How Iran exports its ideology

"We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry 'there is no god but God' resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle."
– Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

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Introduction

Since the 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iranian regime has sought to export its revolutionary ideology in an effort to establish Iranian hegemony in the Islamic world. American diplomat Henry Kissinger has remarked on several occasions that Iran needs to decide "whether it wants to be a nation or a cause." In fact, the need to spread the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran's borders is ingrained in the principles of Khomeinism, Iran's guiding ethos. In the words of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, "We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry 'there is no god but God' resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle."

Khomeinism is a radical Shi'a Islamist ideology that fuses religion and governance, utilizing the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) to endow a learned Islamic jurist with the role of Supreme Leader who holds final religious and political authority over all affairs of state. Under Iran's revolutionary system, *velayat-e faqih* is invoked to demand loyalty to and justify the authoritarian role of the Supreme Leader based on divine right.

The other defining principle of Iran's Khomeinist ideology is a conspiratorial outlook and enmity toward the West, particularly the United States which is still frequently referred to as the Great Satan. Iran has framed its Islamic Revolution as a supranational liberation movement of oppressed Muslims from "arrogant" colonialist powers who seek to subjugate Islam. Article 154 of Iran's constitution explicitly states that the Islamic Republic "supports the just struggles of the mustad'afun [oppressed] against the mustakbirun [tyrants] in every corner of the globe."

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, explained Iran's sense of grievance toward the U.S. in a June 12, 2017 speech: "Basically, many of our issues with America are not solvable. The reason is that America's problem with us is us, the Islamic Republic! The problem is this. … The problem of the US is the essence of the Islamic Republic. That a government and a political system comes into being in an important country like Iran and in a rich land called Iran which takes no heed of the yeas and nays of a power like the US and which says yes and no whenever it likes is very difficult for them to tolerate. … How do you want to "resolve" this opposition? Therefore, our problems with the US are insolvable. Their problem is with the essence of the Islamic Republic itself."

Iran has pursued a two-pronged approach, encompassing hard and soft power strategies, in order to spread its brand of Islamic fundamentalist ideology throughout the Middle East and beyond. In terms of hard power, Iran has offered financial, ideological, and material support for global terrorist proxies loyal to Iran's supreme leader. Iran's backing of terrorist movements has helped Iran establish spheres of influence throughout the region, including in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the Palestinian territories. An extensive analysis of Iran's support for terrorist proxies can be found here, and a timeline of Iran's state sponsorship of terrorism in pursuit of its revolutionary goals can be found here.

This report will focus on Iran's ideological expansion through soft power means, examining the key institutions and agents driving Iran's bid for influence around the globe. Iran has established a worldwide network of religious and cultural organizations, including universities, charities, media outlets, and civic organizations oriented towards propagating the regime's Khomeinist ideology. Iran has thus anchored loyal adherents to the regime's religious and foreign policy vision in a diverse array of societies, in turn generating funding and a pipeline of recruits supporting its hegemonic military pursuits around the Middle East.

Profiles of Institutions Spreading Iran's Revolution Abroad

Universities

Iran views education as a core component of its mission to propagate Khomeinist and anti-Western ideology at home and abroad and has accordingly invested heavily in international university endeavors. Ayatollah Khomeini sought the creation of a revolutionary, clerical vanguard to educate the masses of Iran and other Islamic countries in order to impel them to rise up against what he considered "illegitimate" forms of government.

In his pre-Revolutionary treatise, "Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist," which laid out the blueprint for establishing Islamist governance predicated on the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, Khomeini expounded upon the importance of education, urging his followers to become Islamic scholars so they could convey "Islam accurately to the people. Islam is now a stranger; no one knows Islam properly. You must convey Islam and its ordinances to the people so that they understand what Islam is, what Islamic government is, what prophethood and imamate mean, and in the broadest terms, why Islam was revealed and what its goals are. Thus Islam will gradually become known, and, God willing, an Islamic government will one day be established." Iran's international university offerings have allowed the regime to introduce students from over 100 countries to Khomeinist revolutionary precepts. Many of these students go on to effectively serve as goodwill ambassadors for Iran within their home countries, facilitating the spread of Iran's pernicious ideology to all corners of the globe.

Al-Mustafa International University

Overview: Headquartered in the Iranian holy city of Qom and with affiliated religious seminaries and Islamic colleges in over 50 countries, Al-Mustafa International University is one of Iran's main arms for the dissemination of Khomeinist ideology abroad.

Al-Mustafa University Logo (Source: My Colleges Abroad)

Al-Mustafa International University is tasked with training the next generation of Iran's foreign Shi'a clerics, religious scholars, and missionaries. Since its establishment in 2007, approximately 30,000 pupils have graduated from Al-Mustafa, with many going on to subsequently teach for the university or serve as Shi'a missionaries in various countries, spreading Iran's Khomeinist ideology around the world. It is estimated that Al-Mustafa has 40,000 foreign students enrolled at present, roughly half of whom are studying at campuses within Iran. Many Al-Mustafa graduates are selected by the Iranian regime to establish religious and cultural centers in their home countries, where they can then recruit students and inculcate loyalty to the Islamic Revolution among local populations.

Iranian Backers: Al-Mustafa was founded in 2007 by Iran's current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who directs its activities and is the school's highest authority. In 2016, Iran allocated $74 million in its budget to Al-Mustafa, and it is believed to receive more funding from the Office of the Supreme Leader and from his vast business and charitable empires.

The groundwork for the establishment of Al-Mustafa University was laid in September 1979, when Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, one of the Islamic Republic's founders considered the spiritual forefather of Iran's reformist faction, formed the Council for Managing Non-Iranian Seminarians' Affairs in order to attract non-Iranians interested in studying revolutionary Shi'a Islam in Iran. The Council established numerous branches abroad, particularly in Africa, and "sought to provide ideological training to foreigners in Iran and, if possible, in their home countries. It also supported foreigners in building infrastructures for ideological propaganda and networking in their home countries." In 1993, Supreme Leader Khamenei ousted his rival from the institution and set about modernizing it, establishing one section for foreign students in Iran and one for ideological training outside Iran. In 2007, the two divisions merged into a unified Al-Mustafa International University.

The current president of Al-Mustafa, Ayatollah Ali Reza A'arafi, is a hard-line member of Khamenei's inner circle whose name has been floated as a potential successor for the position of Supreme Leader. During the early portion of A'arafi's revolutionary career, he played a key role in Khamenei's push to "Islamize" Iran's university and seminary system, moving as head of the Office for Cooperation between Clergy and Hawza (seminary) to replace standard humanities textbooks with versions compliant with Khomeinist ideology. During his tenure as head of Al-Mustafa, A'arafi "has magnified the regime's efforts to export its revolutionary ideology, building a colossal infrastructure in Iran and dozens of other countries toward this end and constructing a sophisticated international network rooted in strengthened ties with groups like Lebanese Hezbollah and partnerships with other academic, religious, or political institutions or individuals.

Revolutionary Activities Abroad: Exporting Iran's Islamic Revolution is explicitly stated as the core goal of Al-Mustafa University. Addressing Al-Mustafa's students studying in Iran in 2010, Supreme Leader Khamenei said, "The first lesson that the Islamic Revolution and the auspicious Islamic Republic taught us was that we should think beyond our borders and turn our attention to the vast arena of the Islamic Ummah. … Part of the great work is what you are doing. You have gathered here from nearly one hundred countries in order to become familiar with the pure teachings of Islam," referring to Iran's Khomeinist ideology. In 2016, Al-Mustafa's vice president declared, "Export of revolution has always been one of the most important goals for the Islamic Republic. Al-Mustafa plays a role in preparing the ground and attain this goal. Al-Mustafa has used the Islamic soft power in the region and prepare the ground for Iran's hard power (military) to be present in the Middle East and successfully oppose the global arrogance."

Al-Mustafa offers a generous package of financial incentives to entice students, in effect buying their loyalty to the Islamic Republic and the Supreme Leader. The majority of students pay no tuition and are given enough money for them and their families to travel to Qom for their studies. Al-Mustafa's Farsi website states that, "students in its Iran campuses receive monthly stipends and are provided with free housing, home loans, health care for the students and their families and child care for children. It offers financial support for families, school for children, professional education and job for spouses as well as summer camps for them. In foreign branches, students also receive a wide range of financial assistance."

Al-Mustafa's diffuse international presence anchors subjects loyal to Khomeinist ideology in societies around the globe and serves as a fertile recruiting pool for Iran's Quds Force, the foreign expeditionary arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). There have been reports of Al-Mustafa students, particularly from Afghan and Pakistani backgrounds, joining the Iran-backed militias fighting in Syria to preserve the Assad regime. According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the core members of the Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade, an IRGC-trained elite volunteer outfit fighting in Syria, come from Al-Mustafa University. A similar Afghan brigade also claims Al-Mustafa alumni among its ranks. In a July

2017 interview, Al-Mustafa President Ayatollah Ali Reza A'atif admitted that many graduates of his seminaries "found martyrdom or became disabled [in Syria]. But a large number of them are still fighting."

In addition to providing the ideological underpinnings that inspire a portion of its students to fight for Iranian interests in Syria, Al-Mustafa trains clerics around the world to spread Khomenism in their home countries. The university boasts a presence in over 30 African countries and claims to have 5000 African students enrolled, including 2000 studying in Iran who return home several times a year for missionary purposes. Al-Mustafa operates several branches in European countries, most notably the Islamic College of London. Graduates of Al-Mustafa such as Italian cleric Abbas DiPalma have gone on to form Iranian cultural centers in their home countries, such as the Imam Mahdi Center in Rome. Al-Mustafa has also dispatched Lebanese graduates as missionaries to Latin America, where they seek to create inroads with expat communities and proselytize among local populations.

Islamic Azad University

Overview: Islamic Azad University (IAU) was established in 1982 as a nominally private technical and engineering university by a decree of Ayatollah Khomeini. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani , a member of Ayatollah Khomeini's inner circle and two-term former president, played the leading role in conceptualizing and establishing Islamic Azad University, and went on to serve as head of the university's founder's committee, akin to chairman of the board, for over three decades until his death in January 2017. Rafsanjani was known as a pragmatic backer of limited social and economic liberalization, rather than ideological rigidity, as the best possible guarantor of sustaining Iran's Islamic Revolution.



Islamic Azad University Logo (Source: Wikipedia)

Upon assuming the presidency in 1989, Rafsanjani's administration lifted restrictions on private universities, catalyzing a massive expansion in IAU's size and scope. IAU has grown into a comprehensive system of universities and community colleges, offering a wide array of undergraduate and graduate degrees at its over 400 campuses both in Iran and abroad. With a student body of 1.62 million, IAU ranks as the world's fourth largest university in terms of enrollment. IAU's massive size has enabled it to expand higher educational opportunities to the masses, particularly in rural areas and small towns underserved by Iran's public university system, giving the school a monopoly over education in many areas and thereby increasing IAU's political power.

IAU's expansion has also enabled it to amass $20-$25 billion in assets. Tuition fees and charitable gifts constitute the bulk of its revenue streams, which it has used to purchase and develop 10 million square meters of building and university space situated upon 35 million square meters of property. The expansion of degree offerings, contrasted with large-scale unemployment of Iranian college graduates, has sparked criticism that the university's focus on quantity has led to the dilution of the quality of education being offered, and that "its degree programs do not train professionals, but rather degree holders, who cannot be employed because they graduate without the necessary skills." Additionally, IAU's forays into real estate have prompted criticism that the university system "has a business model based on higher education rather than the other way around."

Iranian Backers: Because of its prodigious holdings and ability to influence a large amount of Iranian students, Islamic Azad University has been a focal point in the ongoing power struggle between Iranian hard-liners and reformists. Numerous members of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, the body tasked with cleansing Iranian higher education of Western influence in order to bring it in line with Shi'a Islam, were among the university's founders, including current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Khomeini's son, Ahmed Khomeini. Khamenei resigned from the founder's committee upon being designated Supreme Leader, and Ahmed Khomeini died in 1995, diminishing the influence of hard-liners over IAU's trajectory.

The remaining founders, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mir Hossein Mousavi, judiciary chief Ayatollah Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardebili, and Abdollah Jasbi were all affiliated with reformist and pragmatist factions. As a result, "the university's curriculum, hiring practices, campus environment, and general orientation took on a relatively progressive quality. …When it came to factional fights, the university either took a neutral or anti-hardline stance." As Rafsanjani's ties to reformist politics grew during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iranian conservatives and hard-liners increasingly came to worry about the school's potential to serve as a reformist stronghold. Ahmadinejad's administration undertook several abortive measures aimed at weakening the school's autonomy, but was initially unsuccessful due to Rafsanjani's continued stature within Iran's revolutionary establishment.

The tide turned following the bitterly contested 2009 presidential election. Ahmadinejad's backers accused IAU of contributing to the 2009 Green Movement protests that rocked Iran, and successfully pressured the university to sever its ties to Mousavi, the defeated presidential candidate and Green Movement leader. Emboldened, Ahmadinejad petitioned parliament for the ability to remove the university's board and president, a Rafsanjani ally. Fearing a hostile takeover by a determined Ahmadinejad, Rafsanjani re-registered IAU as a private non-profit organization. This move served to preserve a degree of autonomy for the university, but it also ceded some powers to the government, granting the Iranian government and Supreme Leader a more decisive role in selecting IAU's president.

The battle over IAU's direction was effectively settled in January 2017 following Rafsanjani's death, with the hard-line faction coming out on top. Supreme Leader Khamenei moved to appoint Ali Akbar Velayati, a staunch Khamenei loyalist and his most trusted foreign policy adviser, by edict to take over Rafsanjani's role as head of the founder's committee.

Revolutionary Activities Abroad: The growth of the Islamic Azad University system and sheer quantity of enrolled students has made the university a large-scale mechanism to disseminate regime ideology and inculcate loyalty to Khomeinism at home and abroad through its official branch campuses and partnership agreements with international universities. Iranian officials operate Islamic Azad University branches in the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, Lebanon and Afghanistan. The school also maintains international offices at local universities in Russia, Italy, Germany, Tanzania, and Armenia, and has plans to offer more branch campuses in Malaysia, Canada, Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the near future. IAU's partnerships with international universities, such as Moscow Synergy University (Russia), Polytechnic University of Milan (Italy), University of Essen (Germany) and University of Nottingham (Germany) enable its students to undertake sabbaticals and research opportunities at foreign universities, and for non-Iranian students to pursue research opportunities in Iran.

In July 2017, Ali Akbar Velayati announced plans for IAU to open new branches in Lebanon and Iraq. Underscoring the new direction he envisions for IAU, Velayati called for IAU to promote science and faith together in its educational offerings, declaring that "we need to revive Islamic culture at the university."

Velayati stressed that IAU will help train the next generation of "resistance" in Lebanon and Iraq, referring to Iran's revolutionary struggle against the U.S. and West in general. Velayati went on to declare that the Basij, the IRGC's paramilitary wing tasked with channeling popular support for the Islamic Republican regime, should have a leadership role in the Islamic revival on IAU campuses. The Basij should be an "all-encompassing presence in Azad University's cultural, ideological and social activities. … The Student Basij is a pillar of universities and student campuses, the cultural department of Azad University will be a headquarters of Basij because we believe that Basij is the most capable organization in the cultural and ideological fields," said Velayati. Velayati's statements indicate clearly that he views his ascension as an opportunity to transform IAU's mission from training technocrats to training committed Khomeinist revolutionaries.

Charitable Organizations

Iranian charitable organizations are an indispensable component of the regime's strategy to spread its revolutionary ideology to receptive societies, especially those with weak state and governmental structures. Iran has perfected this strategy in Lebanon using its terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, to effectively create a state within a state. In addition to its armed militia, the terror group has woven itself into Lebanon's social fabric, setting up charities and providing services in the southern part of the country where government authority is weaker. These social services have boosted Hezbollah's popularity enough to allow it to become part of the Lebanese political structure.

Iran employs the "Hezbollah model" in other weak states as well, instrumentally using the distribution of social services to build patronage networks loyal to the Islamic Republic and to engender goodwill and sympathy among the recipients of its aid while educating them on core Khomeinist precepts. Iran's alternative provision of social services also serves to further erode the legitimacy of official state structures, further weakening the states in which Iran operates.

Imam Khomeini Relief Committee

Overview: The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) had its origins in pre-Revolutionary Iran, where Ayatollah Khomeini's loyalists organized underground charitable networks to provide relief to political prisoners of the Shah and finance other acts of subversion. On March 5, 1979, less than a month into the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini formally established the IKRC.



Imam Khomeini Relief Committee Logo (Source: Wikipedia)

The formation of the IKRC represented an expansion of the Islamic Republic's social contract with its citizens. Whereas religious-based charitable networks previously operated independent of the state, Khomeini believed that in an Islamic Republic, it was incumbent on the state to provide for the welfare of the "deprived and excluded," particularly those Iranians who had provided the Islamic Revolution its popular backing. Tethering religious-based charity to the state has strengthened bonds of reliance and loyalty to the ruling regime among the recipients of IKRC aid.

The IKRC defines its mission as "providing livelihood and cultural support to the needy and underprivileged people living inside and outside the country in order to secure self-reliance, to strengthen and increase piety, and to preserve human dignity." IKRC provides food, housing, educational, vocational training, and healthcare services to Iran's poorest citizens, but also targets some aid, such as marriage dowry assistance and university scholarships, to middle-class and even affluent citizens in a bid to bolster patronage links to the regime. The former head of the IKRC boasted in 2010 that the organization had been "effective for national security," as it successfully disincentivized aid recipients from protesting the regime, including during the Green Movement unrest following the disputed 2009 election. By fostering reliance on Iran's revolutionary government among IKRC aid beneficiaries, the regime is able to "channel social and economic grievances held by poorer strata into a set of routine everyday interactions with the state."

Iranian Backers: The IKRC derives its funding from three primary sources, the Iranian government, religious taxes and donations from individuals inside and outside Iran, and revenues from its vast economic complex. According to current IKRC head Parviz Fattah, a former IRGC commander, 75% of the organization's funding comes from the government. Additionally, blue and yellow IKRC charity boxes are a ubiquitous presence throughout Iran, particularly in urban centers, collecting donations and religious alms from citizens. The IKRC reportedly has an annual budget of $2 billion and provides aid to approximately 9 million Iranians yearly. The IKRC is beholden only to the Supreme Leader and receives scant oversight from other branches of government. The organization was formerly headquartered in a "grimy" area of downtown Tehran, but now occupies a "lavish multiple-building compound" in the northeastern quadrant of the city.

Revolutionary Activities Abroad: The IKRC functions as the Islamic Republic's primary aid distribution network outside of Iran's borders, where it works to engender goodwill among foreign populations and spread the regime's revolutionary ideology. The Supreme Leader coordinates with Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office for Expansion of Relations with Iranians Abroad to direct IKRC's external charitable activities, distributing aid through a network of in-country offices, distribution centers, and educational institutes. The IKRC maintains offices dedicated to welfare, culture, and education in Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Iraq, and Comoros, and additionally conducts philanthropic activities in Chechnya, the Palestinian territories, Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, and Sierra Leone.

IKRC's charitable works in these countries target the elderly, disabled, orphans, and other marginalized strata of society. Among the services provided are food aid, distribution of blankets and fuel, medical services, computer classes and vocational training, interest-free loans, and marriage assistance. Beyond pure philanthropy, the organization seeks to export Iranian culture and educate about Iran's revolutionary Islamist principles, using charity as a foot in the door. Among the endeavors it sponsors in this vein are competitions among aid recipients testing knowledge on Ayatollah Khomeini's Last Will and Testament. The IKRC also plays a leading role in agitating against the Islamic Republic's chief adversaries, the U.S. and Israel, sponsoring and coordinating Quds Day demonstrations in host countries, as well as ceremonies commemorating the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's death. According to previous IKRC head Hossein Anvari, "The Islamic Republic of Iran benefits a great deal from IKRC's diplomacy, which is indeed defensive diplomacy … [which aims] to neutralize threats against the Islamic Republic."

The IKRC focuses heavily on providing relief and assistance to countries beset by conflict and natural disasters, exploiting weakened state structures to carve out inroads among the populace. After the Taliban government was toppled in Afghanistan, Iran dispatched an IRGC-Quds Force commander to coordinate Iran's relief and rebuilding effort, which included drastically increasing the IKRC's activities in the country in a bid to influence village leaders and poorer citizens. Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah

war, the IKRC raised over one billion rials to facilitate the rebuilding of Lebanese Shi'a religious infrastructure destroyed by Israel. Iran dispatched the IKRC to Azerbaijan to aid displaced refugees following the Armenian invasion and occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. Following a sustained drought in Somalia, the IKRC opened an office in Mogadishu to provide food aid, sewing machines to create economic opportunities, and Quran learning centers. The organization partnered with the Basij following Israel's 2014 conflict with Hamas, mobilizing Basij bases, mosques, and religious centers to fundraise on behalf of the reconstruction of Gaza.

In 2010, the U.S. Treasury Department designated the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee's Lebanon branch due to its operational links to Hezbollah. According to the Treasury Department, "The IKRC in Lebanon is a Hizballah social service organization that was created by the Government of Iran in the 1980s and is directed and run by Hizballah members or cadre. Iran has provided millions of dollars to the Hizballah-run branch in Lebanon since 2007. The IKRC has helped fund and operate Hizballah youth training camps, which have been used to recruit future Hizballah members and operatives. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has acknowledged the IKRC branch in Lebanon as one of Hizballah's openly-functioning institutions linked to and funded by Iran."

Ahlul Bayt World Assembly

Overview: The Ahlul Bayt World Assembly (ABWA) is an internationally active Iranian NGO which functions as the umbrella over a network of Iranian-backed religious, cultural, and educational institutions tasked with disseminating Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamist ideology around the world. Ahlul Bayt refers to the "People of the House (of the Prophet)," and in the Iranian context specifically refers to Shi'a Muslims (partisans of, or Shi'at 'Ali). The ABWA is functionally the link between the Iranian Shi'a clerical establishment and foreign Shi'a clerics, and also links Shi'a communities around the world to each other.



AhlulBayt World Assembly Supreme Council (Source: AhlulBayt News Agency)

According to its website, the primary goals of the ABWA include:

- Restoration and promotion of pure [Shi'a] Islamic teachings & culture as prescribed genuinely by the Holy Prophet of Islam;
- Creating and reinforcing solidarity among all members of the whole Islamic World, especially the followers of the Ahlulbayt;
- Cooperation for development and promotion of cultural, economic, social, and political conditions and living standards of followers of the Ahlulbayt (a.s.) worldwide; and
- Defending the oppressed Shiah Muslims against the propagandistic attacks of western media.

Iranian Backers: The ABWA was established in 1990 by Supreme Leader Khamenei as the codification of an initial summit which brought together 300 followers of Khomeinist Shi'a Islam. The organization acts as a transnational propaganda arm for the Supreme Leader, extending his soft power reach and amplifying

his messaging capabilities. The organization's four secretary generals to date (Ayatollah Mohammad-Ali Taskhiri, Dr. Ali-Akbar Velayati, the late Ayatollah Mohammad-Mahdi Asefi, and Ayatollah Mohammad-Hasan Akhtari) have been trusted confidantes and advisors close to the Supreme Leader, ensuring that the ABWA works toward the fulfillment of Khamenei's preferred diplomatic initiatives. According to Tashkiri, the ABWA's first Secretary General, the organization seeks to gain supremacy "over all Islamic groups active in the areas of culture, propaganda, economics, society, and politics via peaceful propaganda and persuasion, and to implement the Iranian claim to leadership over all Shi'i communities in the world."

ABWA's policy agenda is determined by its Supreme Council, comprised of leading Shi'a figures from Iran and other nations with large Shi'a concentrations. Notably, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah sits on ABWA's Supreme Council. ABWA's Secretary General is the organization's chief executive, tasked with implementing the Supreme Council's policy objectives. The current Secretary General, Mohammad-Hasan Akhtari, was one of the founders of Hezbollah and also previously served as Iran's ambassador to Syria on two separate occasions. A 2009 interview with Arabic newspaper *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* referred to Akhtiar as "the operational father" of Hezbollah, "engineer of the special relationship" between Syria and Iran, and "coordinator of Iran's relations with Palestinian organizations in Damascus."

Under Akhtari, ABWA's network of religious organizations, cultural centers, and charities reportedly collaborates with the Quds Force, providing "an effective cover for assisting with intelligence-gathering; spotting and recruiting foreign students; and moving money and materiel destined for Qods Force (and MOIS) operations." Akhtari allegedly leverages his extensive experience in the Levant to advance covert action with the Quds Force wherever possible, which includes propagating regime ideology to local populations in Quds Force theaters of operation in order to win over hearts and minds.

Revolutionary Activities Abroad: The ABWA plays an administrative role, facilitating relationships with local branches and affiliated religious and cultural organizations around the globe. Many of the localized organizations profiled in this report, such as the Islamic Centre of Hamburg and World AhlulBayt Islamic Mission in Britain, operate under the aegis of the ABWA, and receive material and planning support from the parent organization. ABWA publishes Islamic books, magazines, software, and cultural products in different languages which it disseminates at its sub-organizations; helps arrange pro-Iranian seminars and conferences; sponsors religious activists and Shi'a preachers to speak; and undertakes charitable endeavors at the local branches worldwide. Many of the AhlulBayt-affiliated organizations also play leading roles in staging annual Quds Day celebrations in their respective localities.

Iran's Media Empire

The Iranian regime strategically employs radio and television broadcast media – amplified by the internet – in order to disseminate its ideology, worldview, and values at home and abroad. Iran utilizes state-owned international satellite networks as a tool of state-to-foreign population strategic diplomacy. Iranian networks such as Al-Alam (Arabic), PressTV (English), and HispanTV (Spanish) represent a cost-effective complement to the regime's geopolitical ambitions, enabling Iran to project influence and amplify pro-regime ideology in pursuit of its efforts to export the Islamic Revolution.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting's mission statement describes the world's media scene as a "battlefield" in which an "intensifying media war" is playing out in order to win over public opinion. While its news, cultural, and religious programming outputs are often crude and propagandistic, they form the

basis of a coherent and concerted global strategy to disseminate the Iranian establishment's alternate worldview and challenge Western hegemony.

Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting



IRIB logo (Source: Wikipedia)

All internal and external Iranian broadcast media falls under the aegis of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), a state-owned umbrella organization constitutionally mandated to serve as Iran's sole legal TV and radio broadcaster.

Domestically, IRIB is an instrument of Iran's efforts to preserve the Islamic revolution through repression. The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned IRIB in 2013 over its usage of "state-media transmissions to trample dissent." Treasury further cited "distorted or false IRIB news reports and the broadcasting of forced confessions of political detainees" and IRIB's role in jamming satellite transmissions of Western-produced Persian language news broadcasts, as the impetus behind designating IRIB. While satellite dishes are officially proscribed in the Islamic Republic, a majority of Iran's citizens own the illegal devices, giving them access to dozens of non-state approved Farsi-language news, entertainment, and film channels. The European Union similarly sanctioned IRIB's chief in 2012, and several European satellite providers subsequently removed IRIB offerings from their service, but both the U.S. and EU opted to waive their sanctions against IRIB during the Iran nuclear deal negotiating process, enabling IRIB channels to return to Europe's airwaves.

At the height of Iran's financial crisis in early 2015 catalyzed by the international sanctions regime and a sustained drop in energy prices, Iran moved to shutter IRIB news outlets in the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, and Latin America. However, since receiving a sanctions relief windfall valued at over $100 billion in the wake of the JCPOA, Iran is poised to reinvigorate IRIB's global footprint, as Iran's parliament voted in January 2017 to double IRIB's annual budget to $750 million. One of the Middle East's largest news organizations, according to Iranian newspaper the Financial Tribune, the IRIB has "13,000 employees and branches in 20 countries, including France, Belgium, Malaysia, Lebanon, the UK and the US. IRIB offers both domestic and foreign radio and television services, managing 12 domestic television channels, four international television news channels, six satellite television channels and 30 provincial television channels." According to Al-Monitor, IRIB "runs dedicated news channels in English, Arabic and Spanish while broadcasting in more than 30 languages, including Bosniak, Azerbaijani, Mandarin, Malay and Albanian.

Iran's constitution gives the Supreme Leader the power to select the head of IRIB. Accordingly, the media conglomerate has been run by conservative and hardliners loyal to Khamenei since he assumed the role of Supreme Leader. IRIB's mission is to provide consistent messaging in pursuit of the regime's domestic, foreign policy, and military goals. Its programming aims to strengthen morality and religiosity in Iranian society, to uphold Iran's revolutionary ethos, and to provide viewers a theoretical foundation for Khomeinist principles, such as *velayat-e faqih*, the invocation of rule by clerics from which the Supreme Leader's absolute authority is derived. According to its charter, among IRIB's guiding principles are conveying "The majesty of spirit of the Islamic revolution as well as that of constitution over all of the programs" and "The fulfillment of the Supreme Leader's point of view as the Islamic Jurisprudent."

As such, IRIB has served as a crucial institutional pillar of support for Iran's hardline establishment in its factional struggles with reformists, shaping Iranian perceptions of the news in accordance with the regime's prevailing worldview. IRIB has been an important agent in thwarting societal and political liberalization sought by reformist politicians and protestors, branding government opponents as enemies or foreign agents.

As student protests rocked Iran in 1999, IRIB became a target of the demonstrators' ire due to its biased reporting and inadequate coverage of the unrest. IRIB played a similar obscurantist role during the bitterly disputed 2009 election, giving minimal coverage to the massive Green Movement protests, selectively using footage to tar demonstrators as merely "hooligans" rioting, and labelling opposition leaders and activists as "seditionists." The broadcaster also initially chose to ignore the killing of protestor Neda Aghan Soltan at the hands of the Basij, acknowledging her death only after it crystallized an international uproar, and then conspiratorially painting the incident as "phony" or a fabricated Western media plot to undermine the Basij. IRIB also earned domestic and international opprobrium for broadcasting show trials and coerced confessions of Green Movement leaders and activists, a key factor in the U.S. and EU's eventual imposition of sanctions against IRIB.



Ceremonial destruction of satellite dishes in Tehran (Source: Hossein Zohrevand/AFP)

While IRIB's occasionally heavy-handed methods have given its news programs a reputation for peddling pro-regime propaganda, a 2012 U.S. government funded survey found that 86% of Iranians still count IRIB among their top three sources of news, even though only half of respondents classified IRIB's news content as "very trustworthy." IRIB continues to dominate Iranian news consumption despite the mounted challenge posed by Persian-language news offerings by Western media organs, such as BBC and Voice of America, seeking to provide an alternative point of view to Iranian audiences. Iranian authorities regard these broadcasts with fear and mistrust, viewing them as a threat to their continued cultural hegemony. Iran accordingly invests heavily in censorship efforts, including jamming of international satellite broadcasts. Iranian police also regularly conduct raids to seize illegally possessed satellite dishes, and the IRGC's Basij militia have staged ceremonies in which they destroy massive quantities of the corrupting devices.

Al-Alam

Al-Alam (The World) is IRIB's 24-hour Arabic language news channel with news bureaus based in Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Tehran. The network advocates for and seeks to advance the interests of the Iranian regime to the world's 300 million Arabs, and its satellite programming reaches viewers on five continents. Al-Alam offers a mouthpiece for Iran to influence Arab public opinion and shape perceptions of events on the ground in real time in accordance with the Iranian establishment's perspective.



Al-Alam Logo (Source: PressTV)

Al-Alam was set up hastily in 2003 during the run-up to the U.S.-led invasion of neighboring Iraq, preceding similar American media efforts by months and thereby giving Iran a head start in establishing its own spheres of influence in Iraq while simultaneously tarnishing both the U.S. occupation and Saddam Hussein's ruling Ba'ath party. Up until the U.S. invasion, Saddam Hussein had a tight grip over Iraq's media, banning satellite dishes and restricting access to content from Arab media outfits such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Al-Alam was able to break Saddam's messaging stranglehold, utilizing a relay station on a hill on Iran's border with Iraq to terrestrially beam sophisticated newscasts which enabled Iran to communicate directly to Iraqis.

Al-Alam quickly bolstered Iran's image and influence in Iraq. As the war in Iraq raged, Al-Alam viscerally highlighted the toll taken on the civilian population, broadcasting images of dead civilians and maimed children in hospitals and featuring a nightly roundup of U.S. coalition attacks under the slogan "War of Domination." Al-Alam's slick and professional coverage won it a significant proportion of viewers, eroding support for the U.S. in the process and laying the groundwork for Iran's emerging status as a crucial power broker in Iraq.

Bolstered by the initial successes of Al-Alam in Iraq, Iran expanded the network into a satellite channel, enabling it to reach Arab audiences throughout the Mideast and beyond. The network expanded its focus as well, as correspondents around the region began focusing on other Middle Eastern conflict zones, such as Lebanon and Israel/Palestine. Al-Alam served as a key soft power weapon in Iran's bid for regional primacy, enabling it to exploit and exacerbate growing cleavages between Arab publics and their rulers, particularly in U.S.-allied Arab states. Especially after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, Iran was able to boost its popularity and that of Hezbollah on the Arab street to unprecedented levels by claiming the leadership mantle of "resistance" against Israel and America's regional ambitions. Al-Alam's editorial content frequently attempted to walk a tightrope between portraying Iran in a positive light, on the one hand, while paying lip service to non-sectarian, pan-Islamic unity on the other.

The 2011 "Arab Spring" period, however, witnessed the collapse of Iran's delicate balancing act, dealing a serious blow to Shi'a Iran's aspirations to lead the Arab world. The advent of the Arab Spring and in particular, the civil war in Syria, brought the sectarian tensions that Iran had cavalierly stoked for years to the fore, transforming the region into a battlefield for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its U.S.-backed moderate Arab allies, wary of Iran's expanding regional clout. Whereas Iran's media strategy in the mid-2000's was oriented toward all Arabs, its support for the brutal Assad regime's conduct has diminished Iran and Hezbollah's standing among Sunni populations. Accordingly, its media strategy since

2011 has centered largely on fomenting unrest among neighboring Shi'a populations in order to weaken its Sunni rivals.

To a large extent, the cold war between Shi'a Iran and the moderate Sunni states takes place on a media battlefield, with Al-Alam serving as the tip of the spear in Iran's efforts to propagandize and mobilize Shi'a populations in neighboring countries. As the Arab Spring's unrest spread to Sunni-ruled Bahrain's Shi'a majority and to Saudi Arabia's sizeable Shi'a minority concentrated in the nation's Eastern Province, both the Bahraini and Saudi monarchies directed their blame at Al-Alam. "Around-the-clock broadcasts in Arabic by Iran's state-run radio and television stations incited our population to engage in acts of violence, sabotage, and insurrection. … Iran's propaganda fuelled the flames of sectarian strife," claimed Bahraini King Hamad in November 2011. Al-Alam's popularity has grown among Bahraini and Saudi Shi'as as a result of its coverage of their protest movements and the heavy-handed attempts by authorities to suppress them, which Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya and Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera both sought to downplay.

PressTV

The IRIB inaugurated its 24/7 English-language satellite channel, PressTV in July 2007. Headquartered in Tehran, the network employed correspondents in Washington, New York, Moscow, Rome, Cairo, London, Brussels and Beijing and operated bureaus in Beirut, Gaza and the West Bank immediately upon its inception. PressTV debuted during a period of Iranian concern over military encirclement by the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan and intensifying international pressure over Iran's illicit nuclear program. Iran thus viewed PressTV as a means for Iran to reach Western audiences and defend the regime's nuclear pursuits, foreign policy, support for "resistance" movements, and human rights record.



PressTV Logo (Source: American Friends Service Committee)

PressTV's editorial content has frequently promoted the Iranian regime's conspiratorial anti-Western, anti-Zionist worldview. A yearlong review of the station's offerings by the Anti-Defamation League found that PressTV regularly aired:

- "Allegations of "False Flag" conspiracy theories, including claims that Israel and Jews masterminded the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks;
- Allegations of Zionist control over world events, with allegations that Zionists control, manipulate and exploit world events through a global Jewish conspiracy;
- Allegations of "Israeli Lobby" control of the American government, including the canard that Jews "control" the government and have a disproportionate influence on policymaking and in influencing the American presidential elections; and
- Allegations of excessive Jewish/Zionist influence as a result of disproportionate wealth and power."

Reflecting IRIB's vision of the world's media landscape as a "battlefield" of ideas to influence public opinion, the first iteration of its website claimed that "Press TV was born out of the need to break the global media stranglehold of Western outlets." At PressTV's opening ceremony, then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told the staff, "Broadcasting the truth immediately, providing precise analysis and exposing the plots of propaganda networks of the enemy is among your duties." In an interview to mark the one-

year anniversary of PressTV, IRIB vice president Mohammad Sarafraz opined that the network had succeeded in providing typically marginalized viewpoints and perspectives to Western, English-speaking audiences. "Previously, most of the news on Iran and particularly the views of the leader of the Islamic Revolution (Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamene'i), who is the highest decision-making authority in the country were censored. Press TV has now made possible for viewers to receive this kind of news. … According to various polls, the secretary-general of Hezbollah, Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah, is also one of the most popular figures in the Middle East. Despite all this, media outlets did not televise his speeches or censored most of it. However, Press TV has conducted live broadcasts of all his speeches … and given a voice to Hezbollah. The same goes for Iraq. No-one gives any coverage to the Sadr movement, which believes in resistance against occupation. However, Press TV has been able to provide this kind of coverage," boasted Sarafraz.

PressTV has garnered criticism for its uncritical coverage of the Iranian regime despite its myriad human rights abuses and support for terrorist movements. This unwillingness to engage critically with itself was especially manifest during the network's coverage of Iran's disputed 2009 election, which exposed the network's lack of journalistic independence. PressTV contributed to the perception that the election was rigged, waiting only an hour after the polls closed to "announce that Ahmadinejad is ahead in the elections with a significant margin." As Iran's Green Movement took hold, PressTV tarred the demonstrators as "seditionists" and "rioters," according to a former journalist at the station. Most egregiously, PressTV dispatched a journalist to Tehran's notorious Evin prison to air footage of a scripted confession by Newsweek journalist Maziar Bahari that he colluded with Western media outlets to stage protests. The confession was obtained under duress and the threat of execution.

The UK's broadcasting regulator subsequently revoked PressTV's license, and the EU and U.S. both sanctioned PressTV, effectively removing the station from their satellite providers (temporarily in Europe's case). Still, PressTV was able to maintain a robust online presence in spite of the sanctions. Responding to its removal from European satellite providers, PressTV issued a statement that the decision "shows that the European Union does not respect freedom of speech, and spares no efforts to silence the voice of alternative media outlets." Notably, Iran officially bans all broadcasters apart from the IRIB from airing content in Iran.

HispanTV

HispanTV is the IRIB's Tehran-based Spanish language network, which airs throughout Latin America and Spain. The network serves as an arm of Iran's public diplomacy outreach to Latin America, a region in which Iran has invested significant political capital. According to Iranian officials, the goal of HispanTV is to "broaden the Iranian regime's ``ideological legitimacy'' among friendly governments in the region – and to diminish the influence of ``dominance seekers,'' a thinly-veiled reference to the United States."

HispanTV Logo (Source: Viaway)

HispanTV's December 2011 debut marked the latest chapter in Iran's efforts dating back to the 1980s to establish strong commercial, political, and strategic links to Latin America. Buttressed by a shared antipathy toward the U.S., Iran has made common cause with leftist, populist Latin American regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, etc., enabling the Islamic Republic to anchor a Hezbollah and IRGC presence in the Western hemisphere.

HispanTV's debut occurred around the imposition of the U.S. and EU's toughest sanctions to date against Iran for its illicit nuclear program. Iran's pursuit of economic and strategic ties with Latin America was instrumental to its ability to withstand the international sanctions regime. The Venezuela/Cuba-led axis (known as the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our Americas, or ALBA) helped Iran Iran "skirt international sanctions and evade financial authorities by launching front companies, laundering money and injecting cash into the financial systems of ALBA countries for lucrative, commercial, and criminal enterprises. Additionally, Hezbollah utilized the tri-border area of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil as a staging ground for money laundering and drug trafficking operations, netting the Iranian proxy millions of dollars.

HispanTV has contributed to Iran's "resounding success in promoting an anti-US and anti-Israel message in Latin America." The network provides Iran a mass media platform to conduct "proselytization activities designed to promote its particular brand of political Islam, and ideological coalition-building intended to make the region more inhospitable to the United States than it is currently."

Government Sponsored Initiatives

Khatam al-Anbiya

Overview: The Iranian regime controls a vast business empire which has increasingly come under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) since the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Established by Ayatollah Khomeini in the months following the February 1979 Islamic Revolution, 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.

Khatam al-Anbiya Logo (Source: Iran Watch)

As the Iranian government reduced military expenditures and sought to rebuild after the war, the IRGC's construction and engineering wing, *Khatam al-Anbiya* ("seal of the Prophets"), moved into civilian enterprises, expanding its influence and economic portfolio as it took on lucrative post-war reconstruction projects. This process accelerated during Ahmadinejad's tenure, 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 and the organization effectively operates as a state within a state, accountable only to Supreme Leader Khamenei. Reflecting the IRGC's growing influence in Iran's oil and gas industry, Khatam al-Anbiya has served as a recruiting pool for top talent for the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. IRGC commander and former Khatam al-Anbia head Rostam Ghasemi was appointed as Iran's Minister of Petroleum in August 2011.

Revolutionary Activities Abroad: The IRGC is a key player in Iran's project to spread the Islamic Revolution beyond its borders. It primarily acts militarily to achieve these aims, utilizing the Quds Force, its foreign expeditionary arm, to support terrorist proxies and subversive activities throughout the Middle East.

Khatam al-Anbiya offers another, subtler avenue for the IRGC to expand Iran's influence around the globe by constructing dams and pursuing other development-oriented projects abroad. According to Iranian newspaper the *Financial Tribune* in 2014, Iran is the world's third leading nation in dam construction behind China and Japan, operating projects in forty countries. The Iranian firms engaged in hydroelectric projects in Latin America, Central Asia, and the Middle East "without exception fall under the rubric of Khatam al-Anbia, the economic wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)," according to Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute.

Khatam al-Anbiya's participation in building dams and related infrastructure projects serves numerous Iranian objectives. Iran utilizes development assistance in a targeted fashion to curry favor with nations voting in key multilateral fora, such as non-permanent members of the U.N. Security Council or International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors. Additionally, Iran can use these projects to covertly project influence, as Rubin speculates that "the dam construction can provide a means to insert IRGC members into areas where they could, in theory, conduct surveillance or support other operations."

Lebanon's northern Sunni and Christian regions are an area where Iran has tried, unsuccessfully thus far, to pursue "dam diplomacy." Seeking to bolster its standing in Lebanon as a hedge against the potential fall of Syria's Assad regime, Iran offered in 2011 to contribute $40 million to the construction of a dam in the Christian city of Tannourine. The plan met resistance, however, from Lebanese Christians weary of Iran's perceived sectarian agenda. "We don't have confidence in Iranian economic aid; we consider it part of a political, security military project," said Sejaan M. Azzi, vice president of the Phalange Party, discussing the project. Tannourine's mayor, Mounir Tarabay said, "The donation was on condition that an Iranian company carries out the work. If they come here, they'll establish their own community, which means that they will establish a colony in this purely Christian area and we don't want this to happen."

Iran has also sought to bolster its strategic depth by expanding its influence westward into Central Asia, competing with Russia and Saudi Arabia for cultural and political cache. Iran's efforts have centered largely around Tajikistan, which has proven eager to boost its ties with Iran due to its standing as the poorest former Soviet republic and its natural cultural affinity with Iran. Ethnic Tajiks, which comprise 80% of the population of Tajikistan, are Persian-speaking people of Iranian origin. Iran has invested in and developed numerous construction projects in Tajikistan, including a $260 million hydroelectric power plant and a power plant and dam capable of generating 130 megawatt per hour of electricity. These Iranian projects have contributed to shoring up a "Persian axis" between Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, and Iran is now engaged in building dams in Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan as well.

Quds Day

Overview: Held annually on the last Friday of Ramadan, Quds Day is a day of protest organized by the Iranian government against Israel. Established by Ayatollah Khomeini months after assuming power in 1979, Khomeini envisioned Quds Day as part of a "long-term pragmatic strategy in a bid to launch a justice-based peace in the region and reclaim the rights of the oppressed Palestinian nation," which entails the elimination of "Zionist" control over Israel and the return of Israel to the Palestinians. Iran and its

surrogates around the world stage ceremonies which typically feature calls for hostilities against Israel and the elimination of the "Zionist regime. "Death to Israel" is a common chant at the rallies, often accompanied by "Death to America," and flag burning of Iran's chief adversaries are a staple of the events.

Iranian politicians abidingly attend Quds Day rallies and deliver anti-Israel diatribes to showcase their steadfast commitment to the regime's opposition to Israel. Tehran's June 2017 Quds Day festivities featured myriad examples of incitement. The IRGC showcased several ballistic missiles capable of striking Israeli territory, and the regime debuted a huge digital countdown display ticking down 8411 days until the demise of Israel, a reference to a 2015 statement by Supreme Leader Khamenei predicting that Israel would cease to exist within 25 years. Addressing the gathering, President Hassan Rouhani declared that Israel supports terrorists in the region, and Parliament speaker Ali Larijani called Israel "the mother of terrorism." The regime issued a communique to wrap up Quds Day vowing support for the path of "resistance and intifada" against Israel, and criticizing Israel's "attempts to Judaize the occupied territories and destroy Palestine's national and historical identity."



Countdown until Israel's destruction (Source: Mehr News Agency)

Quds Day fits into Khomeini's revolutionary paradigm as a show of resistance in support of "oppressed peoples" against "arrogant, oppressive powers," and Khomeini went so far as to issue a fatwa declaring the elimination of the "Zionist entity" as a religious duty incumbent on Muslims. While ostensibly Quds Day's primary focus is on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran sees this localized struggle as part of a broader regional initiative. By hosting Quds Day celebrations around the world, Iran seeks to frame the Palestinian struggle as a pan-Islamic cause, and to claim the leadership mantle as the preeminent defender of the Palestinians.


Ballistic missiles on display (Source: AFP)

Quds Day is thus part and parcel of Iran's hegemonic project to export its revolutionary ethos and bolster its cultural and ideological influence throughout the Islamic world. Tehran's rhetoric at Quds Day events has sought to make inroads among Muslim societies, Arab nations in particular, by excoriating their leaders for not doing enough on behalf of the Palestinians and for their willingness to negotiate or make peace with Israel under American pressure, against popular sentiment. By virtue of its implacable opposition to Israel's existence and backing of the most recalcitrant elements of Palestinian society, including terrorist organization 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.

Revolutionary Activities Abroad: Iranian-affiliated agents and entities have helped grow Quds Day internationally, organizing events in over 80 countries annually. In addition to shows of support for the Palestinians and denunciations of Israel, displays of support for Iran and Hezbollah – including flags, and posters depicting Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah – are a staple at Quds Day events worldwide.



Quds Day rally in Kashmir (Source: AhlulBayt News Agency)

Although Hezbollah itself draws no distinction between its military and political wings, the European Union has designated only the military wing of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, allowing the group to overtly organize, demonstrate, and carry out fundraising activities throughout the continent. The Iranian terrorist proxy has therefore played a prominent role at Quds Day rallies in European capitals such as London and Berlin.

In London, the primary organizer of the annual Quds Day march is the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), a British Khomeinist organization that is strongly supportive of Hezbollah. IHRC cooperates with several other Iranian-linked organizations (Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission, InMinds) to stage the event, and these groups have joined forces with organizations linked to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS), groups with Islamist leanings, far-left/socialist movements, and fringe anti-Zionist Jewish groups to stage Quds Day rallies. In 2017 the IHRC issued an encouraging advisory ahead of the rally informing attendees that "you can bring a Hizbullah flag to show support for the political wing of Hizbullah … because the political wing of Hizbullah is not a proscribed organisation." Notably, Hezbollah has only one flag for its military and political wings – which prominently features an assault rifle – casting suspicion on IHRC's disclaimer that its promotion of Hezbollah flags at Quds Day events in no way demonstrates support for Hezbollah's proscribed military wing.



Hezbollah flag at Quds Day rally in London, U.K. (Source: Algemeiner)

Quds Day events in Berlin, held annually since 1996, have also courted controversy due to calls for the destruction of Israel and Hezbollah participation. At the 2017 Quds Day rally, "Mayor Michael Müller permitted nearly 600 Hezbollah supporters and members – and pro-Iranian regime activists – to march in the heart of the German capital." Hezbollah flags, as well as posters featuring Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the leading lights of the Iranian-led "resistance axis," have featured prominently at Quds Day events in recent years. The Iranian-regime owned Islamic Center of Hamburg is the key organizer of

Berlin's Quds Day, and reportedly "buses pro-Hezbollah and pro-Iranian regime members and activists to the annual event, which also serves as a gathering for the BDS campaign against Israel."

India's 2017 Quds Day in Hyderabad, sought to unite India's Shi'a and Sunni communities against Israel. The head of a local Iran-linked organization, Tanzeem e-Jafferi, "addressed the rally stating Palestine is the symbol of all oppressed people in the world and Israel is the main cause of terrorism in the whole world," before attendees concluded the rally by burning the Israeli flag. Quds Day events in conflict zones, such as Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Kashmir, have sought to tie in local liberation movements with the Palestinian cause, and have cast the U.S., U.K., ISIS, Saudi Arabia, and Hindu Brahmans as Zionist agents of imperialism.

Tehran International Book Fair

Overview: The annual Tehran International Book Fair, which celebrated its 31st iteration in May 2018, is one of the key cultural diplomacy initiatives of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance geared toward spreading Iran's ideology. Iran's regime established the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1986, during the presidency of current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, as a means of spreading Khomeinist principles at home and abroad. Domestically, the ministry is tasked with restricting access to press and media deemed not in adherence with Iran's revolutionary ideology and religious sensibilities, and with promoting cultural endeavors which further religiosity in society and the regime's worldview. The ministry is also a key agent of "exporting" Iran's Islamic Revolution. Among its roles are, "informing the world community about the basis and aspirations of the Islamic Revolution; expansion of cultural ties with various nations and Muslims and with 'the oppressed people in particular'; running the affairs of the Haj, operation of facilities for domestic and international tourism; and 'preparing the ground for spread of the culture of Islamic Revolution and Persian language in other countries'".



31st Tehran International Book Fair Logo (Source: Mehr News Agency)

Echoing Khomeini's rhetoric on the centrality of education, the Iranian regime views books as an essential component of propagating its revolutionary principles. According to the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, "In a community in which book reading is not a value, we must expect ignorance and foolishness. In such a community, morality will be replaced by immorality; corruption will replace purity; honesty is substituted by lies; darkroom substitutes illumination; and interaction will give its place to confrontation."

Supreme Leader Khamenei has also issued numerous statements, compiled here, imploring Iranian citizens to be faithful to the Revolution by purchasing and reading more books. The vaunted status Khamenei accords to books is ironic given Iran's antipathy to free and open inquiry. The regime regularly imprisons journalists, shutters opposition newspapers, censors the publication of books, and infamously issued a *fatwa* calling for the assassination of Salman Rushdie in response to the publication of *The Satanic Verses.* Khamenei himself has declared, "We cannot lift controls on the book market and thus allow harmful books to enter the market."

Against this backdrop, the 2017 Tehran International Book Fair hosted nearly 140 foreign publishing agencies from countries including the US, the UK, France, the Netherlands, China, South Korea, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan and Jordan. According to Minister Salehi Amiri, "What happened in the book fair indicates that Iran is concerned to develop its relationships with the neighboring countries and expand its international communications." While many of the book fair's offerings are fairly anodyne, the confab has garnered controversy in recent years due to the inclusion of an abundance of anti-Semitic and Holocaust denying literature from both Farsi and Western sources, including the notorious anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and a book entitled *Jewish Supremacists* by David Duke.

Revolutionary Activities Abroad

Backed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Tehran International Book Fair frequently exhibits Iranian publishers and titles at similar book fairs around the world. In recent years, Iran has participated in book fairs in Beijing, New Delhi, Frankfurt, Belgrade, and Vienna. Notably, Iran has disregarded Western sensibilities, using the occasions to exhibit many of its most noxious offerings.

Beyond offering Iran a platform for its anti-Semitic regime ideology, Iran's attendance at various international book fairs has helped the regime weather international attempts to isolate it for its illicit nuclear program. Under the guise of cultural exchange, Iran's participation in such endeavors has served to normalize and confer prestige upon the regime, frequently in the heart of Western nations. Iran views these cultural interactions instrumentally as a stepping stone to the expansion of economic and diplomatic ties.

Iran's Ideological Expansion – Middle East

Iran's actions to plant the seeds of the Islamic Revolution in regions such as Europe, Africa, and Latin America, detailed extensively in this report, are largely carried out in service of its most pressing foreign policy priority, supplanting the United States and becoming the rightful dominant power in the Middle East. The Middle East is the most active region in the Islamic Republic of Iran's hegemonic project, and Iran has worked diligently since the 1979 Islamic Revolution to weaken and destabilize neighboring governments by exploiting the sectarian tensions it has fomented in a bid to spread its ideological influence. Tehran's nefarious regional meddling has enabled it to amass significant influence over four Arab capitals – Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Sanaa.

Iran's primary method of empowering itself has been to anchor loyal terrorist proxies in the region, which it has done most successfully with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and more recently in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories. Where its proxies have not been able to take root, Iran has engaged in subversive activities to undermine rival governments and enhance its influence, as it has done to greatest effect in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait. UANI has extensively covered Iran's campaign for regional dominion through proxy wars and subversion. In tandem with its strategy of spreading the Islamic Revolution through asymmetrical applications of hard power, Iran utilizes a range of sophisticated and varied soft power approaches to buttress and complement its militaristic advances, enabling it to make inroads with target populations and create favorable conditions for fealty to its revolutionary regime to take root.

To this end, Iran has proliferated charitable and social service organizations, educational institutions, and media organs throughout the region to assist in its ideological expansion. These organizations typically work hand-in-glove with Iranian-affiliated terrorist proxies and militias to facilitate their acceptance on the part of local populations. Altruism serves merely as a secondary function of Iranian-backed charitable organizations, while the primary function is to instrumentally create patronage networks and foster reliance on Iran. Iran uses media organs to propagandize and present Iran and its proxies in a positive light, and educational institutions to indoctrinate committed cadres with revolutionary theology and ideology.

As a Shi'a power in the Sunni dominated Middle East, Iran's soft power efforts largely center on Shi'a minority populations where applicable, and typically attempt to be inclusive of Shi'a offshoots such as the Alawites in Syria or Zaidis in Yemen as well. However, basing its Middle East foreign policy on Shi'a identity politics would be an inherently self-limiting proposition, and so Iran has also sought to inculcate outreach on shared bases such as pan-Islamic unity, anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, and opposition to monarchical or otherwise autocratic governments.

This strategy has at times paid dividends. In the years directly following the 2006 Hezbollah war against Israel, the Iranian-led "resistance axis" which included Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad enjoyed unprecedented popular support among Arab publics due to the perception that they were the only parties willing to confront the U.S. and Israel. A 2008 University of Maryland/Zogby International poll found that Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, and then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad were the three most admired leaders in the Muslim world, transcending sectarian identity.

Iran and its subordinates' popularity has undergone a reversal, however, since the Arab Spring and subsequent Syrian Civil War, which have largely inflamed sectarian tensions throughout the Middle East.

Iran has come to play an integral role in sustaining Syria's Alawite Assad regime since a popular uprising against Assad emerged in March 2011 as the "Arab Spring" swept across the region. Iran has spent years investing in a "Shi'a crescent" of influence stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean with the aim of creating a land-bridge that would link its own territory to Hezbollah's Beqaa valley stronghold via Iraq and Syria.

Loath to abandon this project, Iran ordered Hezbollah into the conflict, as well as thousands of Shi'a mercenaries, IRGC forces, regular Iranian army forces, and *basij* paramilitary forces. Iran and its proxies' entry into the battle have preserved the Assad regime and enabled it to stanch and reverse key losses, but at great cost to Iran's regional standing due to the brutal human toll of the conflict, which has killed over 400,000 to date and created over 5 million refugees according to U.N. estimates. In a similar vein, Iran's meddling in Iraq in the form of support for sectarian policies by pro-Iranian government figures and backing of Shi'a militias also served to fan the flames of sectarian tensions, provoking widespread Sunni dissatisfaction and creating conditions which enhanced the potency of ISIS.

Iran's efforts to destabilize its neighbors have thus paradoxically enhanced Iran's power and influence around the region while hardening Sunni popular opposition to its dominion. President Rouhani boasted about Iran's regional clout in October 2017, stating, "No decisive actions can be taken in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, North Africa and the Gulf region without Iran's consent." Rouhani's bluster elides the precariousness of Iran's strengthened regional position, which is a direct result of the sectarian backlash Iran's regional adventurism has fostered. Iran's ability to retain its regional influence will depend to a large extent on its ability to sustain the loyalty of pro-Iranian constituencies in neighboring countries through soft power outreach. Iran has a coherent, albeit sometimes ineffective, strategy to this end.

Iranian Influence in Lebanon: The Hezbollah model

The preferred strategy employed by Iran to expand its ideological influence throughout the Middle East is the "Hezbollah model." Iran helped create the terrorist group in Lebanon in the early 1980s following Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982. Iran's financing of Hezbollah's military and social services enables the group to solidify its role as the protector and provider of Lebanon's Shi'a community. This core constituency provides the base for Hezbollah and Iran to fight for dominance throughout the Middle East.

Despite Hezbollah's rhetorical goal of freeing Lebanon from foreign occupation, it has made no secret of its allegiance to or support from Iran. Hezbollah is first and foremost an instrument of the Iranian regime that has pledged allegiance to the ideals put forward by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Iranian revolution and Iran's first supreme leader. The group explicitly states in its 1985 "open letter," essentially the group's founding manifesto and mission statement, "We are often asked: Who are we, the Hezbollah, and what is our identity? We are the sons of the *umma* (Muslim community) – the party of God (Hizb Allah) the vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran. … We obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and *faqih* (jurist) who fulfills all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. God save him!"

In the years prior to the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which rescued Iran's economy from the brink of calamity with an infusion of $50-100 billion in previously frozen assets, Iran provided Hezbollah with an estimated $200 million per year for both its militant and social/political activities. Immediately preceding the JCPOA, international sanctions and falling oil prices led Iran to

reportedly cut its monetary support to Hezbollah by 40% in 2015, with the cuts primarily coming from Hezbollah's health and social services rather than military budget.

The lifeline provided by the JCPOA has allowed Iran to drastically escalate its funding of Hezbollah. In June 2016, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah proclaimed that, "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, are from the Islamic Republic of Iran. … As long as Iran has money, we have money." In 2017, Iran reportedly quadrupled its pre-JCPOA funding of Hezbollah, upping its aid to $830 million per year. In addition, Hezbollah supplements its Iranian aid through its fundraising and criminal activities in Europe, Africa, and Latin America.

Hezbollah's efficacy as a foreign policy tool of the Iranian regime is two-fold, comprising hard and soft power objectives. On the hard power front is the group's militant "resistance" character. Hezbollah carries out terrorist and criminal operations around the world with Iran's guidance and direction in furtherance of its shared anti-Israel, anti-U.S. agenda. On Iran's orders, Hezbollah bombed the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in October 1983, killing 241 American peacekeepers and 58 French soldiers. This attack sparked the withdrawal of the U.S. and France from Lebanon, paving the ground for Iran to consolidate its power in Lebanon. In more recent years, Hezbollah's terrorist militia has evolved into a potent conventional fighting force as well since entering the Syrian Civil War at Iran's behest to prop up the embattled Assad regime.



Hezbollah rally in Bint Jbeil, Lebanon (Source: AFP)

Equally important is Hezbollah's soft power approach, which serves to implant and spread Iran's revolutionary ideology in the areas of southern Lebanon under Hezbollah control. Hezbollah acts as more than just a "resistance" organization, it is a political party as well whose potency lies in the network of social services, hospitals, mosques, charities, and even a satellite TV network, Al-Manar, that the group operates with an annual budget of $15 million. Hezbollah's provision of essential services, such as garbage collection and healthcare, and welfare services to its Lebanese Shi'a constituency, particularly vulnerable strata of society such as orphans, the disabled, and the elderly, address gaps in the provision of such aid by the Lebanese state, establishing Hezbollah as a viable alternative to the state and boosting the group's domestic popularity. Through Hezbollah, Iran capitalizes on the weakness of the Lebanese state to fund "a variety of cultural, educational, religious, and reconstruction projects" aimed at justifying its presence and promoting its ideological and political agenda in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's creation of parallel, quasi-state structures inculcates loyalty and patronage to Hezbollah, and by extension, Iran, thereby weakening official Lebanese state structures and vesting Hezbollah as a crucial power broker with the ability to bring the Lebanese government to a standstill. Since the 2008 Doha Agreement, Hezbollah has had veto power over government decisions and non-Shi'a leaders have increasingly had to join or reach accommodations with the Hezbollah-led March 8th coalition in order to assure their political survival.

Much of Iran's largesse goes to providing salaries and social services to Hezbollah members and fighters, incentivizing young Lebanese Shi'ites to join the organization and their families to embrace it. Hezbollah pays its Lebanese conscripts between $500 and $2000 a month, a substantial and alluring amount for young men which has enabled the organization to overcome recruiting shortages and supply manpower for the brutal fighting in Syria. Hezbollah also operates a Martyr's Foundation, which provides financial assistance to the families of fallen soldiers in Syria ranging between $25,000 and $45,000, as well as health and social services.

The most important Iranian aid organization operating in Lebanon is the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), whose Lebanese branch was designated by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2010 for "for being owned or controlled by Hizballah and for providing financial and material support to Hizballah." The IKRC's assets are controlled by Supreme Leader Khamenei, while its $2 billion budget is supplied primarily by the Iranian government, with about 25% coming from public donations and fundraising abroad.

The IKRC began operations in Beirut in 1986, and today has over 10,000 Lebanese under direct payroll and another 1,000 volunteers. The organization delivers aid to more than 400 cities and rural areas of Lebanon and has 20 offices around the country. Its primary charitable activities are "cash assistance, health services, educational programs, housing, informational trips for young Lebanese to Iran, emergency relief assistance at times of conflicts and natural disasters, interest-free loans, and marriage assistance." Beyond charity, the IKRC is a diplomatic tool of promoting Iranian culture and ideology in Lebanon, earning fealty and patronage to Iran from its beneficiaries.

The Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon (ICRL) is another important institution that Iran uses to curry favor in Beirut which doubles as an instrument of Tehran's expansionist agenda. Established by the IRGC in 2006 to help rebuild Hezbollah-controlled areas of southern Lebanon devastated in the Israeli-Hezbollah War, Iran spent over $1 billion on over 5000 construction and rebuilding projects in the years directly following the war. While the ICRL did play a role in reconstructing mosques, educational centers, and health facilities, many of its aims were nefarious and non-humanitarian related.

The ICRL provided a cover for Iran to embed elite Quds Force operatives in Lebanon under the radar. The organization's "civilian" leader, Hessam Khoshnevis, was in reality a senior Quds Force commander named Hassan Shateri using a false identity. Under Shateri's leadership, the ICRL played an integral role in resupplying Hezbollah's arsenal and building a secret fiber optics network for secure communications which triggered the 2008 crisis that strengthened Hezbollah at the expense of the Lebanese government. The U.S. Treasury Department designated the ICRL in August 2010, finding that, "ICRL has financed and facilitated Hizballah's infrastructure and private communications network that enables the terrorist group to communicate securely."

Iran's cultural and educational activities in Lebanon are directed by the Cultural Center for the Islamic Republic of Iran in Beirut (CCI), an initiative of Iran's Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance. The CCI is essentially Tehran's umbrella propaganda arm in Lebanon, utilizing schools and universities, local mosques and cultural centers, and print and broadcast media outlets to promote Hezbollah and Iran's revolutionary ethos in Lebanon. The CCI provides free cultural and educational activities throughout the country and oversees an Iranian network of schools, universities, and religious seminaries.

Islamic Azad University is among the CCI-backed educational institutions, operating branches in Beirut and Al-Nabatieh. In July 2017, Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's chief foreign policy advisor, announced IAU will

open additional branches in Lebanon in order to train the next generation of "resistance." Al Mustafa University also maintains a modest presence in Lebanon, operating two seminaries for training male and female clerics, many of whom go on to serve as pro-Iranian missionaries elsewhere in the Middle East and Latin America, which has a large Lebanese expatriate community.

The CCI also oversees Iran's media operations in Lebanon, which has become a hub for producing state-run propaganda. Al-Alam and Press TV both operate bureaus in Beirut, broadcasting Iranian regime perspectives to the Arabic and English speaking worlds. The CCI has also served as a technical and financial partner in the establishment of Hezbollah's media empire, which includes a satellite TV network (Al-Manar), radio station (Radio Nour), nearly two dozen print and online newspapers, and a robust social media presence.

Export of the Hezbollah Model

In Lebanon, Iran embedded a proxy force to provide security and social services to the Shi'a community above and beyond the capacity of the Lebanese government, securing loyalty of large swathes of this constituency to Iran and Hezbollah rather than the Lebanese state. Hezbollah's maintenance of a terrorist militia and operation of parallel state structures has eroded Lebanese sovereignty, further destabilizing the weak centralized government and enabling Iran to become the dominant power in Lebanon. The Middle East is a region replete with weak and failing states. Having established the blueprint for destabilization and domination in Lebanon, Iran has sought to replicate the "Hezbollah model" throughout the Middle East with varying degrees of success.

Iraq

Since the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iran has sought to significantly increase its influence in Iraq by empowering the Shi'a majority with the aim of winning their loyalty to the Iranian regime. Iran viewed the U.S. invasion in 2003 as an opportunity to transform one of its primary foes into a client state and base from which to direct revolutionary activities around the Middle East. In order to achieve this objective, Iran has sought to keep Iraq weak and dependent on Tehran for its security.

Iran has sought to replicate the "Hezbollah model" that it employed in Lebanon in its quest for power in Iraq. Iran seeks to be the dominant influence in Iraq's religious, political, and security spheres. On the religious front, Iran seeks to propagate its revolutionary brand of Islamism predicated upon the conception of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurisprudent) among Iraq's Shia. The hope is that the Iraqi Shia will regard Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as their preeminent source of emulation, supplanting the influence of Shia clerics such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani based in the holy Iraqi city of Najaf, a rival power center to Qom, Iran. Sistani opposes velayat-e faqih and is an advocate for a religiously pluralistic government in Iraq, as opposed to Iran which seeks a Shia dominated government subservient to Iran.

Sistani is the most revered Shia cleric among Iraqi Shia, but Iran has taken strides to make inroads at Sistani's expense. Iranian religious foundations and construction firms have built religious schools, mosques, and health facilities to gain adherents to their revolutionary theology, and the Iranian government has also moved "to prop up minor local clerics to lessen (Sistani's) influence – part of preparations to fill the vacuum once the aging ayatollah dies." In October 2011, Iran dispatched Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, a high-ranking cleric closely aligned with Supreme Leader Khamenei from Qom to

Najaf along with a cadre of lower-ranking revolutionary seminary teachers, indicating that Iran is gearing up to increase Qom's influence within Najaf's religious establishment. Iran's encroachment into Najaf is meant to ensure that Ayatollah Sistani's successor will at the least be more amenable to Iran's interests, if not subservient to the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih.*

Outside the religious sphere, the main levers for influence in Iraq that Iran has at its disposal are the vast number of Shia militia groups it controls. The IRGC-Quds Force is the main body behind the creation, funding, and equipping of Iran's Shi'a militias in Iraq, and Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani coordinates the battlefield activities of several of the key militias. Staying true to the "Hezbollah model," Iraq's Iranian-backed Shia militias form the basis of Iran's military and political power in Iraq. The militias have leaned on Hezbollah's example in terms of providing security and social services to Shia constituencies in Iraq, thereby cultivating patronage and loyalty which extends to the Iranian regime and its revolutionary ideology. The militias have successfully translated the support of their Iraqi Shia backers into political clout, which they in turn use to apply pressure for policies favorable to the Islamic Republic. The concentration of military and political power in the hands of Shia militias serves to weaken the centralized Iraqi government, making it harder to defend against Iran's ideological expansion in Iraq.

There are currently about 50 Shia militias operating in Iraq. The sheer numbers of these diffuse militias ensures that no one militia becomes too powerful, or independent from Tehran. The Iraqi Shia militias have killed hundreds of U.S. troops and even more Iraqis. 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, demonstrating Iran's role in arming the militias.

The IRGC-Quds Force and Hezbollah have played an important role in training the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias, conducting training in Iran. Thousands of Iraqi militants have traveled to Iranian training camps, where the Quds Force and Hezbollah provided basic 20-day basic paramilitary training courses, as well as leadership courses to train more advanced recruits to serve as instructors. The recruits are obligated to undergo mandatory religious and ideological courses to engender loyalty to Iran's revolutionary ethos. Many of the Iraqi militias trained by Hezbollah have gone on to send fighters to Syria in recent years, indicating that they are ultimately transnational actors whose supreme loyalties are to their Shia identity and Tehran, and highlighting their commitment to fulfilling Iranian regime objectives.

The rise of ISIS has led to unprecedented coordination among Iraqi militias, evidenced by the creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an alliance of over 60,000 fighters from predominantly Shiite militia groups in Iraq that often fights alongside the Iraqi army against the Islamic State. Not all of the militias represented in the PMF are pro-Iranian, however, "the three core Shiite groups of Kataeb Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq answer directly to the IRGC." An examination of these three groups illuminates the tactics Iran pursues in service of its strategic goal of expanding its ideological influence within Iraq.

Badr Organization: The roots of some of the Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq date back to the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, when elements of Iraq's Shi'a population fought alongside the IRGC against Saddam Hussein's regime. The most prominent of these groups is the Badr Organization, a Shiite political party and paramilitary force that acts as "Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq." Formed in 1983 as the Badr Brigades, the group served as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a political party created by Iran in order to organize Iraqi Shia under the banner of the Islamic Revolution.

The Badr Brigades operated from a base in Iran from 1983-2003, launching periodic attacks within 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. Despite pledging to refrain from violence, the Badr Organization waged a brutal sectarian war against Iraq's Sunnis from 2004-2006. In 2012, the Badr Organization branched off from the SCIRI (which had rebranded as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq in order to downplay its links to Tehran) and formed its own political party while retaining an active militia. Today, the Badr Organization is the most powerful militia within the Popular Mobilization Forces. As its military stature has grown, so has its political prominence. Badr Organization leaders have served in key cabinet positions, and the political wing holds 22 seats in Iraq's Parliament.

Shiism and Iranian-influenced Islamism have remained central elements of the Badr Organization's identity since its return to Iraq in 2003. In 2011, Badr members celebrated the end of the U.S. military presence in Iraq by plastering the walls of government buildings with posters of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In early 2015, the group's political and military leader, Hadi 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." The Badr Organization's decades-spanning fealty to the revolutionary Iranian regime, and its privileged position as the most powerful Shia combined military and political force in Iraq make it the closest Iraqi analogue to Lebanese Hezbollah. These two organizations stand as "the foremost examples of the IRGC's success in cultivating a closely knit allegiance with a foreign entity along shared political and religious lines."

While the Badr Organization's genesis dates back to the 1980s, many of the Shia militias operating in Iraq today were formed by Iran in the post-2003 era. Some of these smaller militias, such as Asai'b Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Ka'taib Hezbollah, are more fiercely loyal and subservient to Iran than more established militias such as the Badr Organization and the Sadrist militias, and are therefore the key drivers of Iranian influence in Iraq.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq: Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) – in English, the "League of the Righteous" – is an Iranian-backed Shiite militia and political party operating primarily in Iraq, with ancillary operations in Syria and Lebanon. Formed in 2006 after breaking away from Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi, AAH has approximately 10,000 members and is one of the most powerful Shiite militias in Iraq. The group is perhaps the most unfailingly loyal militia to Iran, and seeks to promote Iran's political and religious influence in Iraq, maintain Shiite control over Iraq, and oust any remaining Western vestiges from the country. 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 has claimed credit for a campaign to erect thousands of signs and posters venerating Supreme Leader Khamenei around Shia neighborhoods in Iraq.

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, emulating the "Hezbollah model" as a means of disseminating Iran's revolutionary ideology. The group has not fulfilled its pledge to disband its armed militia, and today forms one of the pro-Iranian pillars of support within the PMF. 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.

Kata'ib Hezbollah: Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) is an Iranian-sponsored, anti-American Shiite militia operating in Iraq with ancillary operations in Syria. Like AAH, Kata'ib Hezbollah is a splinter group of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi, which was created by Iran's Quds Force in 2007 and is considered by the U.S. to be "a direct action arm" of the IRGC. KH has a reputation as a secretive and highly skilled militia that is entrusted with Iran's most sensitive weaponry. In contrast to AAH, Kata'ib Hezbollah is focused exclusively on militant, rather than political or social, activities. Little is known about the group's structure, but its leader, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, serves as Iraq's deputy national security advisor and as the deputy commander of the PMF.

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 Shiite 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.

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Iran's influence within the PMF – whose creation was officially sanctioned by the Iraqi government – through its operational links with the Badr Organization, Asai'b Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, runs the risk of becoming a runaway train which Iran can exploit to expand its influence within Iraq and beyond into Syria. Critical questions remain about the fate of the PMF coalition as the fight against ISIS in Iraq winds down. Iran is unlikely to willingly disarm or disband the militias it controls in the PMF and is increasingly using these organizations to consolidate control over a corridor linking Tehran to Syria and on into Lebanon. Iran controls more than just Iraqi territory, however. Rather, it has gained influence through its backing of Shia militias that extends into dominance over Iraq's military, political, economic and cultural affairs.



Billboard depicting Iran's current and former Supreme Leader in the Baghdad square where U.S. Marines previously toppled a statue of Saddam Hussein in 2003. (Source: Washington Post)

Following the "Hezbollah model" of dispensing patronage in the form of security and social welfare to fill vacuums created by the weak central government, Iran – through its control over Shia militias, affiliated charitable organizations, and a heavy media presence – has transformed one of its former greatest adversaries into a client state and a "jumping-off point to spread Iranian influence around the region." Much as Hezbollah has translated its influence in Lebanon into political clout, Iraq's Shia militias translated popular support into a law passed in November 2016 recognizing the PMF as a government entity operating alongside the military, enshrining their legitimacy into law and ensuring funding from the Iraqi government for their operations, which has only served to deepen sectarian tensions.

The kinetic power of the Iran-backed Shia militias buys Iran 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.

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 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 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.

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.

Iraq's sizeable Sunni majority and the countervailing influence of Ayatollah al-Sistani, who opposes *velayat-e faqih*, continue to serve as an effective check against Iran fully remaking Iraq into a theocracy modeled on the Iranian system. Nevertheless, Iran's maintenance of powerful Shia militias in Iraq loyal to Tehran have enabled Iran to erode Iraq's sovereignty and become the dominant power broker within Iraq. While the majority of Iraqis across sectarian lines oppose Iranian expansionism, Iran's creeping takeover has grown stronger with each subsequent election in Iraq.

Syria

Syria represents another case of Iran replicating the Hezbollah model it has applied in Lebanon and Iraq to become the dominant power within a country. Iran has dramatically escalated its support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad, enabling it to reverse key setbacks and regain the upper hand in the Syrian Civil War. The conflict has severely degraded the Syrian Army's fighting abilities and weakened President Bashar al-Assad's political authority, leaving the Assad regime beholden to Iran and the proxy militias it has marshalled for its continued survival.

Iran is effectively in charge of planning and leading the conduct of the conflict and has provided the Assad regime with a nearly $6 billion line of credit, underscoring its increased reliance on Iran. Iran ordered

Hezbollah into the conflict and recruited thousands of Shia mercenary fighters from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria who now form the core of pro-Assad forces in the country. Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani has emerged as the primary overseer of the Syrian war effort, 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.

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. 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." 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 are trained near Tehran where "Iranian officers delivered speeches invoking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the revered seventh-century Shiite figure whose death at the hands of a powerful Sunni army became the event around which Shiite spirituality would revolve. The same enemies of the Shiites who killed the imam are now in Syria and Iraq, the officers told the men."

Iran has 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 "labayk ya 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.



Funeral for Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters killed in Syria. Posters feature Sayyeda Zainab shrine. (Source: Islamic Republic News Agency)

Much as Iran has tried to promote its regime ideology in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, Iran has sought to transform the Sayyeda Zainab shrine into "a regional focal point for Iran's attempt to extend its religious and political influence among Shiites." This effort extends to establishing educational and charitable outfits around the shrine geared toward proselytizing Iranian regime ideology to Shia pilgrims and tourists. Iran's usage of the shrine is largely oriented toward portraying Iran as the defender of all Shia and calling for pan-Shia unity under Iran's ideological mantle. Iran has especially sought to exploit this messaging as the wars it has poured accelerant onto have been increasingly overtaken by sectarianism.

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. The NDF operate as a part-time volunteer reserves of the Syrian Army which have 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.
As a result, the NDF have been coopted into a vehicle for the fulfillment of Iranian objectives, wherein "Iran's Iraqi and Lebanese Shiite proxies helped transform various Syrian Twelver Shiite militias into copies of Lebanese Hezbollah, all espousing Iran's ideology of absolute velayat-e faqih (the doctrine granting the Supreme Leader his authority). In many cases, preexisting NDF groups accepted assistance and guidance from the IRGC, Hezbollah, and Iranian-controlled Iraqi Shiite militias." In a similar vein to Hezbollah, the Iran-backed NDF operate in a localized context and are ostensibly Syrian actors, but scratching beneath the surface reveals that their true raison d'etre is the propagation of Iran's supranational revolutionary project.

Iran's role in creating the NDF 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.

The successes of Hezbollah and the NDF in the Syrian theater have expanded Iran's objectives within Syria. What began as an Iranian-sponsored attempt to create a "Useful Syria" from the regime's major cities and economic centers has now become a more ambitious campaign to retake the entire country. 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 Syrian intervention has paid off, as Assad's survival seems assured while his weakened position both domestically and within the international community all but guarantees he will remain a subservient Iranian client. For its efforts to shore up Assad, Iran and the IRGC – which has a hand in virtually every sector of the Iranian economy – are positioned 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.

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 gives Iran a foothold to project its ideological influence into Syria for years to come. As Iran further entrenches its control over Syria, it will increasingly seek to marshal its proxies to project power throughout the Levant, increasing the likelihood of eventual future conflict with Israel.

Yemen

Yemen is the fourth Middle East conflict zone where Iran has applied the Hezbollah model successfully to effectively take over the country. Iran has supported the Houthi rebels – a Shi'ite Muslim armed religious and political movement – since they launched a series of bloody insurgencies against the Yemeni government in 2004, culminating in the removal from power of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, a key U.S. counterterrorism ally, in 2015.

Although the Houthis and their Ansar Allah movement identify with Zaidi Shi'ism, as opposed to the twelver Jaafari Shiism propagated by Iran's revolutionary regime, Iran has obligingly backed the Houthis due to their opposition to the U.S.-led regional order and Saudi-backed Hadi government. The Houthi slogan "God is great/ Death to America/ Death to Israel /God curse the Jews/ Victory to Islam," emulates the Iranian regime's own "Death to America" motto and extremist ideology, underscoring the group's links to Tehran.

The Houthis ideological affinity for Iran and role in the Islamic Republic's hegemonic project were articulated publicly in October 2014, a month after the Houthi rebels captured Yemen's capital city, Sanaa. Supreme Leader Khamenei's chief foreign affairs advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati, proclaimed Iran's support for the Houthis, saying "Ansar Allah brought about a transformation in Yemen which is unique in the history of this country and Ansar Allah's consecutive victories prove that everything is based on an organized plan," in a meeting with Zaidi scholars. Velayati went on to link the Houthi struggle in Yemen to that of other proxy forces around the Middle East fighting on behalf of Iran's regional agenda, saying, "The Islamic Republic supports Ansar Allah as it sees the movement in line with the materialization of a part of the Islamic awakening. In some countries Islamic Awakening movements started but they faced defeats, however we are hopeful that they will gain success soon and the Islamic awakening will spread worldwide and the Islamic world will overcome its enemies and the Zionists." The Zaidi scholars in attendance pledged their devotion to Supreme Leader Khamenei, stating that they view him as the leader not just of Iran, but of the entire Islamic world.

Iranian ties to the Houthis range from monetary and religious-based support to frequent shipment of arms and military training. A confidential 2015 U.N. report exposed clandestine Iranian efforts to ship arms to the group dating back to 2009. Iran's provision of arms to the Houthis has only escalated since the group overthrew President Hadi in 2015. The Iran-backed rebels twice targeted a U.S. ship in the Persian Gulf in October 2016, and in November 2017 launched a ballistic missile targeting Riyadh's international airport, indicating that Iran is helping the rebels acquire increasingly sophisticated weaponry. Iran's support has helped the Houthis overcome some core deficiencies, including strategic planning, political mobilization, and operating advanced weaponry.

Iran is reportedly injecting Shia mercenary forces into the Yemen conflict, mirroring its strategy in Syria. According to a Reuters report, "Iranian and regional sources said Tehran 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." Also similar to Syria, Iran has outsourced many of its activities in Yemen to Hezbollah, which "remains the contact point between the two countries, the one running trainings and 'building capacity' for the Houthis, and the one directly running the Yemen file for Iran.

Iran's aid to its Houthi proxies has provided a low-risk, cost-effective avenue to becoming the dominant political and military influence in Yemen. Iran has also managed to weaken its geopolitical adversaries by goading an Arab coalition spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates into the conflict,

which has devolved into a costly war of attrition for their side. Yemen, meanwhile, has borne the brunt of this proxy war as the situation has emerged into one of the world's most urgent humanitarian crises.

Afghanistan

Iran has pursued a multifaceted strategy blending hard and soft power approaches, seeking to cultivate religious, cultural, economic, and political influence in Afghanistan in order to gain a territorial and ideological foothold in this neighboring, civil war torn country. While Iran has a long term interest in a "stable, multiethnic, and friendly Afghanistan," it views the U.S. presence as a strategic threat and has thus made the short-term interest of driving out America its main priority. To that end, it has pursued policies oriented toward impeding NATO and the Afghan government's efforts to stabilize the country, including training and arming its former ideological foe, the Taliban since 2006.

In assisting the Taliban, as well as Persian-speaking Tajiks and Shia Hazara groups opposed to the Taliban, Iran is hedging its bets that whatever government emerges in Afghanistan will be friendly, or at least not threaten its interests. 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.

Beyond supporting Afghan proxies of competing stripes, Iran has dramatically expanded its economic ties with Afghanistan to buy influence in the country. Iran increased its exports from $800 million in 2008 to over $2 billion in 2011 and accounted for 27.6% of Afghanistan's $5 billion annual imports. Iran has also provided up to $500 million in development assistance to Afghanistan. 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."

Perhaps the most important prong of Iran's Afghanistan strategy has been its efforts at ideological expansion. Afghanistan is a primarily Muslim country with roughly 35 million citizens. Dari, the Afghan variant of Farsi, is the most common language, spoken by 50% of the population including Tajiks, many of whom feel a cultural affinity toward Iran. Roughly 20% of Afghan Muslims are Shia, primarily belonging to the Hazara, "a much-persecuted minority group of Asiatic origin." Iran has sought to leverage its religious, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic bonds with Tajiks and Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan in order to empower and exercise influence over these groups and their affiliated political parties.

The primary levers at Iran's disposal to spread its Khomeinist ideology in Afghanistan are its charitable and religious-educational networks. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) is the primary Iranian charity active in Afghanistan, with over 45 offices mainly serving areas populated by Shia and Persian speakers. After the Taliban government was toppled in Afghanistan, Iran dispatched an IRGC-Quds Force commander to coordinate Iran's relief and rebuilding effort, which included drastically increasing the IKRC's activities in the country in a bid to influence village leaders and poorer citizens. The IKRC provides health, social services, financial assistance, vocational training, and wedding sponsorship to over 30,000 Afghans annually, frequently seeking to tie its charitable works to ideological indoctrination. The IKRC organizes Afghanistan's annual Quds Day festivities, celebrations to mark the anniversary of the Islamic

Revolution, and contests to measure aid recipients' knowledge of Ayatollah Khomeini's Last Will and Testament.



Khatam al-Nabyeen University campus in western Kabul (Source: RFE/RL)

Iran seeks to ensure that its revolutionary Khomeinist ideology is dominant among Afghan Shia. To that end, Iran has focused on building schools and universities throughout Afghanistan and furnishing them with books, some benign, but many of which disseminate Iranian religious and political propaganda. One of the primary institutions oriented toward propagating fealty to *velayat-e faqih* is Khatam-al Nabyeen University, built in 2006 by an Iran-leaning cleric at a cost of $17 million. Iran's links to the university are deliberately opaque. There are no Iranians present at the school, but rather Afghan teachers who studied in Iran. The school's founder, Grand Ayatollah Mohseni's religious credentials are not recognized by Najaf, so Mohseni is beholden to Qom and Tehran for legitimacy. While Iran has not pledged support to Khatam-al Nabyeen and there is no discernible money trail back to Tehran, the school's Khomeinist curriculum makes it a vehicle for spreading Iran's influence to Afghan Shia.

Iran's role in supporting Al-Mustafa International University's rapidly expanding presence in Afghanistan over the last decade is much clearer. According to Al-Mustafa officials, the university operates a network of 40 seminaries in Afghanistan and gives financial aid to 5000 students, teachers, clerics, and missionaries each year. Al-Mustafa's graduates have gone on to garner considerable influence within the Afghan government. According to Hassan Jan Mohammadi, an Al-Mustafa official in Afghanistan, "In parliament over 30% of Shia MPs are Al Mustafa graduates." According to Seyed Mortazawi, Supreme Leader Khamenei's representative in Afghanistan, there are nearly 15,000 Afghanis enrolled in Shia seminaries in Iran. "Ayatollah Khamenei gives money to clerics who go to Afghanistan as missionaries so they become powerful and distribute stipends to other clerics in Afghanistan," according to Mortazawi. Al-Mustafa's network of seminaries and army of Afghan clerics that it has trained constitute a formidable tool to generate support in Afghanistan for the Iranian regime's ideology and foreign policy imperatives.

Iran has leveraged its ideological influence in Afghanistan to form its own Afghan proxy militia, the Fatemiyoun Brigade. Formed in 2013 by the IRGC-Quds Force and under direct command of Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, the Fatemiyoun is a group of Afghan Shi'a fighting in support of the al-Assad regime of Syria. The Fatemiyoun commanders are ideologically loyal to the Quds Force and Tehran, but the bulk of its fighters are impoverished Afghan Shias enticed by a $500/month stipend and Iranian residency in return for joining pro-Assad militias. Some of the more ideologically motivated fighters were reportedly recruited during their studies at Al-Mustafa.

Palestinian Territories

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 supported Palestinian terrorist groups despite the Sunni-Shi'a divide between them. While Iran's intent vis-à-vis the West Bank and Gaza Strip is not to plant the seeds of a Khomeinist theocracy, its activities in the Palestinian territories are oriented toward empowering radical actors in order to create instability to harm Israel and "moderate" Palestinian leadership open to accommodation with Israel. In this manner, Iran seeks to create local power bases in the Palestinian Territories, burnishing its anti-Israel credentials and removing obstacles to its bid for regional hegemony.

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." It should be noted that while Iran is PIJ's main supporter, PIJ is neither an arm of Iran's Islamic Revolution nor a vehicle for spreading Iran-style Shiism in the Palestinian territories, although it has faced such accusations as a means of discrediting the organization among the Palestinian populace. Still, PIJ's leadership has expressed admiration for Iran's Islamic Revolution for reviving the overall cause of radical Islamism and jihadism, and the group has adopted a conciliatory posture toward Shiites, viewing them as members of the community of Muslim believers, unlike other Sunni jihadist organizations which consider Shiism to be heretical.

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.



Al-Sabirin movement's flag (Source: Times of Israel)

Iran is now also building a loyalist, "Hezbollah-style terror group" in the Gaza Strip. Known as Al-Sabirin, the organization's funding is drawn from the coffers of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and disbursed by the IRGC. Through Al-Sabirin, Iran is also seeking to make inroads into the West Bank. 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 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.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Concerns over Iran's aggressive expansionist goals were the driving factor behind the 1981 creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional political, economic and security alliance comprised of six Arab monarchies – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. Iran has viewed the region as a rich target for the export of its revolutionary ideology given the substantial Shi'a minorities in several of its member states, namely Saudi Arabia, which has a sizeable Shi'a minority concentrated mainly in its oil-rich Eastern Province; Bahrain, whose 70-75 percent Shi'a majority is ruled by a Sunni monarchy; and Kuwait, whose Shi'a population stands at 33 percent.

Iran's attempts to exacerbate internal sectarian divides, foment unrest and topple the GCC monarchies date back to the establishment of the Islamic Republic following the 1979 revolution. The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, claimed that hereditary monarchies such as the GCC states were illegitimate under Islam, and sought to become not just the leader of Iran, but of the entire Islamic world, threatening Saudi Arabia's legitimacy as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites.

Khomeini began stoking tensions with Saudi Arabia and the GCC nations immediately after taking power by backing Shi'a militias and political parties throughout the Gulf. In 1981, an Iranian and IRGC-supported proxy movement carried out a failed coup attempt in Bahrain, one of Iran's first actions to export the Islamic Revolution. Iran also regularly engaged in incitement of Shia pilgrims to Mecca for the annual *hajj* throughout the 1980s. Growing increasingly more radical over time, Iranian pilgrims sought to propagandize and proselytize, spreading the principles of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution directly to the pilgrims of other nationalities.

Midway through the 1980s, an organization called Hezbollah al-Hijaz, or Saudi Hezbollah, was formed in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and operating in Bahrain and Kuwait as well. Saudi Hezbollah was "inspired, supported, and directed by elements of the Iranian government," with Iran providing training for the group's affiliated clergy, as well as money and military training. The group's potency grew as a reaction to Saudi Arabia's Wahabbi regime's harsh treatment of the Shia minority.

Saudi Hezbollah carried out terrorist activities during the 1980s and 90s targeting the ruling monarchy and U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf. The group carried out a number of attacks targeting Saudi oil and petrochemical facilities, and on June 25, 1996, bombed the Khobar Towers housing compound in Dhahran where U.S. and allied forces supporting air operations in Iraq were housed, killing 19 American servicemen and injuring hundreds of others.

Hezbollah's recruitment of Gulf Shia centered around the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in Damascus. According to a 2001 indictment of the group for its role in the Khobar Towers bombing, "Saudi Hizballah drew its

members primarily from among young men of the Shi'ite faith who resided in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, near the Persian Gulf. Those young men would frequently have their first contact with Saudi Hizballah during religious pilgrimages to the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine. There, they would be approached by Saudi Hizballah members to gauge their loyalty to Iran and dislike for the government of Saudi Arabia. Young men who wished to join Saudi Hizballah then would be transported to Hizballah-controlled areas in Lebanon for military training and indoctrination."

Iran's role in the formation and activities of Hezbollah al-Hijaz, as well as its support for subversive actions targeting the Gulf monarchies, show how it has sought to export the Hezbollah model to the GCC. Capitalizing on the grievances of Gulf Shia chafing under Sunni regimes wary of Iranian influence, Iran moved to embed militant proxies committed to weakening the ruling monarchies and propagating Iran's Islamist ideology.

Iran's sectarian meddling in the Gulf has been especially pronounced since the 2011 "Arab Spring." Iran viewed the nascent wave of democratization spreading to countries such as Tunisia and Egypt as an opportunity to exploit in the Gulf nations with sizeable Shia populations. Acting as the "self-declared defender of Shia causes," Iran embarked on a campaign to empower the Gulf region's Shia and destabilize the Sunni monarchies by supporting Shia protest movements (especially in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and Bahrain), calls for reforms, political parties, and militias. Iran has also had a hand in a spate of terrorist attacks and assorted other subversive activities. Nevertheless, the Gulf nations have weathered the Iran-fueled breakdown of the regional order intact, largely through suppression, while warily viewing the carnage and increased sectarian tensions as a threat to their own regimes' survival.

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Iran has successfully been able to increase its regional influence at the expense of its geopolitical adversaries by exporting the Hezbollah model, cheaply and effectively anchoring loyal terrorist proxies in neighboring countries. Iran has complemented its proxies' military activities with educational, charitable, and media campaigns geared toward creating patronage networks and parallel state structures that serve to weaken central governments. Iran's subversive outreach has enabled it to become the dominant political and military player in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and to wield significant influence in the Palestinian territories and the Gulf.

In its bid to export the Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East, Iran has created "a vast network of Iranian clients that all share a confessional identity. … What is more is that these partnerships appear, especially to Iran's enemies and Sunni rivals, to be transforming into a transnational movement of Shia militancy under the command of Iran." Under the direction of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, Iran's proxy militias around the region have increased their cooperation and coordination with each other and demonstrated willingness to fight not just in their localized arena, but to contribute to the Shia war effort wherever the exigency is greatest. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has indicated a desire to marshal this veritable foreign legion against Israel in the event of a future war. "It [an Israeli attack on Lebanon] would open the door for hundreds of thousands of fighters from all around the Arab and Islamic world to participate in this fight – from Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan," warned Nasrallah in June 2017.

In a sense, Iran's greatest weakness is also its greatest strength. Iran's reinforcement of explicitly sectarian narratives has hardened Sunni attitudes toward Iran and Shias more broadly, contributing to increased suppression and the rise of ISIS and other jihadi organizations. In turn, the conflicts engulfing the region have taken on existential urgency for Shias, drawing them closer to Iran and its proxies as the guarantor

of their survival. This turn of events has boosted the spread of Iran's revolutionary ethos, but ultimately, Iran's quest for ideological expansion has served to engender further radicalization and retrenchment on both sides of the Sunni-Shia divide, making the region's conflicts increasingly destabilizing and intractable.

Iran's Ideological Expansion – Latin America

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has undertaken a concerted strategy to strengthen its political, commercial, cultural, and military ties to Latin America and the Caribbean, establishing "clandestine networks that operated under the guise of cultural and commercial exchanges." Although geographically distant, a variety of factors have made Latin America a tantalizing and fruitful target for Iran's efforts to export its Khomeinist ideology. First and foremost, Iran has sought to expand its influence and capabilities in the region due to its proximity to Iran's chief adversary, the United States, viewing Latin America as an ideal staging ground from which to undermine U.S. national security and interests.

The next major factor which has attracted Iran is the presence of lawless free-trade zones in the region, where Iran-backed terror organizations have carried out money laundering, narcotrafficking, and other terrorist operational and financial activities with relative ease. In particular, Iran has focused its efforts on the Tri-Border Area (TBA) between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, where Iran and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah have "developed intelligence and logistical support networks in the region without restraint," drawing upon existing Shi'a and Lebanese diaspora communities for assistance and cover for their illicit criminal activities. Iran has also proliferated mosques, cultural centers, health clinics and educational facilities in the TBA between Peru, Chile, and Bolivia; infrastructure which indicates Iran is seeking to anchor its terrorist networks in the area.

Third, Iran's ties to the region have accelerated in recent years due to the burgeoning of its alliance with the leftist, populist, anti-imperialist bloc Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA) founded by former Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez and former Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The ALBA project has been characterized by its member nations' desire to supplant U.S. dominance in the region, and in Iran, they found a willing anti-American strategic partner. Iran has joined ALBA's intergovernmental association as an observer state, providing it a forum "to have conversations with countries it otherwise would not have the ability to talk to, such as Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua.



Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is welcomed by Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez at Miraflores Palace in Caracas in 2012.(Source: Reuters)

Iran's alliance with ALBA was an outgrowth of the warm personal ties cultivated between former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Chavez. Much like Iran's Islamic Revolution, the "Bolivarian revolution" led by Chavez seeks to "challenge the Western world's system of rule of law and representative democracy, and seeks to replace it with a new authoritarian model of governance. The purpose of this model is to establish a 'new world order' – one in which Latin America's transformation is simply one chapter of a global revolution. Ostensibly, Iran's Islamic Revolution is another such chapter."

Although the Bolivarian revolution is secular and leftist in orientation while Iran's is Islamist and theocratic, Iran has sought to paper over the inherent differences by co-opting anti-imperialist discourse and branding itself as a champion of human rights, social justice, and a defender of oppressed communities. Iran has dispatched preachers and other proxies to the region to present this sanitized version of the Islamic Revolution, enabling it to "gain footholds among disenfranchised and marginalized

communities in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru. Relying on allies such as Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, Iran has established forward operating bases for the spread of their propaganda." Iran also launched HispanTV in 2012, giving the regime a platform to broadcast its ideology into at least 16 countries in the region.

While Ahmadinejad and Chavez have both since passed from the scene, Iran under the administration of President Hassan Rouhani has continued to focus on Latin America as a latent theater of operations, with Iran's foothold in the region strengthening in proportion to ALBA's growing dominance over Latin America's trajectory. Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia and Venezuela in August 2016 with a 60 member economic delegation. The visit took place months after Implementation Day of the JCPOA, which had enriched Iran and ended its international economic isolation. Iran's continued focus on the region is significant, as Iran is no longer reliant on the Latin American nexus to weather the international sanctions regime. Rather, Zarif's visit indicates that Iran intends on expending some of its new-found resources toward strengthening its anti-American strategic alliance with the ALBA nations.

Nuts and Bolts of Iran's Ideological Expansion in Latin America

Joseph Humire, a global security expert specializing on transnational threats in the Western Hemisphere, identified an incremental, four-pronged (cultural, diplomatic, economic, and military) Iranian "pattern of penetration" in 2015 testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee to explain how Iran has grown its presence and influence in Latin America since the Islamic Revolution. Iran's approach to the region has been characterized by simultaneous efforts to establish formalized, government-to-government alliances coupled with unconventional, grassroots efforts to proselytize, convert, and radicalize Latin American nationals (both Muslim and non-Muslim) into committed backers of Iran's revolutionary ideology.

The first phase of Iran's Latin America strategy centered on cultural exchange and was inaugurated during the early 1980s as Iran sought to cultivate ties with both Islamic and local communities, especially seeking to capitalize on their wealth and political connections. This cultural cooperation begat more formalized diplomatic ties throughout the 1990s into the new millennium, reaching an apex during the Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad which witnessed Iran nearly double its embassies in the region from six to twelve between 2004 and 2010.

Iran's enhanced diplomatic presence in turn spurred greater economic and trade ties, although many agreements, memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and promised large-scale infrastructure projects ultimately never came to fruition. The proliferation of Iranian embassies also served to reinforce Iran's cultural penetration, as Iran has subsequently moved to establish a series of mosques, cultural centers, educational institutions and media organs in the surrounding communities to proselytize, propagandize, and establish links to the targeted communities, while also embedding "eyes and ears" on the ground.

In a 2015 U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Posture Statement, then-SOUTHCOM Commander General John F. Kelly noted, "Iran has established more than 80 'cultural centers' in a region with an extremely small Muslim population. The purported purpose of these centers is to improve Iran's image, promote Shi'a Islam, and increase Iran's political influence in the region." This figure represented over a 100% increase since 2012, when the SOUTHCOM posture statement estimated that there were 36 Iranian-linked cultural centers in Latin America.

Iran's increased cultural, diplomatic, and economic engagement in Latin America has laid the groundwork for Iranian intelligence, IRGC, and Hezbollah operatives to establish a foothold in the region as well. Iran's Latin American embassies tend to be populated by larger-than-necessary staffs, and according to Humire, "serve as bases for Iranian intelligence operatives who immerse themselves into local societies."

Iranian agents have sought to infiltrate or co-opt intelligence and defense services in numerous targeted Latin American countries, with varying degrees of success. Alberto Nisman, the Argentine prosecutor who died under suspicious circumstances while investigating Iran's involvement in the 1994 AMIA bombing in Argentina, warned the authorities of Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, and Colombia in his 2013 indictment report on the AMIA case that Iran is seeking to infiltrate their countries "to install intelligence stations - in other words espionage bases - destined to commit, encourage and sponsor terror attacks like the one that took place against AMIA."

Mohsen Rabbani: Iran's Principal Proselytizer in Latin America

The "pattern of penetration" enumerated in the previous section can be observed concretely by tracing the trajectory of Mohsen Rabbani, the chief architect of Iran's Latin American missionary network aimed at exporting the Islamic Revolution. Iran's ideological penetration of Latin America began in earnest in 1983, when it dispatched Rabbani "a young cleric with impeccable revolutionary credentials" to Buenos Aires. During his 14-year posting, Rabbani was the pivotal figure in the nexus between Iran's religious and cultural, diplomatic, and terroristic activities in Latin America, travelling extensively throughout the region in an effort to replicate the model he perfected in Argentina.

The impetus for Rabbani's arrival in the region occurred a year prior, during a 1982 international conference in Tehran, which Nisman identified as the "turning point for the regime's method to export the [Islamic] Revolution." According to Nisman, former IRGC commander Javad Mansouri addressed the conference, stating, "Our revolution can only be exported with grenades and explosives." Nisman further contends that "Javad Mansouri called to turn each Iranian embassy into an intelligence center and a base to export the revolution" during his speech. By the conclusion of the conference, Iran arrived at the fateful decision to spread its ideology through subversive violence and terrorism. Several months later, Rabbani, who "was not just any operative, but one of Iran's most highly trained and dedicated intelligence officers," arrived in Buenos Aires and set about operationalizing Iran's push into Latin America following the blueprint laid out by Mansouri.

Although he came to Buenos Aires on a tourist visa, Rabbani initially set up shop as a representative of the Iranian Ministry of Meat. His true mission, however, was to proselytize and radicalize the local Shi'a community, which was growing at the time as large numbers of Lebanese refugees emigrated to South America to escape the civil war. By his own admission, Rabbani was dispatched to Argentina "in order to create support groups for exporting the Islamic revolution." Argentine prosecutors found that, "the driving force behind these efforts [to establish an Iranian intelligence network in Argentina] was Sheik Mohsen Rabbani. … From the time of his arrival in the country in 1983, Mr. Rabbani began laying the groundwork that allowed for the later implementation and further development of the [Iranian] spy network." Years later, in a 2015 interview, he would claim that he travelled to the region at the "encouragement and guidance" of Ayatollah Khomeini himself.

Rabbani conducted his Latin America outreach efforts on behalf of Iran's Islamic Propaganda Organization, which according to Nisman was charged with identifying groups and individuals sympathetic to Iran's terroristic machinations to export its revolution. In an early missive sent to his backers in Tehran, Rabbani underscored his subversive intent, writing, "According to our Islamic point of view, Latin America is for us and the international world, a virgin area, that unfortunately, till now, its huge potential has not been taken into account by the Islamic people of Iran. (…) we have a solid support against the imperialism and Zionism intrigues, being an important aid in favor of our presence in the area.

After an initial nine-month visit, Rabbani returned to Iran and began working for the AhlulBayt World Assembly, an internationally active Iranian NGO tasked with disseminating Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamist ideology around the world. Rabbani urged his superiors and Iranian officials to enhance their activities in the region, and ultimately, he was tasked with spearheading Iran's outreach due to the familiarity and contacts he had now amassed.

Upon his return, Rabbani centered his efforts at the At-Tauhid mosque, where he taught religion and rose to become the mosque's leader by 1987. Argentina's National Land Registry showed that the At-Tauhid mosque was owned by the government of Iran, and its operating expenses were covered by the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires. Rabbani used his vaunted position as imam at At-Tauhid to propagandize and recruit on behalf of the Islamic Revolution, creating "an intelligence system that would report to the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires and then up to Tehran." Rabbani also used at-Tauhid as a base to coordinate revolutionary activities across Latin America, travelling extensively throughout the region on educational and indoctrination missions and disbursing funds to mosques and cultural centers for similar proselytization purposes.

Now firmly embedded in Buenos Aires' Shi'a community, Rabbani gained a reputation as a "spokesman of the hardest line inside the Iranian regime," according to the summary of Nisman's 2013 500-page indictment report. Three of his former students later testified that in 1990, Rabbani had urged them "to export the revolution" and declared "we are all Hezbollah." In 1991, Rabbani addressed an audience of Argentinean right-wing activists and local Shi'a at a convention hall and insisted in rudimentary Spanish, "Israel must disappear from the face of the earth."

As his radical rhetoric escalated in the early 1990s, Rabbani's explicit ties to terrorism also crystallized. The intelligence network he had labored to create was firmly ensconced, enabling Iran to provide logistical support for terrorist attacks in South America. Rabbani took on a leadership role in Hezbollah's operational activities on the continent, and is alleged to have scouted targets for the terrorist movement in the run-up to the first major Iran-linked terror attack in South America, the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires on March 17, 1992.

The Israeli embassy bombing was carried out by a suicide terrorist who detonated a truck carrying 220 pounds of explosives, killing 29 and wounding 292. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) conducted an investigation into the attack in conjunction with the Counter Terrorism Center, and concluded that Hezbollah operatives Imad Mughniyeh – one of the organization's senior-most operatives and the chief perpetrator behind the 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut – and Talal Hamiyah were the principal planners, and that Hezbollah carried out the attack at Iran's behest, but took on all operational aspects to shield Tehran from direct involvement.



Aftermath of the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing in Buenos Aires (Source: Reuters)

American, Argentinian, and Israeli investigators all independently found that funding for the attack came from sympathetic elements of the Shi'a community in the TBA between Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, and that the perpetrators hailed from this region as well. According to Dr. Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "The investigation also began to reveal the central role Rabbani had in Hezbollah's Latin American operations. Two weeks after the bombing, on April 3, 1992, Rabbani placed a call from his home phone to the secretary of Sheikh Fadlallah, a Lebanese Shi'ite religious leader with close ties to Hezbollah. Argentine intelligence detected the call and prosecutors pointed to it as timely evidence, not only of his relationship with Hezbollah, but of the leadership role he played in their operations."

Less than two years after the attack on the Israeli Embassy, as investigators were still in the process of piecing together what had happened, Iran carried out another bombing targeting Buenos Aires' Jewish community. On the morning of July 18, 1994, a Hezbollah operative detonated a suicide car bomb laden with 300-400 kilograms of explosives in front of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish community center, killing 85 and wounding over 200.



Aftermath of the 1994 AMIA bombing (Source: The Associated Press)

Nisman's 2013 indictment report fingered Mohsen Rabbani, who had built a network of "local clandestine intelligence stations designed to sponsor, foster and execute terrorist attacks," as the mastermind behind the attack. Nisman's report further concluded that "the decision to carry out the AMIA attack was made, and the attack was orchestrated, by the highest officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the time, and that these officials instructed Lebanese Hezbollah – a group that has historically been subordinated to the economic and political interests of the Tehran regime – to carry out the attack."

In the intervening period between the two major terrorist attacks, Rabbani traveled back-and-forth to Iran on several occasions. On one of these visits in August 1993, he attended a meeting in Mashad of

senior regime officials including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Minister of Intelligence Ali Fallahian, Foreign Minister Ali Velayeti, and Ahmad Asghari, a suspected IRGC official stationed at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires. It was at this meeting that the decision to bomb AMIA was made based on the scouting reports of potential American and Jewish targets compiled by Rabbani and his spy network. Argentine intelligence found that Supreme Leader Khamenei himself went so far as to issue a *fatwa* sanctifying the operation as a fulfillment of Iran's revolutionary objectives.

Once the decision to attack AMIA was made, Imad Mughniyeh was placed in charge of the operational aspects of executing the attack, which he conducted from the Argentina-Paraguay-Brazil TBA, while Rabbani handled local logistics, "including all details pertaining to the purchase, hiding, and arming of the van to be used in the bombing, and liaising with the Hezbollah operatives on the ground in Argentina." Rabbani would travel to Iran once again in February 1994, whereupon he was newly credentialed as the Cultural Attaché to the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires, and accordingly granted a diplomatic passport. This hasty appointment enabled Rabbani to use the cover of the Iranian embassy "to go about providing material support for the operation with relative ease, while at the same time guaranteeing him diplomatic immunity following the attack." An FBI investigation into the attack found that Rabbani used his perch in the office of the Cultural Attaché to stay in frequent contact with the embedded Hezbollah operatives in the TBA. Their report alleged that "in the months prior to the attack, there were many calls from the mosque in the city of Iguaçu Falls (in the TBA) to Iran, the Embassy of Iran in Buenos Aires, the Embassy of Iran in Brasilia, the at-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires, and the office of the cultural attaché where Rabbani worked."

The initial Argentinean investigation into the AMIA bombing was plagued by irregularities and limited in scope, eventually assigning culpability to "a small group of fanatics that served as a shield for an Islamic fundamentalist group that presumably had ties to Hezbollah." Finally, by 2005, the original prosecutor was impeached and replaced by Alberto Nisman, who restarted the investigation from scratch. Nisman's dogged pursuit of justice led to the conclusion in 2006 "that the decision to carry out the attack was made not by a small splinter group of extremist Islamic officials, but was instead a decision that was extensively discussed and was ultimately adopted by a consensus at the highest levels of the Iranian government."

Nisman's findings precipitated the issuance by an Argentinean court of international arrest warrants for nine high-ranking Iranian and Hezbollah officials, former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, senior Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyeh, former Iranian Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, suspected IRGC official Ahmad Reza Asghari, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, former Quds Force founder and commander Ahmad Vahidi, former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai, former ambassador to Argentina Hadi Soleimanpour, and Mohsen Rabbani. Interpol subsequently issued Red Notices for the arrest of six of the alleged conspirators, declining to pursue charges against Rafsanjani, Velayati, and Soleimanpour. All of the alleged conspirators



International arrest warrants issued by Argentinean court for Iranian and Hezbollah officials (AFP)

have eluded justice, with many maintaining positions of prominence in Iran. For instance, Ahmad Vahidi served as Ahmadinejad's defense minister, while Velayati is the chief foreign affairs advisor to the Supreme Leader. Velayati and Rezai were both among the Supreme Leader's approved shortlist of presidential candidates during the 2013 elections.

Iran's relations with Argentina were severely damaged following the attack, until 2007 when Iran leveraged its ties with Venezuela to secure a rapprochement with Argentina. A March 2015 bombshell report in the Brazilian magazine, Veja, exposed a plot wherein Iran, using Venezuela as an intermediary, funneled cash to the election campaign of Christina Kirchner in exchange for technical knowledge of Argentina's nuclear program (specifically, its heavy water reactor which was similar to Iran's Arak reactor), and impunity for the AMIA attack. In 2011, President Kirchner went so far as to strike a deal with Iran to form a "truth commission" to verify Nisman's findings, a highly dubious arrangement which in effect placed the alleged perpetrators of the attack in charge of investigating themselves. Nisman filed charges against Kirchner and Argentina's foreign minister, Hector Timerman, for orchestrating a cover-up of Iran and Hezbollah's role in the attack, but the day before he was set to present his findings to the Argentine parliament, he was found dead in his apartment under mysterious circumstances.

Rabbani's Disciples: Ongoing efforts to spread Iran's revolutionary ideology in Latin America

While Nisman's pursuit of justice remains unrealized to this day, perhaps his most enduring contribution was the instrumental role his investigation into the AMIA bombing played in exposing the espionage and intelligence networks put in place by Mohsen Rabbani, which remain active throughout Latin America from Argentina and Chile in the south all the way to Cuba and Mexico in the north. During his time in the region and since his return to Iran, Rabbani has radicalized and cultivated numerous disciples who carry on his legacy of exporting Iran's revolutionary ideology throughout Latin America, a sphere in which Rabbani himself remains an active player.

Mohsen Rabbani returned to Iran for good in 1997 amid mounting suspicions over his involvement in the Israeli embassy and AMIA bombings. Although he remains an internationally most-wanted fugitive, he serves today as Supreme Leader Khamenei's personal representative to Latin America, and as a professor and international affairs advisor to the president of Al-Mustafa International University in Qom, one of the regime's main organs for Khomeinist indoctrination of the next generation of Iran's foreign Shi'a clerics, religious scholars, and missionaries. Rabbani is also the founder and director of the Islam Oriente Cultural Institute, an educational institute based in Qom whose mission is to strengthen ties between Iran and Latin America. The institute offers an intensive program, led by Rabbani, meant to politically and theologically indoctrinate Latin American students into revolutionary ideology.

Abdul Kadir: One of Iran's most important agents in the region, who Nisman demonstrated had extensive ties to Rabbani, was a Guyanese parliamentarian named Michael Seaforth, who went by the name Abdul Kadir upon his conversion to Shi'ism. Kadir was active as an Iranian agent dating back to the 1980s, and apparently made his first contact with Rabbani in 1994, at which point he became a "direct subordinate" and "man of trust" for Rabbani. The summary of Nisman's 2013 indictment report notes that Kadir's trajectory in Guyana was practically identical to Rabbani's, in that Kadir oversaw "the establishment of intelligence bases and centers with clear operative capability to execute terrorist attacks" in Guyana and the Caribbean which directly mirrored Rabbani's Argentinean intelligence and espionage networks. Furthermore, Kadir mimicked Rabbani's playbook, employing the stratagem of "dual-use" by which he hid

behind the legitimacy provided by diplomatic facilities and cultural, religious, and charitable organizations in order to conceal criminal and terroristic activities.

Kadir established and directed a Shi'a cultural center called the Islamic Informational Center of Guyana. His role at the center helped him gain "tremendous influence over the Islamic communities in Guyana and neighboring countries, through the Caribbean and into diaspora groups in the U.S.," according to Joseph Humire. Kadir leveraged these ties to the Guyanese diaspora community in New York to establish contacts with Guyanese workers at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport as part of a 2007 plot to blow up jet-fuel storage tanks at the airport, an attack that would have crippled America's economy, especially the airline industry, had it not been foiled. Documents seized from Kadir's house indicated that he had met with and engaged in personal correspondence with Mohsen Rabbani during the plotting of the mission. Rabbani's links to Kadir demonstrate that Rabbani continued his support for terrorism long after the AMIA attack.

Suhail Assad and Abdul Karim Paz: Since Kadir's arrest, Iran's "primary agent of influence in Latin America" is an Argentinean-born disciple of Rabbani named Sheik Edgardo Ruben Suhail Assad. Assad, along with his brother-in-law Sheik Abdul Karim Paz, was mentored by Rabbani during his time in Argentina and the two have utilized their training to recruit and indoctrinate Latin American youth into Khomeinist ideology. Paz studied at Rabbani's Islam Oriente in the early 1990s, and subsequently succeeded Rabbani as the head of the At-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires in 1993. He then went on to serve as imam of the Islamic Cultural Center in Santiago, Chile. Assad, meanwhile, is believed to have established over 20 Islamic centers in Latin America and regularly travels to universities around the region to lecture about Khomeini's teachings and other revolutionary topics.

Suhail Assad's primary base of operations in Latin America is the Center for Iranian-Latin American Cultural Exchange in Caracas, Venezuela. In 2016, HispanTV aired a documentary series that highlighted Assad's missionary activities on behalf of the Islamic Republic throughout Latin America. The program showed Assad's efforts to establish communities of converts to Shi'ism, and to subsequently unify and radicalize these communities, in Costa Rica, Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Peru.

Cuba offers a vivid example of Assad's operational blueprint. The communist island nation is notoriously hostile to religious freedom but has made an exception for Iranian proselytism due in part to the formalized links between the countries established in the ALBA framework. With the "full knowledge and blessings of the Cuban authorities," Assad has since 2013 established a cultural center and mosque in Havana which actively seeks to recruit and convert adherents from the local population. These converts are then enticed to travel to Iran, where they are given training and indoctrination into Iran's revolutionary values at institutions such as Al-Mustafa International University and the Islam Oriente Cultural Institute.

Abdul Karim Paz similarly serves as a leading recruiter of Latin American students for Rabbani's Qom-based programs. In 2015, Alberto Nisman described Paz as Rabbani's "right hand," and Paz is reportedly in charge of accompanying Latin American converts on their travels to Iran. When they are not conducting their missionary activities in Latin America, both Paz and Assad are reported to serve as instructors under Rabbani at Islam Oriente and Al-Mustafa International University in Qom.

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Rabbani is believed to have trained over 1,000 Latin American students in Iran just between 2007 and 2013, and these activities – paid for in full by the Iranian regime – are believed to be ongoing. Reports abound of students returning from Rabbani's training and subsequently undertaking missionary activities of their own back in their home countries. One such example is Edwar Quiroga Vargas, a Peruvian indigenous rights activist who was recruited by an Iranian diplomat to study under Rabbani in Qom. Iran's outreach to indigenous Peruvian communities dates back to 2011, when Suhail Assad inaugurated recruitment efforts which have paid off in the form of hundreds of known instances of Peruvians travelling to Lebanon and Iran for indoctrination.

Quiroga was one such recruit, who upon returning to Peru, set about establishing a Shi'a Islamic cultural center called Inkarri-Islam which seeks to blend indigenous teachings with radical Shi'ism. He went on to establish five additional cultural centers throughout Peru, and has recruited at least 25 students to study under Rabbani in Qom. Quiroga has also established a political party in Peru called *partido de dios*, or "party of God," which translates in Arabic to Hezbollah.

According to 2013 Congressional testimony by Douglas Farah, President of IBI Consultants, Inc., the trainings overseen by Rabbani "can range from 30-120 days, and specializations include intelligence, counter-intelligence, theology, crowd control and how to incite crowd violence in street marches. Regardless of the topic, each course contains strong components of radical Shi'ite theology and anti-U.S. preaching, including statements of the United States as the great Satan, the enemy of humanity, while justifying its destruction and that of Israel." Farah went on to expound upon the potential threat posed by Rabbani's outreach, noting that Iran appears to be "creating a small group of sleeper cells across the region, people with specialized training who are not Iranian citizens and therefore subject to much less scrutiny both by their home governments and the United States should they travel here. The clandestine nature of the recruitment, the use of cultural centers as meeting points to exchange lessons learned and build networks, and the ability of these students to plug into existing Hezbollah and radicalized networks are all significant dangers."

Iran's efforts to spread its revolutionary ideology to Latin America pose an active and ongoing threat to the U.S. While Iran's trade and commercial ties to the region remain largely inconsequential, in recent years, Iran has continued to proliferate mosques, cultural centers, media outlets, and institutions providing education, health, and a variety of other social services at a rate that indicates that Iran nevertheless attaches great significance to the region. Iran has succeeded in indoctrinating and radicalizing cadres of converts into its anti-American, radical Islamist theology throughout the region. Iran's hearts and minds campaign, coupled with the presence of lawless zones where Hezbollah can operate freely, portend a growing Iranian menace in America's backyard.

Iran's Ideological Expansion – Africa

When it comes to Africa, Iran's imperial project to export the Islamic Revolution and its Khomeinist doctrine throughout the Muslim world and beyond has proceeded in fits and starts, notching several successes but also notable failures. Iran views the African continent as an ancillary arena in a zero-sum battle for influence, power, and territory against Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom's brand of Sunni, Salafist Islam, often referred to as Wahhabism. Iran has also sought to counteract Western influence, and in particular that of the United States, within Africa, finding common cause with elements opposed to colonialism and seeking to chart a more independent course.

Iran's bid for influence on the African continent since the 1979 Islamic Revolution has been an uphill struggle as Iran has no significant historical footprint in Africa, and due to the predominance of adherence to Sunni and Sufi forms of Islam among African Muslims. Nonetheless, Iran has created an infrastructure of mosques, cultural centers, charitable networks, and educational institutions which have served to spread its revolutionary ethos to Africa.

Ayatollah Khomeini's ascendance shifted Iran's foreign policy focus from the West to the developing world, and African outreach soon became a high priority. Iranian leaders saw African nations, where many political systems had not matured or stabilized in the post-independence era, as susceptible targets for the spread of the Islamic Revolution. One of Khomeini's first foreign policy gambits was to sever ties with the apartheid regime in South Africa, which was a key African ally of the Shah's regime, and to pledge complete support to the African National Congress. This move bolstered Iran's image in Africa and lent credence to the revolutionary regime's aspirations to be perceived as champions of the world's oppressed peoples.

Many Africans, and Muslims in particular, developed favorable views of Iran's revolution as a "victory of popular forces against a corrupt and repressive regime supported by the Western powers." In the absence of a widely revered indigenous Muslim leader on the continent, Khomeini's popularity grew, and his ideology, which fused Islamic governance with Marxist-influenced economic themes, resonated against a backdrop of widening political and economic disparities in the postcolonial period.

In the early 1980s, Iran began a concerted effort to establish diplomatic, commercial, and cultural ties to Africa in order to lay the groundwork for the spread of its revolutionary ideology. A 1984 report by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency on growing Iranian activity in Africa found that just five years in, Tehran's revolutionary government had embarked on an aggressive campaign to build "networks of sympathizers among Muslim fundamentalist groups, Lebanese communities, and universities in the region."

As in Latin America, Iran was bolstered in its revolutionary project by the presence of nearly 120,000 Lebanese Shi'a expatriates in Western Africa, many with strong ties to their respective nations' business and political elites. Iran found that some powerful Lebanese expats were willing to serve as intermediaries on behalf of Tehran's political, religious, and business interests in Africa, while others sought to steer clear of an association with Iran's controversial political activities, lest they harm their own privileged economic and political position, or bring suspicion on the entire Lebanese community.

Although most West African Lebanese have few links to Hezbollah, these well-established communities have served as a conduit for the group, Iran's primary terrorist proxy, to establish an operational and fundraising presence in the region. Hezbollah has been known to recruit and operate actively in Sierra

Leone, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria, partaking in illicit money laundering, drug trafficking, blood diamond sales, and arms dealing for supplemental sources of income. The group has been bolstered by porous borders and weak, unregulated economic environments which have enabled it to freely conduct criminal enterprises and set up front companies to channel funds back to Lebanon. Hezbollah is believed to have generated millions of dollars annually from West Africa, although U.S. officials have succeeded in recent years in reducing the flow through a campaign of sanctions targeting Hezbollah's activities in the region.

In addition to anchoring Hezbollah in the region, Iran set about leveraging its ties to the Lebanese community to expand its diplomatic footprint in Africa, doubling its embassies in Sub-Saharan Africa from nine to eighteen between 1982 and 1984. Iran's embassies in the region served as the focal point of Iran's efforts to promote its culture and ideology on the continent. The embassies provided Iran with bases around the continent to coordinate media, cultural and educational outreach to local communities. Iranian cultural centers typically sprang up around the embassies which were operated by Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Propagation, the government body tasked with "informing the world community about the basis and aspirations of the Islamic Revolution" and "preparing the ground for spread of the culture of Islamic Revolution…in other countries."

With official diplomatic presences in place, Iran set about propagandizing and proselytizing with the aim of recruiting adherents to Khomeinist doctrine. Iran's embassies cultivated relationships with local press outlets in order to place articles favorable to the Iranian regime's worldview. Iran also utilized its embassies and cultural centers for the dissemination of books, periodicals, and cassettes propagating Khomeinist propaganda in local languages.

Iran's presence on the ground enabled it to build bridges to two key constituencies which Iran sought to court in order to make inroads to broader swathes of society, clerics and university activists. Iran dispatched groups of clergymen to Africa to establish contacts with local Muslim communities. The Iranian clergy staged seminars and conferences with local clerics in an effort to indoctrinate them into Khomeinist theology which they would then impart to their own followers, and also sought to target Muslim adherents directly, giving highly politicized and inflammatory guest sermons at local mosques.

Similarly, Iran sought to establish ties to radical Muslim student groups on university campuses, dispatching diplomatic personnel as professors, guest lecturers, and students to introduce Khomeini's teachings and spur pro-Iranian student demonstrations. A large part of Iran's clerical and university outreach to Africa was to recruit clergy and university activists sympathetic to the regime's worldview and bring them to Tehran for further indoctrination.

Nigeria

Through its outreach efforts, Iran was able to cultivate leaders inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution to adopt anti-Western, pro-Iranian Khomeinist ideology, and who subsequently worked with Iranian agents and institutions to spread it on the continent. A key example of this strategy bearing fruit took place in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and the continent's key oil producer. Nigeria had a virtually nonexistent Shi'a presence as late as 1980, but now has an estimated 3 million Shi'a Muslims who are heavily influenced by Iran. The rapid, extraordinary ascent of Khomeinist Shi'ism in Nigeria is fully attributable to Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, the founder and spiritual leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), Iran's key proxy group in Nigeria.

Sheikh Zakzaky, from the northern Nigerian city of Zaria, began his career in Islamist activism during the early 1970s. Zakzaky originally was a devotee of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, primarily drawing inspiration from Sayyid Qutb, the Muslim Brotherhood's main theologian and the intellectual forebear of Salafi jihadist movements such as Al Qaeda. As a radical university activist, Zakzaky served as Secretary General of the Muslim Student Society at his university, and was appointed Vice President of the Society's international body in 1979. It was during this period that Zakzaky most likely came into contact with Iranian agents. According to the 1984 CIA report, "We know that Iranian recruiters have been active at universities in northern Nigeria, from members of the Muslim community there. In 1983, for example, there were a half dozen Iranians – among them former Iranian diplomatic and military personnel – teaching or studying at northern campuses while actively involved with the Muslim Student Society."

Zakzaky was ultimately inspired by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini to convert from Sunni Islam to Shi'ism. Zakzaky viewed the 1979 overthrow of the Shah of Iran and subsequent establishment of an Islamic government as a model for an Islamic revival in Nigeria. In 1980, Zakzaky, along with other members of the Muslim Student Society, paid a transformative visit to Tehran where they received training to indoctrinate them into Khomeinism with the goal of exporting the Revolution to Nigeria. Upon his return to Nigeria, Zakzaky "adopted the symbolism and rhetoric" of Ayatollah Khomeini and went on to found the IMN as the vehicle for proselytization. His initial activities included "recruitment tours" of northern Nigerian universities to expose students to Iran's revolutionary principles. His agitation on Iran's behalf led to numerous conflicts with Nigerian authorities, including a 1981-1984 stint in prison for "sedition and for declaring he would recognize no governmental laws or authority except those of Islam."

Once out of prison during the mid-1980s, Zakzaky transformed the IMN from a student activist movement to a mass movement bent on gaining converts. Zakzaky himself began wearing the traditional white turban of a Shia cleric. According to a U.S. State Department specialist on Nigeria, Iran funds the IMN to the tune of approximately $10,000 per month, providing a cost effective means to increase their influence among Nigeria's Muslim population. Using these funds, Sheikh Zakzaky has emulated the Hezbollah model, creating a variegated network of social welfare organizations in order to create patronage links to local Muslim communities, boosting the profile of the IMN and Iran in the process and facilitating the spread of Khomenist ideology. A March 2017 Bloomberg report, which included interviews with Nigerian Shia converts, illustrates the strength of this model in inculcating fealty to the Iranian regime. One subject, who receives a roughly $5 weekly stipend from the IMN, stated he would offer his kids to Iran if called upon by Ayatollah Khamenei, while another said "If Iran wants our help, we are ready to go and help it, even with our blood."

Using Iranian funding, as well as member donations, Zakzaky's IMN operates a network of Islamic centers and prayer rooms which are used to propagate Khomeinism, and has established over 300 schools in Nigeria which provide free education to poor families for indoctrination purposes. The IMN's strength in Nigeria has made the country the main center of Al-Mustafa International University in Africa. Al-Mustafa operates five schools and seminaries in Nigeria with nearly 1000 students from Nigeria and neighboring countries. Al-Mustafa's presence serves as a pipeline for bringing dozens of Nigerian students each year to Qom for intensive ideological training, and many graduates go on to undertake missionary activities elsewhere in Africa.

The IMN also operates several propaganda organs, including news magazines in English and the local Hausa language, a Hausa-language radio station called al-Shuhada (the martyrs), and the group's official website, which prominently features the writings and teachings of Zakzaky, Ayatollah Khomeini, and

Supreme Leader Khamenei. The IMN translates documentaries on Shia religious leaders into Hausa, "with hundreds of DVDs sold to eager locals every month." The IMN's propaganda and proselytization efforts have spread the movement's ideology beyond Nigeria, with pockets of support reportedly forming in neighboring Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Burkina Faso and Ghana, giving Iran a nascent doctrinal presence in these countries.

Having amassed a large following through educational and social welfare outreach, Sheikh Zakzaky and IMN clerics work to transmit Iranian-influenced ideology to the group's backers. Zakzaky frequently gives addresses to his followers while sitting under a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini, and his speeches center around typical Iranian grievances and conspiracy theories against Israel and Jews, the U.S., and the West. IMN imams "preach that the West conspires to "dominate minds and resources" of Muslims by converting them to Christianity and secularizing them, Jews are the "lowest creatures on earth" and the "children of monkeys and pigs," the West fabricated the 9/11 attacks on the United States, and the Nigerian government created Boko Haram to justify Western-Christian "occupation" of the Muslim world and northern Nigeria."

One of Zakzaky's main targets is Nigeria's republican government itself, which the IMN, according to its own website, and ostensibly its potentially 3 million members, wish to replace with an Iran-style theocracy predicated on *velayat-e faqih.* While the IMN claims to be an exclusively peaceful Islamist movement, it has a checkered history of low-level militant activities and confrontations with Nigerian security forces that have led to the imprisonment of hundreds of the group's members since the 1980s. Both Nigerian intelligence and U.S. embassy cables have reported that the group operates paramilitary training camps in northern Nigeria. The group has hundreds of paramilitary guards, called hurras, who are not armed so as to avoid a direct confrontation with the state, but who "are a uniformed, regimented organization modeled on the Revolutionary Guard that carries Hizb Allah's flag as their emblem."

The nature of the IMN's ties to Hezbollah are unclear, but the groups have a shared ideology and history of contacts which suggests that the IMN may gradually shift into more militant activities when expedient, or if it faces governmental repression. In May 2013, Nigerian authorities charged three Lebanese members of Hezbollah with terrorism and weapons smuggling after unearthing a large weapons cache in the town of Kano which were allegedly meant to target Israeli and Western interests in Nigeria. The seizure indicated that Hezbollah's presence in West Africa is not just about collecting money, but the group is also planning and conducting militant activities as well.

The IMN denies operational links to Nigeria's Lebanese community and Hezbollah, but Nigerian security analysts dispute this assertion. According to Cheta Nwanze, head of research at SBM Intelligence, "The Nigerian State has a trove of information linking the IMN with hundreds of Lebanese who are resident in Nigeria, especially Lebanese based in Kano. They strongly believe that this is a basis for coordination with the Hezbollah in Lebanon." In 2015, Sheikh Zakzaky travelled to Lebanon, where he toured Hezbollah-operated sites and sat for an interview with Hezbollah's al-Manar TV station, giving further credence to Hezbollah-IMN links.



IMN members march with Hezbollah flags during 2015 Quds Day rally (Source: Islamic Invitation Turkey)

The IMN frequently mobilizes tens of thousands of its members for Shia religious events and mass political demonstrations, many of which feature the burning of American and Israeli flags, and veneration of the triumvirate of Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. The mass demonstrations have been the site of violence and clashes on occasion. In July 2014, more than 30 IMN members were killed in clashes with government forces during the IMN's yearly Quds Day procession held to demonstrate IMN's solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Sheikh Zakzaky lost three sons in the incident.



IMN members hold posters of Khomeini, Khamenei, and Zakzaky during 2015 Quds Day rally (Source: Islamic Invitation Turkey)

In December 2015, the IMN was holding a procession when the Nigerian military alleges that attendees attacked a motorcade transporting the army's chief of staff . The incident touched off several days of clashes which led to the deaths of several hundred IMN members. The Nigerian authorities took Sheikh Zakzaky and his wife into custody, and they remain detained to this day. Iran's Supreme Leader, President, and foreign minister, as well as Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, have all called for Zakzaky's release. His ongoing detention at the hands of Nigerian authorities heightens the prospect that the IMN will step up its militancy in the months and years to come. Despite his penchant for extreme rhetoric, Zakzaky has largely discouraged physical confrontation with the Nigerian state. The IMN has several younger potential successors waiting in the wings who are more "radical and violence-prone" than Zakzaky, further exacerbating concerns of future sectarian strife in Nigeria.



IMN members stage "Free Zakzaky" protest in Abuja, Nigeria in May 2018 (Source: AhlulBayt News Agency)

Senegal

Senegal represents another key African state where Iran has sought to cultivate influence, but where progress has at times been undone by its criminal mischief. Senegal's appeal to Iran was based on the strength of its politically organized Muslim community which exercises "considerable influence on world Islam and among neighboring Francophone African states," including at the United Nations where many of its neighbors follow its lead. The linchpin of Iran's bid for influence has been Senegal's well-established community of 40,000 Lebanese, of which reportedly 90% are Shia Muslim and whose businesses account for a disproportionate share of Senegal's domestic industry.

Islam in Senegal is traditionally Sunni and dominated by Sufi orders. The Lebanese Shia minority was generally apolitical and quietist, and their position in Senegalese society was particularly vulnerable in the period after Senegal gained its independence from France. The community became more assertive, however, after Musa Sadr, a towering figure in Lebanese Shiism revered by both followers of Amal and Hezbollah, visited Senegal during a 1967 trip to Africa seeking to instill "Shiite pride in Lebanon's Muslim diaspora." The awakening Lebanese Shia community of Senegal urged Sadr to establish the first Shia religious center in Africa, and so he travelled to the holy city of Najaf, Iraq in search of an emissary. There, he found a Lebanese cleric named Abdul Monem El-Zein who had trained under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini during his exile in Najaf. El-Zein was dispatched to the Senegalese capital of Dakar in 1969, where he would go on to establish a Khomeinist institutional presence, founding the Islamic Institution in Dakar's Plateau neighborhood in 1978.

Iran's Islamic Revolution the next year would have a profound impact on the trajectory of Shia Islam in Senegal. Although El-Zein's initial mission was to strengthen the Shia identity of the Lebanese immigrant community, the reverberations of the Islamic Revolution drew Senegalese intellectuals to Khomeinism as well, leading El-Zein to broaden his proselytization activities to the indigenous Senegalese population. El-

Zein would go on to found "half a dozen mosques and more than one hundred madrasas, or religious schools, around the country, many of them staffed by Senegalese clerics he has trained." By 1984, Senegalese authorities grew wary of the burgeoning pro-Iranian sentiment in Senegal and moved to shut down the Iranian embassy in Dakar, "accusing its diplomats of abusing their status to spread religious propaganda and covertly financing Senegalese media and other organizations with an eye towards interfering in the internal affairs of the country."

Diplomatic relations would be restored in the 1990s, and by the 2000s, Senegalese-Iranian bilateral relations warmed considerably with the accession of Abdoulaye Wade to Senegal's presidency. In addition to numerous high-level visits of Iranian officials to Senegal and vice versa and the strengthening of commercial ties, including an $80 million Iranian investment in an Iran Khodro automobile production facility in Senegal, Iran reinvigorated its cultural and ideological meddling in Senegal with Wade's full blessing. Wade permitted an Iranian cleric to build a Shia seminary, the *Hawza al-Rasūl al-Akram*, in Dakar where "Senegalese youth are trained using Arabic-language Shi'a texts by mullahs trained in Iranian institutions."

Al-Mustafa International University has also established a branch in Dakar, indoctrinating 150 Senegalese students each year into Khomeinist ideology. The students receive "free tuition, a stipend, and breakfast" to entice them, and are expected to "promote Iran online or in books" in return for the Iranian largesse. They are also given enough money to enable them and their families to visit Qom during the course of their studies, furthering their indoctrination.



Al-Mustafa University branch in Dakar, Senegal (Source: Reuters)

The resumption of pro-Iranian activism within Senegal has carried risks for the Senegalese government and invited subversion. In 2010, Senegal cut off diplomatic relations with Iran until 2013 after a shipment of sophisticated Iranian arms was discovered in Nigeria that was bound for anti-Senegalese rebels operating in Gambia. In 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department unearthed Hezbollah fundraising and logistical operations taking place in four West African nations, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Gambia, and Senegal. A Lebanese-Senegalese dual citizen, Abbas Loutfe Fawaz, was among four individuals designated by Treasury for acting as Hezbollah "ambassadors" to West Africa. Fawaz served as "Hezbollah's leader in Senegal," raising funds for the terrorist organization and recruiting sympathizers through a chain of supermarkets he owned in Dakar. He had also reportedly held discussions with Lebanese Hezbollah officials about sending Lebanese nationals in Senegal to Lebanon, possibly for ideological and military training.

The Senegalese Shia community is smaller and has a far less pronounced institutional presence than that of Nigeria. While Senegal's Lebanese business community has prospered, its economic success has

historically been tied to staying out of the political and social limelight. The growth of the community's transnational links to Lebanon, Hezbollah, and Iran have stirred a growing assertiveness, however. The 2006 Hezbollah war with Israel marked a turning point for the Senegalese Shia in terms of political activism. Sheikh El-Zein, who had previously sought to downplay any connections to Hezbollah or Iran, led a demonstration and march in Dakar attended by 3,000 mostly Lebanese nationals, many of who waved Lebanese and Hezbollah flags. Senegal is largely renowned as a model state for cultural and religious pluralism and political moderation, due in large part to the tolerance preached by its dominant Sufi orders. The growth of Khomeinist ideology and meddling by Iran and Hezbollah, however, threatens to upend the balance.

Kenya

Iran escalated its missionary activities in Kenya following the Islamic Revolution, working to propagate Khomeinism among Kenyan Muslim communities "through media, press, educational institutions, charitable works and direct diplomatic financial support from Iran Embassy in Nairobi." Iran operates a large cultural office in Kenya alongside its embassy which carries out programming meant to cast Iranian-style Shiism in a favorable light. Iran's proselytization in Kenya has helped expand its Shia population to roughly half a million, many who are ideologically predisposed to backing Iran. A Kenyan Shia cleric, Morteza Morteza, commented on Iran's ideological expansion in Kenya addressing the 5th General Assembly of Ahlul Bayt World Assembly in 2011, saying that due to the Islamic Revolution, "The number of Shia Muslims has sharply increased and a lot of Kenyans got familiar with this honorable school of thought."

During the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran undertook a concerted effort to establish strategic military, commercial, and diplomatic ties with African nations in order to offset Iran's growing isolation from the West due to its illicit nuclear program. Iran's renewed outreach to Africa sought to strengthen Muslim allegiances and engender goodwill through offers of oil, aid, and infrastructure projects. Iran's diplomatic and economic ties to Kenya burgeoned during this period, as Kenya sought Iranian investments. In 2009, President Ahmadinejad visited Kenya with a 100-person Iranian business delegation and agreed to extend Kenya a $16 billion line of credit for housing, dam construction, healthcare, and humanitarian assistance.

Ahmadinejad's visit to Kenya was the first such trip for an Iranian president since 1996. The visit provided visual evidence of Iranian Shia ideological expansion into Kenya, as thousands of ecstatic Shias mobbed Ahmadinejad as he arrived in the port city of Mombasa, chanting "Allahu Akbar." Beyond economic appeals, Ahmadinejad sought to frame Iran's interest in Kenya, and Africa more broadly, in populist, anti-imperialist, anti-Western terms. During his visit, he called for African nations to stand up against Western powers, saying, "Western countries have for years oppressed African states, exploited Africa's natural resources. … The time has come for the developing countries of Asia and Africa to rise up and refuse [to accept] dictatorship." Ahmadinejad's rhetoric in Kenya fit into his overarching project for an Iranian-led anti-imperialist front, which was also visible in his approach to Latin America.

Iran's efforts to spread its Khomeinist ideology in Africa support a broader pernicious goal of the Islamic Republic: to anchor Hezbollah and IRGC-Quds Force operatives in Africa who can carry out subversive terroristic attacks against Western and Israeli interests. Iran's ideological expansion into Kenya bears out this strategy, as two major terrorist plots involving Iranian agents have been thwarted in recent years. In

June 2012, two Iranian nationals, allegedly members of the IRGC-Quds Force, were arrested by Kenyan security forces and subsequently led the authorities to a cache of RDX, a powerful explosive, large enough to topple a tall building. Kenyan officials believed the Iranians intended to target American, British, Israeli or Saudi Arabian interests within Kenya. The officials also alleged that the advanced explosives and the men's links to the Quds Force indicated that Iranians at the highest levels of government likely had knowledge of the plot. In December 2016, a Nairobi court charged two Iranian men and their Kenyan driver, with "facilitation of a terrorist attack" after authorities caught them filming the Israeli embassy with their mobile phones. The surveillance was conducted from a diplomatic vehicle that belonged to the Iranian embassy, indicating state involvement in the plot.

South Africa

South Africa is another African nation where Iran's Islamic Revolution has had a lasting impact. Although Muslims account for only about 2% of South Africa's population, its Muslim community drew inspiration in the 1950s from the burgeoning of Islamism in Pakistan and Egypt, and teachers and professionals began calling for an Islamic Revival. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, a seminal turning point in the trajectory of global Islamism, provided the impetus for the creation of the Qibla mass movement, "an anti-apartheid movement inspired by the universal egalitarian message of the Islamic revolution in Iran."

Qibla was formed in 1980 in Cape Town by a radical cleric, Imam Ahmed Cassiem, with the goal of overthrowing South Africa's apartheid regime and replacing it with a theocratic Islamic state based on Khomeinist principles. Operating under the slogan "one solution, Islamic Revolution," Qibla is reportedly "manipulated from a safe distance by the Iranian intelligence services, which use the organization not only to propagate the world view of the Islamic Republic, but also as a cover to conduct espionage in RSA (Republic of South Africa)." Qibla has a history of militant activity, and was labeled a terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State. The organization reportedly dispatched members to Libya and Pakistan for military training in the 1980s and 1990s, and has sent fighters to South Lebanon to fight alongside Hezbollah in the 1990s.
In addition to Qibla, Imam Cassiem serves as the head of the Islamic Unity Convention (IUC), an umbrella organization comprised of 250 Muslim organizations which essentially acts as a front for Qibla and advocates for Islamic unity "as a precursor for an Iranian-style Islamic revolution" in South Africa. The IUC controls a radio station, Radio 786, which broadcasts Cassiem's radical ideology and "classical anti-Semitic themes" to purportedly over 100,000 listeners.

The legacy of Qibla and its Iranian backers' opposition to apartheid has contributed to strong South African-Iranian bilateral ties since the ANC assumed power in 1994, particularly in international diplomatic fora. As a voting member of the IAEA Board of Governors and as a sitting member of the U.N. Security Council during the 2007-08 and 2010-11 terms, South Africa opposed sanctions on Iran over its illicit nuclear program. South Africa is also one of the most powerful members of the African Union, and acts as a strong advocate within the AU for closer Iran ties. This has placed it at odds with the consensus in the AU, where Saudi Arabia wields considerable influence over other key members.

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Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Africa has proved to be a fertile ground for the spread of Khomeinist ideology. According to a Wall Street Journal report, "parts of the continent's Sunni Muslim heartland are living through the biggest wave of Sunni-to-Shiite conversions since many Sunni tribes of southern Iraq

adopted Shiism in the 19th century." However, as the Middle East has become increasingly engulfed in sectarian tensions due in large part to Iranian support for terrorism and meddling in neighboring countries, Iran's presence in Africa – and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah's as well – has engendered a backlash by governments opposed to Iranian subversion.

Morocco, for instance, severed its diplomatic ties with Iran in 2009, accusing it of seeking "to change the religious foundations of the Kingdom" and of "intolerable interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom." Gambia cut off ties with Iran in 2010 following the foiled attempt to smuggle sophisticated arms to anti-Senegalese rebels operating in its territory. Sudan, which had developed a strategic partnership with Iran on the shared basis of withstanding international isolation campaigns, broke off ties in 2016 at Saudi Arabia's directive after Iranian protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran following the Kingdom's execution of a radical Shia cleric. Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros also sided with Riyadh in the dispute and cut off ties to Iran as well.

Saudi Arabia's challenge to Iranian expansionism in Africa extends beyond the realm of diplomacy and bilateral relations. Wary of Iran's growing influence, donors from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Dubai and Kuwait have begun funneling investments into Africa to establish educational, cultural, and religious institutions meant to propagate their conservative brand of Salafism. The contestation for religious and cultural influence in Africa between Khomeinism and Salafism risks devolving in certain hotspots into a microcosm of the sectarian strife plaguing the Middle East at present.

Iran's Ideological Expansion – Europe

The long arm of the Iranian regime extends to Western Europe and the Balkans, where the Islamic Republic has worked since the 1979 Islamic Revolution to establish a network of cultural centers, mosques, universities and seminaries to promote its Shia Khomeinist ideology. This pro-Iranian NGO network serves as a conduit for Iran to embed intelligence agents and IRGC-Quds Force operatives on the European continent and provides a base of support and recruits for Hezbollah's criminal and terroristic activities in Europe.

Since the Islamic Republic's founding, Iran has sought to infiltrate Muslim immigrant communities throughout Europe in order to spread Ayatollah Khomeini's "Islam of the Disinherited." Hezbollah's active presence is the most potent manifestation of Iran's ideological expansion into Europe. The terrorist group has operated on the continent at the behest of its benefactor and strategic partner, Iran, since the group's founding in the 1980s.

Hezbollah's flourishing in Europe occurred as an outgrowth of the influx of refugees fleeing Lebanon's civil war during the 1980s. The group's first foray into terrorism in Europe took place in 1983, when Hezbollah's militant Islamic Jihad wing took credit for bombs placed at a train station and aboard a train from Paris to Marseille. Over the next few years, Hezbollah operatives carried out a series of hijackings, bombings, and assassination plots. Hezbollah's terrorist activities in Europe were primarily in service of Iranian interests, with targets selected in order to punish countries that backed Iraq in the ongoing Iran-Iraq war, or to silence Iranian Kurdish and MEK dissidents.

Following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, there was a lull in Iran-backed Hezbollah terrorism on the continent for the better part of two decades. However, Hezbollah continued to utilize Europe "as a staging ground for operations to be carried out elsewhere, as a logistical hub, and as a place where the group and its supporters could raise funds through a variety of criminal enterprises." Narcotrafficking is foremost among Hezbollah's criminal enterprises in Europe, with Europe serving as the final destination for drugs emanating from Hezbollah's West African network. Other criminal activities carried out by Hezbollah in Europe include currency counterfeiting, weapons trafficking, document forgery, and money laundering. Europe's open societies and borders have made it an ideal arena for Hezbollah to operate.

Hezbollah's criminality was further abetted by a lax European Union (EU) enforcement regime, whereby EU member states, with the exception of the Netherlands, failed to proscribe the group as a terrorist organization and effectively appeared content to allow it to carry out criminal, political, and fundraising activities unimpeded so long as it refrained from terrorist attacks on their soil. Although European security services had monitored Hezbollah members and supporters, they failed to detect the development of Hezbollah sleeper cells. Alexander Ritzmann, a policy adviser at the Counter Extremism Project in Europe warned in 2012, "They (Hezbollah) have real, trained operatives in Europe that have not been used in a long time, but if they wanted them to become active, they could."

Ritzmann's warning came to pass in July 2012, as Hezbollah's free reign in Europe metastasized into a return to terrorist activities. Hezbollah undertook two major plots that summer, one foiled and one successful. In July, Cypriot authorities arrested a dual Lebanese-Swedish citizen and Hezbollah member for his role surveilling potential targets in a plot to attack Israeli tourists. Hossam Taleb Yaacoub told Cypriot investigators, "I was just collecting information about the Jews. … This is what my organization is doing, everywhere in the world." Later that same month, a Hezbollah suicide bomber destroyed an Israeli

tour bus in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing the Bulgarian bus driver and five Israelis, and wounding more than 30 others. In an investigation, the Bulgarian government found Hezbollah responsible for the attack.

With Hezbollah's culpability in the Burgas bombing established and international condemnation of the group rising due to its pernicious role in the Syrian civil war, the EU moved in July 2013 to designate Hezbollah's military wing, but not the organization as a whole. The EU pointed to Hezbollah's social services network and participation in Lebanese parliamentary politics as a justification for this half-measure, with some member states citing concerns to the safety of their personnel engaged in peacekeeping missions in southern Lebanon and others arguing that a full designation could further destabilize Lebanon. In announcing the designation of Hezbollah's military wing, former EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton stated, "We also agreed that the delivery of legitimate financial transfers to Lebanon and delivery of assistance from the European Union and its member states will not be affected."

Hezbollah's resumption of terrorist operations in Europe exposed the lie that the organization had two distinct wings, one "political" and one "military." Due to the fungibility of money, Hezbollah's fundraising activities in Europe, both licit and illicit, ultimately pad the organization's bottom line, freeing up funds for the organization's terrorism activities in the Middle East and beyond. High-ranking Hezbollah officials themselves have denied the bifurcation of the group's activities insisted upon by European officials. In 2012, Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem declared, "We don't have a military wing and a political one; we don't have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other...Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, are in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority."

A survey of European countries reveals an active pro-Iranian regime NGO network with links to Tehran which advances Khomeinist ideology and Iranian foreign policy imperatives in Europe, and also provides cover for Hezbollah's ongoing activities on the continent.

Germany

Germany has emerged as the primary hub of Hezbollah and pro-Iranian activism on the European continent. Hezbollah's activities in Germany date back to the 1980s, when the group established a presence among Shia communities fleeing the Lebanese civil war. In 1992, a Hezbollah cell carried out one of the organization's most "daring and public assassinations" at the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin, targeting the head of Iran's primary Kurdish opposition movement. The Mykonos assassination plot was ordered and directed by the highest echelons of the Iranian government by a body called the Committee for Special Operations, "which included President Rafsanjani, Minister of Intelligence Fallahian, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, … and, most significantly, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei." In 1997, Steven Smyrek, a German convert recruited by Hezbollah and trained in Lebanon for a suicide bombing mission was arrested upon arrival at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport before he could carry out an attack on Israeli civilians.

Hezbollah has generally refrained from engaging in terrorist activities in Germany since those incidents, instead primarily using Germany as a safe haven and for spreading anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic propaganda. A 2016 report from the domestic intelligence service in Berlin states that the Hezbollah leadership has explicitly given the directive not to engage in high-profile activities in Germany. Nevertheless, a 2016 federal report by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Germany's domestic intelligence agency, argues that Hezbollah uses third countries to plan terrorist attacks against

Israel. Concerns about Iranian or Iran-backed activities in third countries were substantiated by an Iranian spy probe in 2017 and subsequent raids against suspected Iranian agents in the beginning of 2018 in Germany.

Iran is increasingly engaged in espionage activities on German individuals. In March 2017, it was reported that the Quds Force intelligence hired a Pakistani student known as Syed Mustafa H. to gather information on pro-Israeli individuals and institutions. The student was asked to surveil former MP Reinhold Robbe, who previously headed the German-Israeli parliamentary group and served as President of the German-Israeli Society. Security authorities suspect that information was gathered for potential retaliatory measures against Israel-friendly individuals in case Israel launched air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. Following this incident, police conducted a series of raids linked to 10 other Iranian spy suspects, but no arrests were made. The spy probe prompted pro-Israeli and Iran-critical voices to call for tougher actions against Tehran, with some suggesting that Germany expel its Iranian ambassador, ramp up its counter-intelligence, and designate the IRGC and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations. In response to the incident, the German Foreign Ministry summoned Iranian ambassador Ali Majedi in December 2017 to communicate that these kinds of violations are unacceptable.

Hezbollah maintains a robust presence in Germany. According to an October 2017 report of the Federal Office of the Protection of the Constitution, Germany's domestic intelligence agency, there are 950 active Hezbollah members in Germany, classified as belonging to the organization's "political wing," a number which has remained steady for over a decade. The Hezbollah supporters regularly meet at Iran-backed mosques and Islamic community centers around the country. There are believed to be around 30 such institutions in this pro-Iranian network, including the Imam Mahdi Centre in Münster-Hiltrup, the Imam Reza mosque in Berlin, and the Imam Ali Mosque in Hamburg. The ongoing Middle Eastern refugee crisis further compounds the security risk posed to Germany by Hezbollah. The 2017 intelligence report states that, "Since mid-2015 there are increased indications of fighters from Shi'ite militias entering Germany as legal refugees."



Imam Ali Mosque in Hamburg, Germany (Source: Mehr News Agency)

Pro-Iranian activities in Germany center largely around the Islamic Center of Hamburg (*Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg,* or IZH), an umbrella institution which plays a financial and organizational role in the operation of Shia associations around Germany. The IZH seeks to promote the Islamic Revolution in Germany via "brochures, events, prayers, rallies, and other activities. According to Germany's intelligence agency, "Towards the outside world, the IZH acts as a mere religious organization that does not include political activities in its direct field of work. … In reality however, IZH spreads the Shiite teachings of Iranian brand, as one of the most active centers of Iranian propaganda in Europe. Its actual task is the 'subtle propagation' of an Islamic theocratic State after Iranian example."

German intelligence agencies allege the IZH is directly controlled by Tehran. Underscoring the IZH's linkages to Iran, the IZH's imam and director since 2002 is Ayatollah Reza Ramezani, who German intelligence has labelled Supreme Leader Khamenei's deputy in Europe and who in 2006 was elected to Iran's Assembly of Experts, the deliberative body tasked with electing and overseeing the Supreme Leader.

Each year, Hezbollah members and supporters gather publicly in Berlin for the annual Al Quds Day march, a global initiative of the Iranian regime initiated by Ayatollah Khomeini dedicated to Israel's destruction. The IZH is involved in the organization of the march, and funds buses of pro-Hezbollah, pro-Iranian regime activists to the event from the Imam Ali mosque in Hamburg, which the IZH operates. Prominent displays of Hezbollah flags and posters of Shia and "resistance axis" leaders, such as Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, Hassan Nasrallah, and Bashar al-Assad have been a fixture at the Quds Day rallies, although in 2016, the Berlin State Senate agreed to ban Hezbollah flags at the gathering going forward.



2014 Berlin Quds Day march (Source; Wikipedia)

Despite the IZH's Iranian and Hezbollah's links, federal and municipal bodies have played a role in legitimizing the organization in Germany. In November 2012, Hamburg entered into a partnership treaty with the regional *shura*, an umbrella council of Islamic associations which includes the IZH, making the IZH a partner of the city of Hamburg. In May 2017, the German Foreign Office held a conference on the "Responsibility of Religions for Peace" and invited several Muslim clerics with ties to Iran. Among them was Hamidreza Torabi, the chairman of the "Islamic Academy of Germany" which falls under the IZH umbrella. During the 2016 Quds Day march, Torabi carried a poster calling for the destruction of Israel.

The "Islamic Community of Shiite Communities in Germany (IGS)" is another problematic pro-Iranian NGO in the IZH constellation. IZH Director Ayatollah Ramezani chairs the IGS "Scholar's Council." Although the German federal government classified the IGS as "extremist influenced," the EU's Internal Security Fund is set to fund the IGS, channeling the money through Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), to the tune of over 283,000 Euros through the end of 2019. Ironically, the funds are earmarked for "extremism prevention" and "deradicalization." Additionally, the IGS received over 18,000 Euros from the German Ministry of Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in 2017. In July 2017, the Ministry supported a workshop organized by IGS and conducted by the Al-Mustafa Institute of Berlin, which is affiliated with Al-Mustafa University, Iran's global network of seminaries and Islamic colleges which trains the next generation of Khomeinist clerics and missionaries.

Although Germany and the EU have counterproductively legitimized and, in some cases, even subsidized pro-Iranian regime and pro-Hezbollah organizations in Germany, German authorities have moved to curtail Hezbollah's fundraising activities since the 2013 EU designation of Hezbollah's "military wing." One crucial step was shutting down and freezing the assets of the deceptively named "Orphan's Project Lebanon" following a raid on their headquarters in Lower Saxony in 2014. Germany allowed the Hezbollah-affiliated charity to operate and raise funds for years. A portion of the funds collected by the

"Orphan's Project", totaling 3.3 million Euros between 2007 and 2013, were in turn contributed to Hezbollah's *al-Shahid* (Martyrs) Foundation, "which finances the families of Hezbollah members who commit suicide bombings against Israelis and supports Hezbollah members." The Orphan's Project case demonstrates how even Hezbollah's "legitimate" fundraising by the "political wing" often abetted terrorism.

United Kingdom (U.K.)

The Islamic Revolution's reverberations reached the United Kingdom on February 14, 1989, when, less than four months before his death, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa (religious decree) calling to kill Salman Rushdie, an Indian-born British Muslim author, for writing the book Satanic Verses, which Khomeini proclaimed as "blasphemous against Islam." With his health faltering and the Islamic Revolution imperiled following the 1988 end of the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini's fatwa was a strategic masterstroke designed to revitalize the Revolution's fortunes by casting Khomeini as the leader of global Islam whose jurisdiction reached even as far as Muslim communities in the heart of the secular West.

The Rushdie affair was a seminal chapter in Iran's efforts to export the Islamic Revolution that heralded Iranian-style Islamism's arrival as a security threat to the West. Beyond the Rushdie affair, Iran's revolutionary regime has longstanding enmity toward Great Britain, trailing only its hatred of the Great Satan, the U.S., and rivaling that of the Little Satan, Israel. The roots of anti-British sentiment in Iran date back to the early 20th century, when the British government maneuvered to take over all of Iran's oil, and was exacerbated by the British spearheading of a 1953 plot to remove Prime Minister Mossadegh after he nationalized the Iranian oil industry. Given Iran's historical enmity toward the U.K, a large Muslim immigrant population, a large anti-Israel/anti-war/anti-imperialist movement, and a liberal free speech environment, Iran has invested heavily in disseminating Khomeinist ideology in Great Britain.

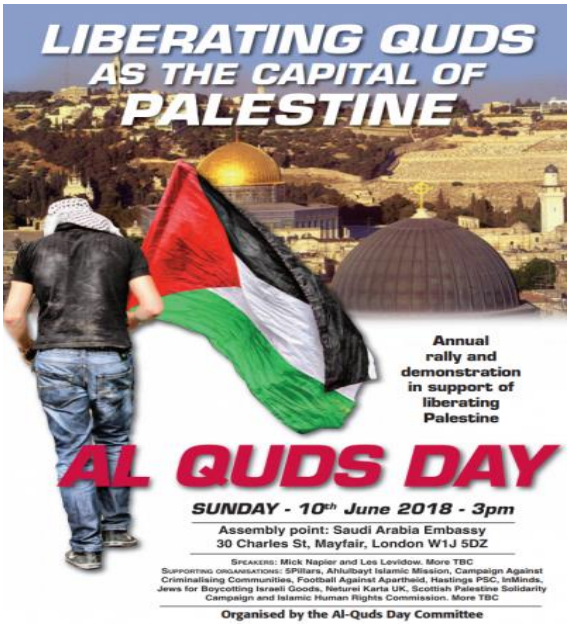
There are four primary Tehran-linked organizations operating in the United Kingdom: The World AhlulBayt Islamic Mission in Britain (AIM), the Islamic Center of England (ICEL), the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), and InnovativeMinds (InMinds). Their activities are oriented toward promoting Iran's Islamic Revolution, bolstering Hezbollah, delegitimizing Israel, and campaigning against Iran sanctions. Additionally, Al-Mustafa International University operates a branch in London, the Islamic College of London, which is the university's main campus in Europe.

World AhlulBayt Islamic Mission in Britain (AIM): AIM is the British chapter of the AhlulBayt World Assembly, an internationally active Iranian NGO which functions as the umbrella over a network of Iranian-backed religious, cultural, and educational institutions tasked with disseminating Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamist ideology around the world. AIM hosts conferences in Britain aimed at promoting the Iranian regime's agenda, and collaborates with leftist and Islamist organizations of various stripes at conferences and events aimed at the delegitimization of Israel.

Islamic Center of England (ICEL): The ICEL is one of Iran's key religious institutions in the U.K. It is run by Ayatollah Abdolhossein Moezi, who describes himself as Supreme Leader Khamenei's personal representative in Britain. The ICEL operates a religious school, the *Hawza Ilmiyya,* which a 2006 *Times* report revealed was teaching students that non-believers are "filth" and akin to "pigs and dogs." The *Hawza* is a sister institution of the Islamic College of Advanced Studies, the London branch of Al-Mustafa University, whose degrees are validated by Middlesex University.

The ICEL has hosted and provided a platform for visiting Khomeinist scholars to present their extremist and conspiratorial views, such as Shaykh Hamza Sodagar, an American Shi'ite cleric who has lectured at events coordinated by ICEL in conjunction with AIM in 2014 and 2016. Among Sodagar's controversial proclamations are that "9/11 was an Israeli project," a "Zionist web of media is trying to control the minds of the people," and "If there's homosexual men, the punishment is one of five things. One – the easiest one maybe – chop their head off, that's the easiest. 'Second – burn them to death. Third – throw 'em off a cliff. Fourth – tear down a wall on them so they die under that. Fifth – a combination of the above." The ICEL also hosted Sheikh Zakzaky, the leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria in 2010 at an Islamic Human Rights Commission event.

Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC): Founded in 1997, the IHRC is a British Khomeinist organization that is supportive of Hezbollah. The IHRC produces research and spearheads advocacy campaigns based on a Shia Islamist interpretation of human rights centered around defense of the "oppressed." The causes it addresses are both local and global in scope. Locally, it seeks to defend the rights of British Muslims and combat Islamophobic discrimination and hate crimes. Globally, the IHRC's primary preoccupation is advocating on behalf of the rights of Palestinians and campaigning for the delegitimization of Israel.



2018 London Quds Day poster. Supporting Organizations include AhlulBayt Islamic Mission, InMinds, and Islamic Human Rights Commission (Source: Islamic Human Rights Commission)

The IHRC has been embroiled in numerous controversies. One of its ongoing campaigns calls for the release of "prisoners of faith" around the world, many who are convicted jihadists, including Sheikh Abdul Omar Rahman, the now deceased spiritual leader of Egypt's Islamic Jihad movement who was convicted for seditious conspiracy after his followers attacked the World Trade Center in 1993. The IHRC currently campaigns heavily for the release of Sheikh Zakzaky in Nigeria. The IHRC also gives out annual "Islamophobia awards" meant to satirically spotlight "those in public life who have perpetrated or perpetuated acts of hatred against Muslims and their faith." In 2015, the IHRC gave the Islamophobia award to the staff of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* just months after Islamist gunmen massacred a dozen members of its staff.

IHRC is one of the primary organizers of the annual London Quds Day march, joining forces with the Khomeinist organizations AIM and InMinds, as well as organizations linked to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS), groups with Islamist leanings, far-left/socialist movements, and fringe anti-Zionist Jewish groups. In 2017 the IHRC issued an encouraging advisory ahead of the rally informing attendees that "you can bring a Hizbullah flag to show support for the political wing of Hizbullah … because the political wing of Hizbullah is not a proscribed organisation." The IHRC's leader, Massoud Shadjareh, has previously addressed the Quds Day gathering draped in a Hezbollah flag. In 2017, London Mayor Sadiq Khan implored the British Home Secretary to proscribe the flying of Hezbollah flags at the annual Quds Day, prompting the IHRC to respond that Khan had committed "a betrayal of trust" of Londoners.

Despite the IHRC's support for Hezbollah and other jihadists, a parallel charitable organization, the Islamic Human Rights Commission Trust, technically a separate legal entity, is a registered charity in the U.K. The IHRC has advised the U.K. parliament on anti-terrorism strategy and has also held consultative status with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs since 2007.

Innovative Minds (InMinds): Established in 2001, InMinds is a British Khomeinist organization whose website declares, "Undoubtedly the single most significant success for the Muslim Ummah this century is the Islamic Revolution in Iran." InMinds maintains close ties to the IHRC and is a partner organization in the staging of London's Quds Day March. InMinds is primarily engaged in anti-Israel BDS-related activities. Its website features fatwas from prominent Shia clerics, including Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Khamenei, and Hezbollah's spiritual forefather Sheikh Fadlallah justifying boycotts of Israel. InMinds maintains a database of companies with commercial ties to Israel, and the organization creates YouTube videos and propaganda leaflets to "advise viewers and readers how to promote various aspects of the boycott, including in sports, the academic and cultural worlds, and economy." The website also features an article glorifying the "martyrdom" of a female Palestinian suicide bomber, Ayaat al-Akhras.

Italy

After graduation, many foreign-born clerics trained at Al-Mustafa International University return to their home countries to proselytize and conduct missionary work on behalf of the Iranian regime. One such Al-Mustafa graduate is Abbas DiPalma, a Catholic convert to Shi'ism who became the first Italian to gain the rank of Hojjatoleslam. DiPalma now serves as director of Rome's Imam Mahdi Center, one of Italy's primary Khomeinist institutions along with the Italian branch of AhlulBayt World Assembly. Italy's pro-Iranian community activities are largely coordinated in conjunction with the Cultural Institute of the Iran Embassy.

At the Imam Mahdi Center, Di Palma "organizes religious ceremonies, recruits among the local population, notably Muslim immigrants, and also organizes political events to support the Iranian regime." DiPalma is an outspoken proponent of the Iran-led "resistance axis" and has staged events in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iran's intervention in the Syrian civil war. DiPalma was the subject of a PressTV documentary in which he spoke reverently of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, saying: "He is a role-model, his justice, justness, glory, and purity, intellectually and morally. This is very important, and this is why people connect with him and can trust him. He speaks to people in an easy way. It is very interesting, I think, to see this connection between people and Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah."

Belgium

In 2009, Morocco cut off its diplomatic ties with Iran, accusing it of seeking "to change the religious foundations of the Kingdom" and of "intolerable interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom." One of the primary concerns of Moroccan security authorities behind the decision was Iran's efforts to proselytize among Moroccan diaspora communities in Europe, particularly in Belgium, where an estimated 30,000 mostly second and third-generation Moroccan immigrants have converted to Shi'ism. Iran's proselytization activities in Belgium center around the 'Rida mosque and Islamic Association in Anderlecht, the Centre Islamique Culturel Chiite – Ahlou al Bayt in Brussels, and the 'Alzahraa Center in Antwerp.

In spite of Iran's efforts at ideological expansion throughout Western Europe, the region has largely steered clear of the sectarian tensions plaguing the Middle East and burgeoning in Africa. Belgium, however, has emerged as a zone of contestation, with Salafi and Iranian elements vying for influence among the nation's Moroccan immigrants, leading to growing Islamist extremism. Morocco, whose state version of Islam is a tolerant form of Maliki Sunnism, has viewed the growing extremism in Belgium with concern. In 2013, a Salafist carried out an arson attack on the al-Rida mosque while shouting about issues related to the civil war in Syria, killing the mosque's imam. The attack underscored the dangers of Iran's Middle Eastern meddling reverberating into sectarian tensions elsewhere around the globe.

The Balkans

The Balkan nations are beset by "porous borders, rampant corruption, underdeveloped regions and relatively lax security," as well as a lack of intelligence coordination between individual Balkan states and between the Balkans and the EU, making them ideal operating zones for criminal gangs, terrorist networks, and extremist organizations of all stripes. Iran has sought to exploit this environment for nearly three decades, pursuing a mutually reinforcing dual-track strategy in the Balkans by which it seeks to embed Hezbollah and state and IRGC intelligence operatives on the one hand, and a network of religious, cultural, educational, and media organizations on the other. The institutions within the Iranian ideological NGO nexus serve as cut-outs and front organizations for Iranian intelligence and Hezbollah, providing cover for terrorist operations and criminal fundraising activities.

The 2012 Burgas bus bombing carried out by Hezbollah shone a light on Iran's intelligence and terrorism apparatus in the Balkans, which had largely flown under the radar for years, demonstrating definitively that beyond organization and logistics, Iran's European proxies can be mobilized to strike Western and Israeli interests at Iran's command. The attack served as a wake-up call, leading Balkan countries to begin pushing back against Iran's malign influence.

*Bosnia-Herzegovina***:** Bosnia-Herzegovina is the primary hub for Iran's espionage activities in the Balkans. Iran's efforts to cultivate influence in Bosnia date back to the early 1990s before the collapse of communism and breakup of Yugoslavia. During that period, "Iran cultivated a tight clandestine relationship with the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the dominant political faction among Bosnian Muslims. For years, Tehran lavished men, money, and guns on the SDA and established a deep and wide agent network that penetrated Bosnia's security services, military, and political cliques." Iran's alliance with the SDA helped its civilian and IRGC intelligence agencies gain influence among Bosnia's Muslims, as Iranian "spies with cash" moved to "buy politicians, spread radicalism, and recruit and train terrorists."

With its ties to the SDA cemented, Iran moved to set up an embassy and consulates around Bosnia which double as bases for espionage and other covert activities. Iran has displayed a continuing willingness to place sectarian differences aside by arming and training Salafi jihadists in Bosnia. During the Bosnian war of 1992-1995, Iran saw an opportunity to expand its geopolitical influence in Europe and capitalized upon it. Iranian intelligence agents, both from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and IRGC "played a major secret role" by "training Al-Qa'ida-linked mujahidin groups, as well as radical units of the Bosnian Army that were responsible for numerous war crimes."

The Iranian spy network was ordered out of the country following the 1995 Dayton Accords, but Iranian intelligence has maintained a presence that lingers in the present day. The MOIS maintains a strong

presence within Iran's outsized embassy in Sarajevo, where intelligence operatives operating under diplomatic cover come frequently for short term rotations from Vienna, which is the MOIS's main base in east central Europe. Meanwhile, the bulk Iran's intelligence operations, particularly those of the IRGC, have shifted to the Iranian NGO network.

In 2012, the Bosnian investigative newsmagazine *Slobodna Bosna* issued a report detailing Iran's extensive espionage presence remaining in Bosnia. The Iranian Cultural Center in Sarajevo is the primary hub for Iranian intelligence activities, and the Ibn-Sina Research Institute and Persian-Bosnian College are also important intelligence fronts. The Persian-Bosnian College is the Bosnian branch of Al-Mustafa International University. The Iran-backed educational institutions in Bosnia serve as recruitment centers, and hundreds of Bosnian citizens annually are sponsored to travel to Iran to further their indoctrination, "all arranged and paid for by Iranian intelligence." An Iranian funded charity, the Mulla Sadra Foundation, "finances the construction of local mosques and religious educational schools. Moreover it hand outs economic assistance to lower-income Muslim citizens of the country and also provides scholarships for students wishing to enter religious education in Iran."

Following the 2012 Burgas attacks, Western diplomats applied pressure to Bosnia to rid itself of Iranian influence, emphasizing that Bosnia's future lies with the EU rather than Tehran. Such calls have typically resulted in Iran slowing the pace of its illicit activities in Bosnia until the situation blew over. Bosnian authorities were finally moved to act against Iran in 2013, however, after observing Iranian "diplomats," using Iranian diplomatic tags, making frequent visits to Gornja Maoča, a "more or less open training camp for jihad-minded radicals" in northeast Bosnia. Bosnia expelled two Iranian diplomats linked to the MOIS, but by 2014, Iran had once again stepped up the tempo of its intelligence operations in Bosnia according to security officials. This included resuming visits to Gornja Maoča, but using foreign IDs to disguise their Iranian links.

Albania: Albania is another Balkan nation in which Iran has sought to establish a foothold, following the pattern of establishing charities and cultural organizations that double as MOIS and IRGC intelligence fronts. The Saadi Sirazi Cultural Institution is the primary Iranian organization in Albania, and it supports the activities of the other Iranian NGOs in country, disseminates Khomeinst religious and political propaganda, and organizes pro-Iran conferences. The institution is financed by the Iranian regime through the Islamic Cultural and Relationship Organization, which is the external arm of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Al-Mustafa International University operates two branches in Albania. An affiliated charity, the Kuran Foundation, targets working class Albanians in need of financial assistance in order to entice them to attend and helps foot the bill for Al-Mustafa graduate students to study in Iran. Saadi College, an all-female high school, is also engaged in the propagation of Khomeinist ideology.

Despite Iran's efforts to cultivate ideological influence, Albania, a NATO member, remains generally hostile to Iran, particularly among its political and security elites. This hostility manifested in a 2013 decision, at the Obama administration's urging, to offer asylum to up to 2000 Iranian MEK dissidents. In response to the MEK presence, Iranian media outlets began publishing articles in Albanian meant to discredit the MEK. In May 2017, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) announced the launch of a 24-hour Balkan Network featuring Bosniak and Albanian language programming meant both to propagate the Iranian regime's religious and geopolitical worldview, and to influence public opinion against the MEK.

Kosovo: The renewed scrutiny on Iran's meddling in the Balkans due to the Burgas attack led to the arrest by Kosovar authorities of a high-profile Iranian cleric in July 2016 on charges of money laundering and terrorism finance. Hasan Azari Bejandi ran a network of five Iranian organizations under the umbrella of Al-Mustafa International University which sought to propagate Khomeinist teachings. According to Kosovar authorities, the five affiliated institutions were "the Qur'an Foundation of Kosova that was set up in Prizren in 2002; the Ibn Sina Institute for Human Sciences launched in 2012 in Pristina; the all-female NISA charity based in the capital; the Pristina-based Bregu I Diellit group; and the Ahle Beyt Institute set up in 2007 in Prizren."

According to Kosovar investigative journalist Visar Duriqi, "Iran's activities in Kosovo were more or less underground. Their activities didn't cause too much attention. But that changed when authorities found out that the NGOs were hiding their sources of income and the purposes of their spending." State authorities alleged that Bejandi laundered hundreds of thousands of dollars through the Iranian NGO network between 2005 and 2015. The Iran NGO network in Kosovo is no longer operational.

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The 2012 Burgas bombing and foiled Cypriot plot highlight the security threat Iran and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah pose to Europe. While the incidents led the EU to designate the "military wing" of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, Iran still operates educational institutions, mosques, and charitable organizations on the continent which provide a base of support, recruits, and funds for Hezbollah. Iran's malign ideological expansion into Europe, much of it carried out in the open, increases radicalization on the continent and risks metastasizing into further deadly terrorist activity.