openly declared Hezbollah's foray into the conflict, urging his followers to not "[let Syria fall in 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 and 2,000 of them have been killed](#). The group has been 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.

After averting the direct rebel threat to Damascus, Hezbollah has acted to re-extend the regime's control over all of Syria. In [May of 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 as part of a large-scale operation to retake the country's borders with Jordan and Iraq and to join with Popular Mobilization Forces charging from the Iraqi side of the border.

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Hezbollah has made clear it intends to remain in Syria and is laying permanent groundwork for the day after an eventual Assad victory. Hezbollah has reportedly established missile bases [in Qusayr](#) and [Qalamoun](#) to better protect its longer-ranger projectiles from Israeli aerial attacks. It has also engaged in large-scale [sectarian cleansing](#) of Sunnis from the area to secure its Beqaa Valley and Baalbek strongholds across the border and guarantee [its land corridor](#) to Damascus. Critically, 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.

The group is also aiming to [establish a presence](#) on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, a matter of concern for the Israelis. This would not threaten Israel's military superiority in the area, since the Israelis occupy the high-ground and the flat terrain between the Golan and Damascus can easily be seized by IDF ground troops. However, it could serve as a base for Hezbollah to carry out limited strikes against soldiers or civilians in Israeli-held territory in a future conflict.

Israeli security officials say Hezbollah is also exploiting the chaos of Syria's 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. These weapons would be a major upgrade from the short-range and unguided katyusha rockets that have been the group's traditional mainstay, and which make up the bulk of its oft-mentioned arsenal of [150,000 rockets](#). Israel considers this [a red line](#) and has repeatedly [intercepted](#) and destroyed these weapons with air strikes.

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, under the unified command of Qassem Soleimani, have been recruited from across the Arab and Islamic world, [including](#) Iraq, [Afghanistan](#) and [Pakistan](#).

An estimated 3,000 Afghans, primarily [immigrants and refugees residing in Iran and Syria](#), form the Liwa Fatemiyoun (Fatemiyoun Division). Approximately 1,000 Pakistanis, who receive training from the IRGC Quds Force in Mashad, comprise the Zainabyoun Brigade, which the Iranian press describes 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.

Iran's efforts to recruit Shia militants to the Syrian war effort from around the Middle East and beyond center upon the salaries it offers its disaffected conscripts. Recruits are offered monthly salaries on a sliding scale dependent on country of origin, basic and advanced military training, and 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](#).

Beyond cash and benefits, Iran relies heavily on religious and ideological appeals to find recruits willing to be martyred for the cause. The New York Times detailed how recruiters affiliated with the IRGC appeal to the Shia faith and identity of potential fighters, reporting that once recruited, fighters train near Tehran where ["Iranian officers delivered speeches invoking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the](#)

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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 also sought to [frame the fighting in Syria as an urgent necessity to defend Shia shrines](#). The golden-domed Sayyeda Zainab shrine, strategically located in south Damascus, is especially central to this narrative of Iran and its proxy fighters. Attendees at funerals for Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shia 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 prominently placed the shrine’s iconic dome 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.

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 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’être* is the propagation of Iran’s supranational revolutionary project.

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) in Iraq. 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. 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 has participated in critical battles, including the [2016 Aleppo offensive](#) and the campaign to [dislodge ISIS](#), contributing to Assad’s surging territorial reconquests.

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

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“[Useful Syria](#)” from the regime’s major cities and economic centers has now become a more ambitious campaign to [retake the entire country](#). With the Assad regime and allied forces – including Hezbollah and other Iranian proxy militias – retaking the key Iraqi-Syrian border crossings of [al-Tanf](#) and [Abu Kamal](#), and Iranian-sponsored members of the Popular Mobilization Forces reaching the Syrian border from the Iraqi side, Iran has completed a critical link in its project to create a land corridor to the Mediterranean.

Iran’s provision of economic, military, and proxy support was critical in stabilizing Assad’s rule until Russia’s entry into the Syrian Civil War in 2015. Following the regime’s 2016 victory in Aleppo, the war’s momentum swung decisively in Assad’s favor. In 2018, the Assad regime further consolidated its control in 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.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has euphemistically declared that Idlib, whose population has [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 hastily [announced](#) the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeast Syria and signaled his intention to eventually fully end U.S. involvement in Syria. The announcement effectively strengthened Iran’s hand in Syria and will facilitate further Iranian military and commercial entrenchment, presenting a self-inflicted setback to the administration’s concerted effort to pressure Tehran.

The U.S. military presence in northeast Syria provided a 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.

The U.S. withdrawal has 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 had to draw closer to Russia, neutralizing its protestations over a “*fait accompli*” in Idlib.

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. In November 2019, Syrian and Russian forces killed at least [22 civilians in attacks](#) on an

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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.

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](#).

Iran's Long-Term Influence in Syria

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 for years to come. Iran's Syrian intervention has paid off, guaranteeing both Assad's survival and 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 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.

In September 2017, Iran's Research Institute of Petroleum, a governmental research institute affiliated with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), [announced](#) that Iran is planning to build an oil refinery in Syria's western city of Homs once the civil war ends 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 has announced that indicates 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 January 2018, Iran [announced](#) plans to establish [Islamic Azad University](#) branches in Syrian cities, a development that indicates that Iran is investing in spreading its Islamic Revolutionary ideology in Syria.

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.

Both the NDF and Lebanese Hezbollah appear to be permanent fixtures in Syria as well, remaking a country that historically "[was home to many competing ideological forms of Shiism](#)" in Iran's image. Hezbollah and the NDF's secure Iranian alignment and loyalty to its revolutionary ethos ensures that Iran will be the dominant military and cultural power in Syria for the foreseeable future. As Iran has

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further entrenched its control and influence over Syria, it and its proxies have taken on increasingly confrontational postures against the U.S. and Israel. Iran has engaged in [armed drone skirmishes](#) with Israeli forces, and conducted a missile strike against ISIS fighters that landed [within three miles of U.S. forces](#). These incidents indicate that Iran plans on using Syria as a base from which to provoke the U.S. and its allies and is not concerned about dragging Syria into its proxy battles.



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 continues to destabilize 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. Iran uses the Houthis and Yemen as a proxy and base, respectively, to attack its leading Sunni rival, Saudi Arabia. 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. State Department Country Reports on Terrorism 2019](#), throughout 2019, Hizballah, the IRGC-QF, and other Iran backed terrorist groups continued to exploit the political and security

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vacuum created by the ongoing conflict between the Yemeni government under the leadership of President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi, recognized by the UN Security Council as the legitimate government of Yemen, and the Iran-backed Houthi militants. Additionally, 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 Qods Force (IRGC-QF).

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.

Arms Shipments and the Houthi Coup

According to a senior American intelligence official in 2012, intercepted phone conversations between smugglers and the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [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 Iranian manufactured material which was destined for a Yemeni Houthi businessman to create explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), which are [advanced improvised explosive devices](#) able to penetrate armored vehicles and which [killed hundreds of American servicemen during the Iraq War](#). A year later, 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 has undertaken military operations to defeat the Houthis and restore the Yemeni government to power.

Missile and Drone Attacks on Saudi Arabia

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

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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.

Iran reportedly also continues to provide other forms of arms to the Houthis. For example, an independent watchdog organization [claimed](#) in March 2018 that roadside bombs found in Yemen resemble ones used by Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain.

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 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.

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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 “Hizballah 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. And 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-Houthi 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.

Saleh Assassination

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.

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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 of Afghanistan, particularly the Persian-speaking Tajiks and the Shia Hazara. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, [Iran supported Shia resistance efforts and opened its borders to Afghan refugees](#). After the first Gulf War, Iraq, which had posed the major proximate threat to Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, was effectively neutralized. Neighboring civil war-torn Afghanistan supplanted Iraq as the main threat facing Iran, and in 1996, the extremist Sunni jihadist movement, the [Taliban](#), rose to power, backed by Iranian geopolitical rivals Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

During the Afghan Civil War, Iran defensively sought to cultivate 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 of 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 Shia 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.

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Ultimately, however, Iran, which has since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War sought to avoid direct confrontation and heavy casualties, 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 resupply of its fighters.

The Taliban offered Al Qaeda safe haven for its terrorist operations, leading the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to authorize 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 expansion of the 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 as to preclude a further military threat toward it, and 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 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.

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Support for the Taliban

Demonstrating the lengths Tehran was willing to go to repel U.S. influence, one of the primary groups the Quds Force began arming was 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.”

In 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned additional individuals who spearheaded cooperation between the Taliban and Tehran. They [included](#) Mohammad Ebrahim Owahdi, a Quds Force operative, who, according to the U.S. government, provided the Taliban Shadow Governor of Herat Province “with military and financial assistance” in exchange for Taliban forces launching attacks against the Afghan government, and Esma’il Razavi, who ran a training camp for Taliban forces in Birjand, Iran, which, according to the U.S. government, “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 Ghaani](#) became the head of the IRGC Quds Force, following the death of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Ghaani 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 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](#) only 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 the circulation of this story was part of an Iranian propaganda campaign. Such allegations also come 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 of Iran’s malign behavior in Afghanistan. This could be evidence of the new Quds Force commander seeking to deploy his existing network inside Afghanistan against U.S. forces.

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

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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.

Since the agreement was reached, Iran has continued to play a destabilizing double game in Afghanistan, seeking to ensure that it will retain influence in the country regardless of the outcome of the peace process. On the one hand, Iran has sought to ingratiate itself with the Afghan government and has [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 play a [mediation role](#) in future talks as well between the government and 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."

At the same time, though, Iran has continued to [maintain contact with the Taliban](#) to retain leverage over the Afghan government and peace process. Moreover, Iran is evidently working to sabotage the peace process by [backing more radical elements and splinter groups from the Taliban](#) who oppose negotiations and wish to keep fighting the central government and U.S. military presence.

Iran, which has been hard hit by sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, is likely in the immediate term to avoid proxy confrontation with the U.S., instead pursuing strategic patience in the hopes that the U.S. will withdraw on its own accord. However, its influence over radical Taliban elements ensures that it is capable of resuming hostilities against the U.S. and turning Afghanistan into a proxy war battlefield at a time of Tehran's choosing.

This reality was underscored by an August 2020 CNN [report](#) 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 in recent years. 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 attacks targeting the U.S. shows the potential for Tehran to play spoiler through its ties to the Taliban.

Economic and Cultural Influence

Tehran has also dramatically expanded its economic ties with Afghanistan 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 seeks 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 is just the "[tip of the iceberg](#)" in a multitude of Iranian cash inflows to Afghan groups and officials.

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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 Shia 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 international 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 Shia refugees in Iran, and to a lesser extent, Shias 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.

Lastly, Iran has even weaponized Afghanistan's environment. 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.

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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.

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](#). Iran's ties to Bahrain are more than sectarian. Successive Persian empires controlled Bahrain for centuries, ending in the 1780s. Not until 1970 did Iran drop its territorial claims to Bahrain.

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Nevertheless, since 1979, the Iranian regime has persistently attempted to return Bahrain to Shiite rule and has even referenced its former sovereignty over the island. In September 1979, only months after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile, Sadegh Rouhani, a leading cleric, [warned](#) that if the emir of Bahrain did “not want to stop oppressing the people and restore Islamic laws, we will call on the people of Bahrain to demand annexation to the Islamic government of Iran.”

The saber-rattling has continued ever since the onset of Iran’s Islamic Revolution. In 2009, Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri, a senior official and 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, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s representative at the Kayhan newspaper, [reiterated](#) his statement from 10 years prior that “Bahrain is ours [Iran’s]” and that the people of Bahrain want their country to become part of Iran again.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah Activity in Bahrain

In 1981, the [Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain](#) (IFLB), a militant Shiite organization established by Ayatollah Hadi Modarresi, [Ayatollah Khomeini’s personal representative to Bahrain](#), attempted a coup. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Bahraini authorities also worked to incapacitate the country’s local branch of Hezbollah.

Beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the present day, Bahraini authorities accused Iran of spearheading a series of “popular petitions” to reform the Bahraini monarchy. For example, authorities in Manama accused a Shiite cleric, Ali Salman, of organizing such a drive 1994 which acquired, according to some [estimates](#), as many as 25,000 signatures. This led to both Bahrain and Iran [recalling](#) their respective ambassadors, with Bahraini authorities alleging that the petitions were “planned and backed by foreign propaganda” rather than homegrown. Separately, in June 1996, Bahraini authorities [accused](#) Iran of organizing a coup.

Since anti-monarchy protests began in Bahrain [in 2011](#) amid the wider “Arab Spring,” Tehran has attempted to exploit these demonstrations for sectarian purposes and to undermine the monarchy. Bahrain has repeatedly warned Iran to refrain from meddling in its internal affairs and [said](#) in 2011 that it “had foiled a decades long terror plot by outsiders,” referring to the Iranian regime. The main opposition party’s spiritual leader, [Sheikh Isa Ahmad Qassem](#), is, according to a Bahrain expert, “a religious representative of Khamenei” who “propagates his religious authority” and “encourages people to follow [Khamenei] rather than other ‘sources of emulation.’”

On April 22, 2013, Bahraini authorities [arrested](#) eight of its citizens for plotting with an Iranian Revolutionary Guard member to assassinate Bahraini officials and target government buildings and the international airport. Later that same year, 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

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ambassador to Iran the next month. In November of that year, Bahrain [arrested](#) 47 members of an Iran-linked cell that was plotting to execute imminent attacks.

In June 2016, two men alleged to have “[received training in weapons and explosives from Iran’s Revolutionary Guards](#)” planted a bomb that killed a Bahraini woman. In February 2017, a 14-member cell linked to Iran [bombed](#) a bus carrying Bahraini police officers, wounding five. According to Bahraini officials, six of the arrestees received military training in IRGC camps, five in Kata’ib Hezbollah facilities, and three in Bahrain. In March 2017, Bahraini authorities [broke up](#) an IRGC-linked terror cell, which they accused of plotting to assassinate government officials and attack police and U.S. military targets. In March 2018, the government [revealed](#) that it had arrested 116 members of an IRGC-run 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, of whom 69 received life sentences (25 years), on terrorism 113 charges; the court also ordered the revocation of their citizenships. The GOB accused the individuals of forming an organization it referred to as “Bahraini Hizballah” with the intention of carrying out attacks in Bahrain.

[The al-Ashtar Brigades](#)

In January 2016, Bahrain [caught an IRGC- and Hezbollah-backed cell](#) plotting a series of bombings, claiming that one of the main suspects had gone to Iran and met with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, who provided him \$20,000. The cell was allegedly part of the Shiite [al-Ashtar Brigades](#) (AAB), which have claimed responsibility for more than 20 attacks in Bahrain since 2013, including one in March 2014 that killed three police officers, two Bahraini and one from the United Arab Emirates. In February 2018, the AAB [changed their logo to adopt IRGC branding](#), in order to reflect their role as part of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance” against the U.S. and its allies. 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 also outlined new objectives, including cultivating a “resistance and martyrdom culture” and “creat[ing] a deterrent force,” that indicate its intention to create a Hezbollah-style “state within a state” in Bahrain.

Bahrain [added](#) the AAB to its list of terrorist groups in 2014. In March 2017, the U.S. State Department [designated](#) two AAB members, Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi and the Iran-based Ahmad Hasan Yusuf, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). In July 2018, the State Department [designated](#) the AAB itself 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, State Department also [designated](#) an Iran-based AAB senior member, Qassimal-Muamen, as an SDGT.

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.

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Additional Shiite Militant Groups

In addition to AAB, a variety of other Shiite militant groups remain committed to the overthrow of the Bahraini monarchy given its Western-leaning geopolitical posture. The Al-Mukhtar Brigades, which has similar [branding](#) to the IRGC and which the British Home Office [listed](#) as a proscribed organization in December 2017, maintains an online presence which has promoted terrorism via social media. Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya is another similar organization with purported [connections](#) to the IRGC. It [reportedly](#) was behind the detonation of an IED near the U.S. Fifth Fleet and an attack on a branch of the National Bank of Bahrain. Bahrain's chief of public security [estimated](#) in May 2018 that since 2011, AAB and other Shiite militant organizations causes 22 deaths and more than 3,500 injuries to policemen.



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

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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 U.S. 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, proximity to the Gulf, and importance to American and Saudi Arabian security.

The strained relationship between Kuwait and Iran intensified during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. In response to Kuwait shipping Iraqi oil, Iran began [attacking](#) Kuwaiti ships and refineries and [engaging in terrorist attacks](#) on Kuwaiti soil. In 1983, operatives of Iranian-backed Hezbollah and Al Da'wa 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. Consequently, 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 murdered two employees of USAID, were never tried in Iranian court, and were permitted to leave the country. The next year, Hezbollah [attempted to assassinate the Emir of Kuwait](#) by driving a bomb-laden vehicle into the leader's motorcade.

More recently, Kuwait has uncovered Iranian covert operations designed to undermine American-Kuwaiti military cooperation and inflame sectarian tensions among Kuwait's Shiite minority. In April 2011, 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.

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In August 2015, Kuwaiti officials [foiled](#) a plot by Hezbollah to carry out attacks in the country, [planned](#) by 25 of its own 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. The cell was [charged](#) with plotting with Iran and Hezbollah to destabilize Kuwait's national security. Subsequently, the Kuwaiti government [closed Iran's cultural mission and expelled some Iranian diplomats](#).

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.

In March 2016, Kuwait [expelled](#) over 70 Lebanese nationals with permanent residency status for alleged links to Hezbollah. The move came shortly after the GCC declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization.

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 in their operations, with the money subsequently being sent to an unnamed regional state.

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. Kuwait opted to maintain diplomatic ties with Iran following the 2016 attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, which led to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain severing relations with Iran. Kuwait has also sought to serve as a mediator in the dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain; a dispute which centers in part on Qatar's links to Tehran.



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

Saudi Arabia

Active proxy groups & Military forces

- [IRGC \(Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps\)](#)
- [Hezbollah](#)
- [Houthis](#)

Iranian Meddling and Terrorism Within 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 Revolutionary Guard 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 cyber attack](#) 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 further in 2016 after 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 after Saudi Arabia executed outspoken Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Riyadh accused al-Nimr 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

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soon show its effect and divine vengeance will befall Saudi politicians” describing the execution as a “political error.”

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 blamed the violence on and [prosecuted terrorists](#), including Saudis allegedly working for Iranian proxies like Hezbollah. Riyadh has pushed back against Hezbollah, joining the U.S. Treasury Department and other Gulf states in [sanctioning](#) Hezbollah officials and entities in May 2018.

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.

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.

Iranian Meddling and 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, Qatar, 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 landed on multiple cities, including

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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.



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

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*The Saudi Embassy in Tehran on fire
in January 2016 after being attacked
by an Iranian mob.*

Proxy Group Reports

Asaib Ahl al-Haq

Iran provides money, weaponry, training, and operational oversight to Asaib Ahl al-Haq, an Iraqi Shia 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, Shia
- **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 Shia 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 the most powerful Shia militias in Iraq. Until the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, AAH had [launched over 6,000 attacks on American and Iraqi forces](#), including highly sophisticated operations and targeted kidnappings of Westerners. The group seeks to [promote Iran's political and religious influence in Iraq](#), maintain Shia 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 violent Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. In August 2007, the U.S. designated AAH a “Special Group,” a label given to Iranian-backed Shia militias operating in Iraq. AAH is still one of three prominent Iraqi Shia 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 the coordination of 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.

Since entering politics, AAH has not fulfilled 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 is [one of](#)

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[the militias in Haashid Shaabi](#), Iraq's anti-ISIS volunteer forces also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

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 newly 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.

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.

Pro-Iranian: AAH seeks to establish an Islamist, Shia-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 Ayatollahs Khomeini and 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 Shia Lebanese terrorist group.

Declassified interrogation reports of Qais al-Khazali, AAH's founder, underscore the breadth and depth of the relationship between Shia 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 the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 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 didn't 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.”

Anti-American: AAH is also virulently anti-American, a stance that has not abated since the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. In March 2015, for example AAH [boycotted the PMF attack against ISIS in Tikrit because AAH rejected U.S. 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

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“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.

Sectarian: As a Shiite, Iranian-backed group, AAH also follows and implements a sectarian ideology that has deepened the fault lines between Sunnis and Shiites. 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 target Sunni mosques or towns.

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 whole. **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 Shia 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 IRGC-Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani.

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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 Shia 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, and in the April 30, 2014, parliamentary elections, AAH ran in alliance with Prime Minister Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanoon (State of Law). Outside Iraq, AAH has [maintained political representation in Beirut](#), Lebanon since early 2011.

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. As of 2012, Iran was giving AAH [\\$5 million in cash and weapons per month](#), according to an Iraqi close to the group. As of March 2014, the group was receiving 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 Shia 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 Shia 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

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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](#).

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 reportedly [resembles that of Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah](#). As of March 2014, AAH was receiving an estimated [\\$1.5 million - \\$2 million from Iran a month](#). U.S. Colonel Rick Welch 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 its fighters.

In the past, AAH militants have [received training from Lebanese Hezbollah operative Ali Mussa Daqduq](#). The Quds Force placed Daqduq in charge of overseeing training for Iraqi Shia militants in the region, including AAH fighters.

In June 2014, following calls for volunteer fighters from the Iraqi government and Iraq's highest Shia religious authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, there was a [surge in Shia 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 aiming to join Assad forces in Syria are sent to Iran](#) for approximately two weeks of training before going off to fight.

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 Shia militias.

Badr Organization

The Badr Organization is a Shia 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 Shi'ite 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, analysts have [compared the Badr Organization in Iraq to Hezbollah in Lebanon](#).

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- **Type of Organization:** Militia, political party, religious, social services provider, terrorist, transnational, violent
- **Ideologies and Affiliations:** Iranian-sponsored, Islamist, jihadist, Khomeinist, Shia
- **Place of Origin:** Iraq
- **Year of Origin:** 1983
- **Founder(s):** Iraqi Shiites loyal to the al-Hakim Shia 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 worked to import 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 Shia 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 2004-2006, 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](#). [According to a leaked cable from the U.S. State Department](#), "One of [al-Amiri's] preferred methods of killing allegedly involved using a power drill to pierce the skulls of his adversaries."

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, 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 Shia militias and the Iraqi army.

The Badr Organization and Shia militias have also "[deployed alongside Iraqi military units as the main combat force](#)," 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.

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

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until the position was abolished in 2015. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the Badr Organization won 22 seats in parliament.

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 May 2018 parliamentary elections, 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 won first place.

Although the Badr Organization's political arm portrays itself as welcoming and conciliatory to Sunnis, the areas where the group fights ISIS have seen "[some of the most high-profile Sunni-Shiite violence of the current conflict](#)," according to the Washington Post. 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."

In analyzing the group, CBS News writes 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.

Badr: Financed 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."

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 Shia 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

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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."

In his capacity 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, including the Badr Organization, be placed under his office's direct command. As al-Amiri served at the time as the leader of Iraq's collective popular mobilization, Abadi's order seems to suggest that al-Amiri had until then retained significant autonomy when it comes to planning and executing paramilitary attacks.

Although al-Amiri appeared to act without much Iraqi government oversight, reports suggest [he may answer to the leader 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.

Hammas

Hammas is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that has killed hundreds of Israeli citizens, as well as Americans, in suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks since the early 1990s. Hamas has governed the Gaza Strip since it violently expelled the Palestinian Authority in 2007. Though funding has slowed in recent years, 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

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- **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. It has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, when it violently expelled its rival Fatah and the Palestinian Authority from the coastal enclave. Per its 1988 Charter, Hamas considers itself 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. 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 a close relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its offshoots, including its Lebanon-based extension [Hezbollah](#). Iran [provides](#) the Palestinian group 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 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.

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 continued to launch rockets and other terror attacks at Israeli targets. Hamas rocket fire led to three wars with Israel in [2008-09](#), [2012](#), and [2014](#). 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

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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 [U.S. 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 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 overthrow of Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi left Hamas without an ally, forcing it to [restore](#) its relationship with Iran, 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 [sour](#)ed again in [2015](#). Senior Hamas leader Mousa Abu Marzouk [claimed](#) at the time that Iran

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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 Saleh al-Arouri as the deputy chairman of Hamas' political bureau. Al-Arouri—[described](#) by pro-Hezbollah 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—and focuses 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 Ghaani, as Haniyeh appeared in photographs alongside Ghaani and Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri. This was likely a crucial meeting to connect

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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."

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" (Wilayat al-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.

Hezbollah also operates as a political party in Lebanon, holding parliamentary and cabinet seats. 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, 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 the gratitude and support of Lebanese Shiites.

Wilayat al-Faqih and the 1985 Open Letter: Hezbollah's Khomeinist Doctrine

Hezbollah's service to Iran stems from its adherence to Khomeini's teachings on the Islamic government, and his religio-political ideology of Wilayat al-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 the Open Letter in 2009 with the release of its "Political Document." However, both before and after the Document's release, Hezbollah's senior leaders [stressed](#) that it would not alter their adherence to Wilayat al-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 Wilayat al-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.

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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, to \$800 million [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 reportedly also trained Hezbollah's military specialists in producing arms at the IRGC-affiliated Imam Hussein University. However, it remains unclear how Hezbollah acquires and domestically produces the sophisticated components necessary to manufacture these advanced missiles, which the Iranians themselves have difficulty in doing at home. 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](#)”—and 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 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, as well as its regional and global reach.

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

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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 has also incubated Iranian-branded 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 the rise of ISIS in 2014, these militias have multiplied, with most joining Iraq's state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). PMF deputy commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis has 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, etc. – and train the Zaydi Shiite Houthi rebels in their war against neighboring Saudi Arabia. While the Houthis do not share Hezbollah's religious views, including belief in the Wilayat al-Faqih, Hezbollah aids the Houthis because the latter are fighting against Riyadh, a leading rival of Tehran, and Houthi control of Red Sea shipping and the Bab el-Mandeb would weaken the Kingdom.

In [September 2019](#), Hezbollah launched attacks directly on the Israeli military, firing anti-tank missiles targeting 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.

Hezbollah in Lebanon: "Lebanonization" vs. Pragmatism

In line with its adherence to Wilayat al-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,

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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 system's confines and thereby gaining popular support, instead of imposing an Islamic state by force. The roots of this pragmatic approach are in Hezbollah's Open Letter, wherein the group prioritizing public backing over territorial control. It called on the vast majority of Lebanese to [willingly](#) adopt an Iran-style Islamic republic. According to Hassan Nasrallah and his deputy, Naim Qassem, this grassroots strategy remains in place [today](#).

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 defending 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 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. [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.

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According to the U.S. State [Department Country Reports on Terrorism 2019](#), Hizballah 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](#) indirect 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 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. Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force,

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remarked that the fall of Sana'a represented a "[golden opportunity](#)" for Iran. An allied Shia force now controlled the capital of a neighboring country to Saudi Arabia, Iran's primary Middle Eastern geostrategic adversary. 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 has thus sought to gain a foothold in Yemen which would allow 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.

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.

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](#). The U.S. Department of the Treasury [designated](#) Houthi leader "Abdul Malik al-Houthi" as a Specially Designated National (SDN) in April 2015 for "acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen."

Iranian Material and Financial Support of The Houthis' Violent Activities

Beginning in 2004, Shia 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

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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 tonnes 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 also [alleged](#) that Hezbollah operatives were 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. 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 Shia mercenary forces into the Yemen conflict, mirroring its strategy in Syria. According to a March 2017 [Reuters](#) report, "Iranian and regional sources said Tehran

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was providing Afghan and Shi'ite Arab specialists to train Houthi units and act as logistical advisers. These included Afghans who had fought in Syria under Qods 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.

Missile and Drone Attacks on Saudi Arabia

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.

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.”

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.

In May 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department [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.

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.

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Iran reportedly also continues to provide other forms of arms to the Houthis. For example, an independent watchdog organization [claimed](#) in March 2018 that roadside bombs found in Yemen resemble ones used by Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain.

Beginning in April 2019, following the U.S. State Department'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 are heavily engaged in this campaign and have escalated their missile and drone attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure, airports, and military sites to unprecedented levels.

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.

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.

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 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.

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

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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 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. And 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, 2018, 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-Houthi 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, 2018, 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.

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.

As of November 2018, the Trump administration is [reportedly](#) considering designating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, which would enable the administration to freeze the group’s assets and ban them from traveling to the U.S. The move would also facilitate U.S. sanctions and prosecutions of those providing material support to the Houthis.

In December 2019, the U.S. State Department [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

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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.

Likewise, in December 2019, the U.S. State Department [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.

IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)

The [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) is an Iranian government agency whose mission is to defend the regime against internal and external threats. The IRGC includes the Quds Force and Basij militia, which respectively handle external and internal operations. Espousing a radical ideology and a paranoid worldview, the IRGC uses secret police methods against its opponents within Iran, and terrorist tactics against its enemies abroad.

- **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:** Afghanistan, Europe, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, South America, Syria

Historical Background

Founded on May 5, 1979, Iran’s [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) stands today as the country’s most powerful military and security force and a powerful economic actor inside Iran. Iran’s revolutionary government formed the IRGC just one month into the life of the Islamic Republic, giving it a constitutional mandate to “[guard the Revolution and its achievements](#).” In effect, the IRGC is tasked with enforcing loyalty to velayat e-faqih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist), the [Khomeinist](#) precept used to justify Iran’s authoritarian rule by a cleric designated as Supreme Leader. The IRGC preserves the Islamic Revolution and the Iranian regime against domestic and external threats and is a key agent of Iran’s efforts to spread its revolutionary ideology beyond Iran’s borders.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founding father of Iran’s Islamic Republic and the first Supreme Leader, founded the IRGC out of a core of roughly 700 loyalists who had received military training at Amal and Fatah training camps in Lebanon’s Bekaa valley while Khomeini was exiled in Najaf, Iraq. The IRGC was essential in providing Khomeini’s revolutionary government an armed basis of support and immediately set about dismantling anti-revolutionary dissident groups such as the communist Tudeh party and the Mujahideen e-Khalq.

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The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War witnessed the transformation of the IRGC from a hastily organized militia into one of Iran's most powerful institutions. The IRGC emerged from the crucible of the war as a [formidable fighting force with considerable organizational and engineering prowess](#), and rapidly eclipsed the country's conventional armed forces as the primary military power center. The IRGC boasts air, ground, and naval forces, serves as caretaker for Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programs, and trains and equips militias and terrorist proxies throughout the Middle East through the Quds Force, the IRGC's foreign expeditionary wing. The IRGC today is estimated to have [190,000 active personnel](#) at its disposal, and roughly [640,000](#) including domestic paramilitary Basij forces. Domestically, the IRGC has amassed a formidable intelligence apparatus which engages in repression and censorship, and [operates sections of Tehran's notorious Evin prison complex](#) where prisoners, many of whom are incarcerated for political reasons, face deplorable conditions, complete with torture and other human rights abuses.

The IRGC has also assumed a pervasive and opaque role in Iran's economy. Its construction and engineering wing, Khatam al-Anbiya ("seal of the Prophets"), moved into civilian enterprises following the Iran-Iraq War, expanding its influence and economic portfolio as it took on lucrative post-war reconstruction projects. This process accelerated during the 2005-2013 presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as Khatam al-Anbiya was the beneficiary of a succession of [huge no-bid contracts](#), rendering the organization and its complex web of subsidiaries as the dominant players in Iran's [construction, energy, automobile manufacturing, and electronics sectors](#). Fueled by Khatam al-Anbiya's profits, the IRGC has taken on an outsized role in the militarization of Iran's economy. Ahmadinejad also gave the IRGC control over significant energy projects—for example, part of Iran's South Pars natural-gas field in 2010 after European companies withdrew. Contracts for the field were reportedly worth \$21 billion.

President Hassan Rouhani won two terms on a platform that [prioritized boosting civilian power](#) in the political and economic spheres by curtailing the IRGC's pervasive control. From 2013-2015, Rouhani's administration sought and obtained – with Khamenei's cautious backing – a nuclear deal with Western powers. Rouhani's primary motivation was to open up the Iranian market to Western trade and investment, which he believed would empower civilian business interests at the expense of the IRGC. It should be noted that Rouhani's efforts to empower an alternative civilian elite do not stem from benevolence, but from his belief that this represents the ideal path to salvage and preserve Iran's Islamic Revolutionary regime, as well as a desire to enrich his own political allies and benefactors.

After Iran and world powers reached their 2015 nuclear deal in exchange for lifting economic sanctions, the Iranian government reportedly [sought to reduce the influence of the IRGC in the Iranian economy](#). While economic sanctions related to Iran's nuclear deal were lifted, sanctions against the IRGC remained in place, preventing foreign investment in the Iranian economy. According to government spokesman Mohammad-Bagher Nobakht in May 2016, the Iranian government "believes that the private sector should gain the opportunity to present its capability. The government itself shouldn't compete with it. Other sectors like [the IRGC] should not compete with it." The government and the IRGC have officially denied there is any conflict between them over control of the economy. An unnamed IRGC official accused the government of "trying to isolate" the IRGC.

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The IRGC, naturally, has proved loath to cede its power, influence, and riches, and therefore acted to [sabotage](#) the Rouhani administration's machinations for greater economic openness and integration with the West. The IRGC has sought, through threats and harassment, to prevent investment in Iran from those who would not give the IRGC its share. Most notably, the IRGC's intelligence organization arrested Siamak Namazi, a member of a prominent Iranian-American dual national family who had been in business with powerful elements of the Iranian regime since the early 1990s, such as the Rafsanjani family and the Khatami administration. The Namazis and their associates were also close to President Rouhani's team, and had sought to invest in Iran. Subsequently, his father, Baqer was arrested after attempting to visit his son. Namazi's arrest sent the message that the IRGC would not allow its prosperity to be challenged by alternate elites and served to chill the investment plans of other Iranian expatriates.

In early March 2018, Khamenei appointed his personal representative to the IRGC, Hojjatoleslam Ali Saidi, as his [representative to Iran's conventional armed forces](#). This move suggests an expansion of the IRGC's – and by extension, Khamenei's – influence within the Iranian military and an effort to ensure the military's complete subservience to Khamenei and the IRGC. Saidi's appointment marked an acceleration of a trend dating back to June 2016, when Khamenei appointed Maj. Gen. Mohammed Hossein Bagheri, one of the youngest IRGC generals, as chairman of the Armed Forces General Staff, the country's highest military body. Bagheri replaced Maj. Gen. Hassan Firouzabadi, who held the position for over 25 years despite lacking a formal military background.

Further indicating the blurring of the conventional military's autonomy, on April 25, 2018, the [army and IRGC held a joint parade for the first](#) time to commemorate Iran's National Day of the Army. According to an IRGC official, the parade was intended as a demonstration “to let our enemies know that among our armed forces only exists unity, solidarity, and brotherhood. All our armed forces are ready to face the threats in a unified and solid way.”

President Hassan Rouhani, who has at times has criticized the IRGC and whose constituency elected him in hopes of political and economic reforms, appears to have moved instead toward accommodation with the IRGC. In a speech marking Army Day, Rouhani [praised the army](#) for refraining from “political games” and hailed the “purity and sincerity” of the conventional forces. These remarks were widely interpreted as an implicit rebuke of the IRGC and were condemned by IRGC officials. A week later, however, Rouhani changed his tune, saying, “Thanks to prowess of the beloved and brave [Guards] Corps, Army and self-sacrificing Basij [voluntary forces affiliated with IRGC], we enjoy exemplary security in Iran.”

These developments indicate that both Iran's elected and unelected leadership are seeking to boost the IRGC's profile as an antidote to the protests that have taken root throughout the country since late December 2017. The IRGC has had a freer hand to brutally quell the demonstrations as a result. When large-scale protests erupted once again in November 2019 following the regime's announcement of a gasoline price hike, Supreme Leader Khamenei and his security advisors ordered the IRGC and Basij to ruthlessly suppress the protests. According to a senior Guardsman in Kermanshah's [account](#), “We had orders from top officials in Tehran to end the protests. No more mercy. They are aiming to topple the

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Islamic Republic. But we will eradicate them.” Estimates from officials within Iran’s interior ministry placed the death toll during the protests as high as 1,500. The rapid response to demonstrations with brutality and drastic measures, such as shutting down internet access, indicate the regime is increasingly reliant on the IRGC and its repressive apparatus, rather than a reform agenda, to deal with widespread dissatisfaction over its corruption and economic mismanagement.

Organizational Structure

Iranian law [defines the IRGC](#) as “an institution commanded by the Supreme Leader whose purpose is to protect the Islamic Revolution of Iran and its accomplishments, while striving continuously . . . to spread the sovereignty of God’s law.” The IRGC today enjoys the power of a government agency, while still maintaining the zeal and fanaticism of an ideologically motivated terrorist group. The IRGC’s mission combines traditional military roles with a relentless focus on pursuing supposed domestic enemies. According to the Ministry of Defense, [the IRGC’s role](#) is to “protect [Iran’s] independence, territorial integrity, and national and revolutionary ideals, under the shadow of the orders given by the Commander in Chief, the Grand Ayatollah Imam Khamenei.”

[By law](#), the power to appoint and remove the commander of the IRGC is given to Iran’s supreme leader. The supreme leader also [appoints clerical representatives](#) to the various units of the IRGC whose guidance and instructions are binding on commanders. Iranian law [makes](#) “belief and practical obedience to the principle of clerical rule” a condition of membership in the IRGC, further establishing absolute loyalty to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as the IRGC’s guiding principle.

[Administratively](#), the IRGC falls under the Joint Armed Forces General Staff, part of the Ministry of Defense. But these layers of oversight do not give Iran’s nominally elected civilian authorities real control over the IRGC, as the entire military remains subordinate to the Supreme National Security Council, which in turn answers to the supreme leader.

Scholars who study the IRGC [have concluded that](#) “individuals appear to matter more than institutions when considering national security decision[-]making.” Consequently, scholars have [identified personal networks](#), often based on ties of family, friendship, or joint service in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War as the key factors in IRGC leadership. The opacity of the IRGC’s real command structure helps make Iran an erratic and therefore especially dangerous player in regional affairs.

The Basij

The Basij militia—whose name means “mobilization”—is a [paramilitary organization](#) tasked with channeling popular support for the Islamic Republican regime. The Basij is famous for its recruitment of volunteers, many of them teenage children, for “human wave” attacks on Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War, during which Basij forces swept for mines before the Iranian army would advance. Today, the Basij has two missions: giving military training to regime supporters to prepare them to resist foreign invasion and helping suppress domestic opposition to the regime through street violence and intimidation. The Basij were incorporated into the IRGC in 1981.

The Basij presents itself as a popular volunteer association, although it is very much an [organ of the state](#). The group’s “regular members,” said to number more than 10 million, are unpaid volunteers

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motivated by ideological zeal or the hopes of advancement. Its “active members,” whose exact number is unknown, receive salaries and work full time to organize the volunteer members. The group has been nominally subordinate to the IRGC since the early 1980s, and organizational changes in recent years have increased the IRGC’s direct control over the Basij, apparently to better manage the two groups’ repression of internal dissent.

Since its establishment after Iran’s 1979 revolution, the Basij militia has [overseen state-sanctioned domestic abuses](#) in the country. Shortly after the Islamic revolution, before the new regime could establish an effective police force, the Basij was [responsible for maintaining security](#), removing anti-revolutionary components and shah loyalists from the system. The Basij was kept out of the Iran-Iraq War during its first year, but its later participation is credited with transforming Iran’s position from defensive to offensive. The Basij is accused of [brutally suppressing protests](#) after the contested June 2009 election. According to Human Rights Watch, [hundreds of protesters were arrested](#) after the June 12 elections and the Basij militia attacked student dormitories, beating students and ransacking their rooms. Human Rights Watch also reported members of the Basij militia appearing in large groups at mass demonstrations and attacking protesters. There were reports of Basij members armed with clubs and chains beating up anyone suspected of participating in the protests against the government.

Quds Force

The Quds Force is a [special branch of the IRGC](#) that undertakes sensitive missions beyond Iran’s borders. The Quds Force has played an active role in providing training and weapons to extremist groups including Iraqi insurgents, Lebanese Hezbollah, and others. The Quds Force’s raison d’être is to subvert the sovereignty of neighboring states, weakening and destabilizing central governments so that Iran can establish spheres of military and diplomatic influence. The group’s commander was Major General [Qassem Soleimani](#), who served as an emissary of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, reportedly using a combination of violence and bribes to wield enormous influence over the politics of neighboring Iraq. He was also said to coordinate much of Iran’s support for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. On January 3, 2020, Soleimani was killed in a U.S. drone strike shortly after landing at Baghdad’s international airport. His successor is [Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani](#), Soleimani’s former deputy. Upon his swearing-in, Ghaani [pledged](#) to “strike back at the enemy in a manly way.”

Through the Quds Force, Iran commands a transnational movement of Shia militancy comprised of thousands of fighters from around the Arab and Islamic world. Under Soleimani’s direction, Iran’s proxy militias around the region increased their cooperation and coordination with each other and demonstrated a willingness to fight not just in their localized arena, but to contribute to the Shia war effort wherever the exigency is greatest. Iran’s proxies serve as a veritable foreign legion acting in concert to bolster Iranian influence and carry out Iranian foreign policy objectives throughout the region. While Soleimani has departed from the scene, the networks of militias and terrorist organizations that he stood up, trained, and armed pose an enduring threat that will keep the region on the precipice of conflict for the foreseeable future.

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Financing

The IRGC is Iran's most powerful economic actor, according to the U.S. Treasury Department, which has labeled the [National Iranian Oil Company](#) "an agent or affiliate of the Revolutionary Guards." Within the IRGC, the Quds Force [exerts control](#) over strategic industries, commercial services, and black-market enterprises. According to a 2007 Los Angeles Times report, the IRGC has ties to over 100 companies, [controlling over \\$12 billion](#). These funds are used to exert influence in Iran and Iranian proxies. [According to Ray Takeyh](#) of the Council on Foreign Relations, the IRGC is "heavily involved in everything from pharmaceuticals to telecommunications and pipelines ... and a great deal of smuggling. Many of the front companies engaged in procuring nuclear technology are owned and run by the Revolutionary Guards. They're developing along the lines of the Chinese military, which is involved in many business enterprises. It's a huge business conglomeration."

Iran has been [beset since the end of 2017 by a protest movement](#) which has become increasingly bold and assertive in challenging the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic's ruling regime. Among the frustrations of the demonstrators are that promised economic benefits from the 2015 nuclear deal have not materialized. Instead, the deal has primarily [enriched state-controlled entities](#) and reinforced patronage networks linked to the Supreme Leader and IRGC.

Iran's 2018-2019 budget earmarked [267 trillion rials \(\\$6.34 billion\) for the IRGC](#), a [42% increase](#) over the previous year's funding level. The rise in defense spending came amid budget cuts for domestic priorities, such as construction and cash subsidies to the poor. Protestors have taken exception to Iran's heavy investment in foreign policy adventurism at the expense of domestic expenditures, chanting slogans such as "Not Gaza, not Lebanon. My life only for Iran."

Rather than seeking to pacify the situation by acquiescing to demands for political, social, and economic reforms, numerous signals indicate that Supreme Leader Khamenei is instead doubling down on repression and ideological rigidity, strengthening the position of the IRGC in the process. One of the clearest signs is the IRGC's increasing primacy over Iran's military personnel and strategy. Iran's 2018-2019 budget allocated three times as much funding for the IRGC compared to the conventional military forces.

Violent Activities

The Council on Foreign Relations describes the IRGC and Quds Force as Iran's "[primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists abroad](#)." According to a 2010 Pentagon report, the Quds Force "[maintains operational capabilities around the world](#)," and "it is well established in the Middle East and North Africa and recent years have witnessed an increased presence in Latin America, particularly Venezuela." Further, the report concluded that if "U.S. involvement in conflict in these regions deepens, contact with the IRGC-QF, directly or through extremist groups it supports, will be more frequent and consequential." Illustrating this point, Khamenei in 2012 reportedly ordered the Quds Force to [step up attacks](#) against Western targets in retaliation for U.S.-backing of Syrian rebels in that country's civil war.

The IRGC and Quds Force have been accused of supporting militants and carrying out terrorism around the world, including

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in [Afghanistan](#), [Argentina](#), [Austria](#), [Bahrain](#), [Germany](#), [India](#), [Iraq](#), [Israel](#), [Mexico](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and the [United States](#). According to a 2013 bill in the U.S. House of Representatives to label the Quds Force a terrorist organization, the Quds Force “[stations operatives](#) in foreign embassies, charities, and religious and cultural institutions to foster relationships, often building on existing socio-economic ties with the well-established Shia Diaspora...”

Among some of the IRGC’s most notable violent activities, the Quds Force is accused of orchestrating the [1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish center](#) in Argentina and is [accused](#) of playing a role in the attempted assassination in Washington, DC of Saudi Arabia’s then-ambassador to the United States in 2011.

IRGC Ties to Terrorist Entities

The IRGC has been [linked to several global terrorist groups](#). In 2015, IRGC aerospace force commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh boasted, “The Islamic Republic of Iran has helped Iraq, Syria, Palestine and the Lebanese Hezbollah by exporting the technology that it has for the production of missiles and other equipment, and they can now stand against the Zionist regime, the ISIL [Islamic State group] and other Takfiri [apostate] groups and cripple them.”

The IRGC has been a [reliable source of funding, weapons, and training to Hezbollah](#) since the terror group’s emergence in the early 1980s. Iranian leaders have [acknowledged and openly praised](#) this relationship. The United States has also [tied individual IRGC leaders to the Taliban](#) while accusing the IRGC of arming the group. IRGC leaders have [admitted to arming Hamas](#) and providing technological training. The IRGC has also [provided funding and weapons to Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#). In 2011, the IRGC reportedly [plotted with the Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas](#) to assassinate Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States.

The IRGC [provided Hezbollah with its initial financial support and training](#) when the group emerged in the early 1980s. The Quds Force is Iran’s [primary instrument](#) for passing on support to Hezbollah, some of which is in the form of cash, while the rest is in weaponry. Syria is [Iran’s main supply route](#) to Hezbollah in Lebanon. As such, the Iranian government has an interest in keeping besieged Syrian President Bashar Assad in power. [Before the Syrian civil war](#), between 2,000 and 3,000 IRGC officers were stationed in Syria, helping to train local troops and managing supply routes of arms and money to neighboring Lebanon. By Iran’s own admission, members of the Quds Force are acting in an advisory capacity to Syrian government forces in that country’s civil war, and Iran has committed itself to providing arms, financing, and training to Iraqi Shiite fighters in the war. A retired senior IRGC commander [claims](#) there are at least 60 to 70 Quds Force commanders in Syria at any given time.

Since 2012, Iran has effectively been in charge of planning and leading the conduct of the Syria conflict. As Assad risked losing power due to rebel advances and force attrition, Iran began sending [hundreds](#) of IRGC and Basij fighters to Damascus, stanching and eventually reversing Assad’s losses. Tehran has subsequently [greatly 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.

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Additionally, Iran has deployed an estimated [20-30,000 of its regional proxies](#) from around the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into the country. IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani served at the head of these forces until his death on January 3, 2020, coordinating activities among the various Shia mercenary forces and ensuring that their activities fulfill Iranian foreign policy objectives. As the Assad regime has weakened, it has become increasingly reliant on the local and foreign Shia militias beholden to Iran to seize and hold territory.

The Quds Force has also [funded and trained the Iraqi Shiite militias, notably Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(AAH\)](#). 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. AAH [coordinates with senior Iranian commanders](#).

US Sanctions

On October 31, 2017, the U.S. Treasury Department Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) [updated](#) its Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List, applying new sanctions to several individuals and entities affiliated with the IRGC for their role in supporting the IRGC's terroristic and ballistic missile proliferation activities. The latest actions built upon the Trump administration's announcement on October 13, 2017, that it was [designating](#) the IRGC as a terrorist group pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) [13224](#).

Prior to October 13, 2017, the U.S. government sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety in 2007, 2011, and 2012 under E.O.s [13382](#), [13553](#), and [13606](#) respectively for its human rights and non-proliferation abuses. OFAC's October 13th designation corrected an existing anomaly in U.S. policy, whereby the IRGC's Quds Force—its foreign expeditionary arm—was designated under Executive Order 13224 for its support of terrorism, while the IRGC itself was not. In reality, there is no meaningful distinction between the IRGC and the Quds Force, as both ultimately report to the supreme leader, and the organizations frequently share resources and personnel.

The October 31, 2017 sanctions most notably targeted the IRGC Air Force, the [Al-Ghadir Missile Command](#) (which exercises operational control of Iran's ballistic missile program), the [Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization](#) (which is responsible for research and development of Iran's ballistic missile program), and the [Aerospace Force Self Sufficiency Jihad Organization](#) (which is involved in Iran's ballistic missile research and flight test launches).

The sanctions also targeted IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari and four senior officers. [Jafari](#) has commanded the IRGC, the most powerful element of Iran's security services and the primary instrument of preserving and expanding the Islamic Revolution, since 2007. During his tenure, Jafari has overseen the expansion of Iran's ballistic missile program, the brutal suppression of domestic dissent, and the acceleration of Iran's meddling in Iran, Syria, and Yemen. Jafari's deputy, [Brigadier General Mohammad Hejazi](#), was also designated on October 31. Hejazi, who previously served as commander of the IRGC's Basij paramilitary force, is an ultra-hardliner who has played a leading role in violently stifling reformist efforts such as the 1999 Tehran student protests and 2009 Green Movement.

In October 2018, the Trump administration further sanctioned the IRGC under EO 13224, designating a network of businesses and financial institutions known as [Bonyad Taavon Basij](#) (Basij Cooperative

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Network) for their role in funding the Basij. In announcing the designation, the Trump administration accused the Basij of fueling conflict and carrying out human rights abuses around the Middle East, including the recruitment, training, and deployment of child soldiers to support the Assad regime in Syria.

In April 2019, the U.S. State Department [designated](#) the IRGC, including the Quds Force, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. The designation marked the first time that the U.S. had ever designated part of another government as an FTO. Since the designation, the IRGC and its proxies have escalated their [malign and destabilizing activities](#) throughout the Middle East, including actions targeting international shipping, regional energy infrastructure, and U.S. military personnel.

In June 2019, OFAC imposed additional [sanctions](#) against eight senior commanders of Navy, Aerospace, and Ground Forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) pursuant to E.O. 13224. In a press release announcing the new sanctions, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said, “IRGC commanders are responsible for the Iranian regime’s provocative attacks orchestrated in internationally recognized waters and airspace, as well as Iran’s malign activities in Syria.”

On September 4, 2019, the U.S. [issued](#) a reward of up to \$15 million for information leading to the disruption of the financial mechanisms of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its branches, including the IRGC-Qods Force (IRGC-QF).

In October 2019, the U.S. State Department [sanctioned](#) Iran’s construction sector pursuant to Section 1245 of the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of 2012. In announcing the designation, the State Department alleged that the IRGC controls Iran’s construction sector “directly or indirectly.”

On January 18, 2020, the U.S. State Department [designated](#) IRGC Brigadier General Hassan Shahvarpour, Khuzestan Province’s Vali Asr Commander, “for his involvement in gross violations of human rights against protestors during the November protests in Mahshahr, Iran.” The U.S. alleged that IRGC units under his command killed at least 148 protestors.

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

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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 current 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 withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, [KH sent fighters to defend the Assad regime in Syria, allegedly at the behest of Qassem Soleimani](#), the 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. participates.

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. The group has [gained exclusive control over the Jurf as-Sakr area](#) west of Baghdad where it prevents displaced Sunni residents from returning and operates private prisons.

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 the economic and military interests of the U.S. and its allies, taking care not to cross red lines that would trigger devastating reprisals. In April 2019, according to intelligence reports, IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani met with Iraqi Shia 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.

On May 14, 2019, explosives-laden drones attacked 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](#).

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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 Shia militias, most notably Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah. The attacks placed the U.S. on a collision course with the Iran-backed militias.

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.

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.

[KH Ideology: Hostile to America, Loyal to Iran](#)

According to the U.S. Department of State, KH is “[a radical Shia Islamist group with an anti-Western establishment and jihadist ideology](#).” The group is virulently anti-American and ideologically loyal to the Iranian regime.

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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 withdrawal 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 September 2014, for example, KH released a statement saying, "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 the group's anti-American position, saying, "It is not possible for Kataib 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.

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 Shia 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. Indeed, 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](#) Shia 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, the 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

As of 2008, Iran's IRGC Quds Force [has been funding KH](#), according to the U.S. Treasury Department. Though little is publicly known about Iran's financing of KH since then, it is widely believed that Iran continues to finance KH's operations.

In November 2014, 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.

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KH Recruitment: Do You Hate Uncle Sam (but Love Assad)?

KH has sought to lure recruits by advertising its fight against U.S. forces in Iraq. Following the start of the Syrian civil war, the group also advertised its efforts to support Assad 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](#) by advertising their involvement there. 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.

As of mid-2018, KH maintains its [own website](#).

Training from Iran and Hezbollah

In the past, KH members have [received 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 Iraq (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.

KH has [developed especially close ties with Unit 3800](#), the Lebanese Hezbollah wing devoted to arming and training Iraqi Shiite militias.

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](#).

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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, focusing 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 used PIJ to try to undermine Hamas—or at least intimidate Hamas into getting back in line behind Iran by undercutting the group’s popular support. 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 intercept most of the rockets but reported damage to homes and minor injuries.

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. State Department](#), 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.

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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 could account for Tehran's [increased](#) funding to the rival PIJ, which—despite maintaining official neutrality on that conflict—remained friendly with Syria's Assad regime. However, Iran appears to have scaled back funding to PIJ beginning in 2015, when a senior leader claimed the group 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."