

The Creation and Consequences of the Iranian Threat Network

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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, Iran's strategy of gaining influence through building proxy forces has transformed the political landscape of the Middle East in favor of Tehran's overarching aim of regional hegemony. The current conflict with Israel is a direct result of this strategy, and has demonstrated the effectiveness of attacks coordinated between multiple Iranian proxies. After the initial Hamas attack, Hezbollah has begun a war of attrition with Israel in the north, the Houthis are threatening international shipping in the Red Sea and specifically targeting Israel, while over 100 attacks on US forces in Syria and Iraq have been launched by Iran-backed militias.

This research paper outlines the effect that Iran's proxy strategy has had in each part of the region, from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon to Yemen, and how this strategy has brought the region to a crossroads embodied in the current war. It then outlines a number of policy avenues to be pursued in order to counter Iran's strategy.

Iraq. Iraq is the first and most central focus of Iranian foreign activities, as it is the key gateway to broader influence to Iraq's west and south. Iraq served as a proof-of-concept between 2003-2011 in which the IRGC empowered sympathetic third-parties with training and weapons. By the time of the withdrawal of the majority of US forces from Iraq in 2011, Iran had established significant levers of influence over Iraq's political, security and media actors. The Iran-backed militias have become more politically active and are wealthier and more militarily capable than the other militias active in Iraq. Through all these efforts, Iran has prevented the Iraqi state from maintaining a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in its territory, and as a result Tehran has become highly influential in Iraqi political, economic and security affairs.

Syria. When the period of instability began in Syria in 2011, Iran considered it a strategic imperative to intervene to keep the Assad regime in power. In 2012, Iran took active role in the Syrian civil war, beginning with small advisory teams and

training units tasked with ensuring regime survival and control of major urban centers. These aims later grew to include the establishment of a network of militias in Syria loyal to Tehran designed to pursue Iranian interests and to pose a direct threat toward Israel by establishing a presence in Southern Syria. These steps served to strengthen Iran's hold on Syria relative to its two rival regional axes: Sunni Islamism supported by Qatar and Turkey and Arab traditional monarchies led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

As part of its intervention, Iran established an air-transport corridor to Syria in which the IRGC flew civilian and military aircraft to bring in advisors, munitions, and UAVs to its militias. The turmoil of the 2000s in Iraq and the 2010s in Syria also presented the prospect to realize an Iranian land-corridor from Iran, crossing through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean. Much of Iran's opportunity was created by third-parties who have eroded the authorities of the previous regimes in Iraq and Syria, resulting in the expansion of Teheran's strategic reach through the Arab world and into the Eastern Mediterranean.

Hezbollah. No other proxy is more important to Iran, or more closely aligned ideologically, than Hezbollah. Decades of Iranian investment have changed Hezbollah from a small guerilla force, to a non-state political actor with conventional military capabilities which include a vast rocket, missile and UAV arsenal as well as a network capable of conducting terror operations abroad. It has also become the dominant force in Lebanese politics and security policy and serves as mentor to additional Iranian proxies throughout the Middle East. Thanks to Iran's assistance, between 2006 and today, Hezbollah evolved along multiple dimensions. Its rocket and missile arsenal has grown from approximately 12,000 in 2006 to 150,000 today. The missiles in its arsenal are more precise and of much longer range. Hezbollah's fighters have gained proper military experience through fighting in Syria. Its manpower grew with recruitment of tens of thousands of additional operatives. Finally, its regional influence has grown, as it has taken on a key role in training other terrorist militias.

Houthis. In the first decade of the 2000s, Iranian support for the Houthis was limited. As the Houthis' success grew, so did Iran and Hezbollah's support for the movement. This assistance began with small arms shipments and expanded into funding, weapons and training that played an important role in the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in 2014. Within a year, the Houthis controlled significant parts of Yemen, including multiple ports, and have since acquired extended range

ballistic missile, UAVs, sea mines and more, which they have used to attack strategic infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, conduct targeted assassination attempts, and threaten Israeli shipping and international commerce in the Red Sea.

Hamas. The Iran-Hamas relationship is not based on shared theology, but arose for pragmatic reasons. The common goal of eradicating Israel has been sufficient for Iran to provide Hamas with approximately \$70 million dollars per year, alongside training and weapons. Hamas would never have been able to undertake the atrocities of its attack on October 7, 2023 without the decades of assistance from Iran.

The aim of this research is to outline the depth and breadth of Iran's malign influence and to clarify what can and should be done to reverse this trend. Allowing Iran to realize its vision is tantamount to enabling Iran to become the regional hegemon, placing it in control of a large amount of the world's energy and critical waterways for international shipping, which would make it an invaluable strategic partner for China and Russia in their bid to upend the US-led order in East-Asia and Europe. This is the vision to which Iran is committed and to which it has made great strides toward achieving in the past two decades. Ultimately, Iran is the central actor in the anti-Western axis in the Middle East and a critical fixture in the great power struggle between the US, China and Russia.

Though Iran's progress toward realizing the Shiite crescent of regional dominance has been great, its ultimate success is far from inevitable. It can be countered by a regional alliance led by Israel and the Gulf states and backed by the United States. This however, would require a decision on the part of Washington to abandon its attempts to come to a grand accommodation with Iran, and instead return to a policy of maximum pressure on all fronts. Actions to that end should include: Taking decisive military action against Hezbollah and Houthis; raising and enforcing macro-economic sanctions on Iran; targeting the IRGC and its sources of income directly; supporting Iran's domestic opposition; and increasing military strikes against supply lines to proxies.

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