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THE INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY & ZIONIST STRATEGY

The Creation and Consequences of the Iranian Threat Network

Countering Iran's influence across the region is a strategic imperative of the highest order for Israel and the US. Decisive action against Hezbollah and the Houthis is a crucial first step, while direct action against Iran is the only path to a prosperous and stable Middle East in the long term.

By Dr. Raphael BenLevi

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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.

Iran's Grand Strategy: Dominate the Shiite Crescent to Control Energy and International Shipping

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic, Iran has been a revisionist power seeking to remake the Middle East in its image. Iran aims to establish its sphere of dominance extending from the Zagros Mountain range to the Mediterranean, and into the Red Sea on its western flank and through Pakistan and Afghanistan on its east. Although it may not seek direct rule over every inch of this territory, it does want all states in this sphere to subordinate to Tehran and for Shia Islam to eventually become the custodian of the holy places of Islam. In this vision, Israel would cease to exist. The realization of this vision would make Iran the regional hegemon and place it in control of a large amount of the world's energy, in control of critical waterways for international shipping, making it an invaluable strategic partner for China and Russia in their bid to upend the US-led world order. This is the vision to which Iran is committed and toward which it has made great strides in the past two decades.

To pursue these strategic ends, Iran acts to project power and influence opportunistically, anywhere there is a power vacuum and the presence of Shiite populations which it can influence, or even Sunni Islamists given the appropriate circumstances. It uses this power and influence across the region in order to target the forces who stand in the way of it realizing ideological and geopolitical hegemony. These are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and the US military presence in the region. Egypt could pose a challenge to Iran, but it is located at the periphery of the region Iran seeks to dominate and so targeting Egypt has not been a priority for Tehran. Jordan would, as well, except that it is not powerful enough to pose a significant threat, and if the larger powers are taken care of then Jordan will easily fall under Tehran's thumb.

Iran's mode of operation stems from its awareness of its own relative weakness in conventional military terms against more powerful adversaries. Therefore, it seeks to avoid direct conflict with them and instead to act through proxies. The strategy of proxies is used to maintain plausible deniability and thereby avoid accountability for actions that Iran facilitates.

Since the toppling of the Baath regime in Iraq in 2003, Iranian influence has expanded gradually, growing from Iraq to Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. While the strategy of supporting like-minded radicals has been part of Iran's strategic thinking for decades, only in the past 20 years has it begun to succeed and effect widespread change across the Middle East. It uses proxies to threaten the security of its adversaries in a way that grants Tehran itself impunity, as these are independent actors, not acting from Iranian territory or under the Iranian flag. By supporting various terrorist groups and militias with training, funds, technological knowhow, and actual weapons, Iran has placed itself on the road to realizing its grand vision for the region.

Putting its Foot in the Door: 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. Iranian dominance in Iraq is a precondition for its actions in Syria and Lebanon and provides a platform from which it can threaten the status quo in adjacent Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It is the presence of US military forces in Iraq that has been the main obstacle to total Iranian dominance, so this has become the primary target of both

proxy attacks as well as attempts to harness Tehran's political influence in Baghdad to bring about a full US withdrawal.

One of the unintended consequences of the American intervention against the brutal Baath Regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 was that this opened the door to Iranian influence in Iraq and beyond. Since the first months of the invasion, Iran has acted to powerfully influence the new Iraqi state's domestic politics and foreign policy. Through training and arming Iraqi militias, this support has granted Iran significant leverage over the new Iraqi political institutions.

This program began by supporting the Badr Brigade, an Iraqi Shiite militia that had been exiled to Iran during Saddam's reign.¹ The plan was to provide the Badr Brigade with whatever was necessary to oppose US post-invasion goals in Iraq and to eventually raise the price of continued U.S. occupation high enough to force an American withdrawal. The Quds Force of the IRGC played the role of mentor for the Badr Brigade and other Iraqi militias by running training programs for them in Iran and Iraq.² Weapons provided to these groups by Iran included: AK-47s, machine guns, mortars, RPGs, explosives, and Katyusha rockets.³ Through this support, Tehran enabled attacks on US personnel with Iranian-manufactured explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) and improvised rocket-assisted munitions, both of which proved highly effective and deadly to US forces.⁴ Numerous other militias were established in the years that following, including the Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH)⁵ and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH),⁶ all funded and armed by Iran through the IRGC's Quds Force. Together, Badr, KH and AAH have today an estimated force size of between 35,000-75,000 troops.⁷

The cooperation between the Quds Force and pro-Iranian Iraqi militias between 2003-2011 served as a 'proof of concept' in which Iran could act to empower local actors with training and weapons while avoiding accountability and retaliation for the consequences. The members of these militias have become integrated into positions of authority in Iraqi state structures but are ultimately loyal ideologically to the Supreme Leader of Iran. 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 by assisting actors who promoted its interests and threatening anyone who opposed them.⁸

The rise of the Islamic State in 2014 was an important development on which Tehran would capitalize to further consolidate its dominance of Iraq. The Iraqi state military was nearly overrun as ISIS forces captured vast swaths of territory in the north and even encroached on Baghdad. To counter ISIS, more than 60 armed groups, numbering tens of thousands of fighters, merged under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The majority of the groups in this merger are Shiite militias loyal to Tehran.⁹ The PMF was crucial to Iraq's success in retaking the territory from ISIS, however, as a result, Iranian influence grew to the point where it now threatens the independence of Iraq. Since then, it has grown into a force of approximately 100,000 – 150,000 strong and has become the primary conduit of Iranian influence in the country.¹⁰ In 2016, in an attempt to strengthen state control over this fighting force, the PMF was legalized and nominally subordinated to the Iraqi Prime Minister's Office. But in practice, this move gave greater sway to Iranian influencers within the Iraqi government. For example, the deputy chairman of the PMF until his assassination in 2020, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was in charge of coordinating the various factions, logistics, supply, personnel administration and general policy of the PMF, while simultaneously leading the KH militia closely aligned with Tehran.¹¹

Iranian assistance was crucial in building up fighting capabilities within the PMF by providing them with advisors and equipment. For example, an artillery force was established by a Badr veteran in early 2014 and then integrated into the PMF. This artillery force is believed to have some 1400 personnel and has received training for computerized targeting systems. In the following years, during the fight against ISIS, Iran provided weapons and training to create a military engineering directorate and an anti-armor directorate which can apparently use Kornet and TOW anti-tank guided missiles (or Iranian copies) effectively. Iran has also likely provided assistance

with UAV training and regularly embedded advisers within PMF units in order to assist with plotting artillery fire, clearing mines, and collecting intelligence.¹²

These successes notwithstanding, Iran does not exercise total control of Iraq but rather maintains levers of influence while the US-Iraq military relationship continues in parallel. Other political forces in Iraq still do exist, and even among Iraqi Shiite militias the extent of loyalty to Iran and its ideology varies. The majority of Iraqi Shiites do not embrace the Islamic Republic's *Velayat-e Faqih* doctrine,¹³ and many of them still carry the memories of fighting against Iran in the 1980s. The main effect of the militias will likely be the destabilizing paralysis of Iraq's political system and potential infighting amongst Iraqis, as the unifying threat of ISIS recedes.

In many ways, the gestation period for the militias occurred during the US occupation of Iraq, and was allowed to progress as a result of the US' lack of decisive response to stamp it out. After its integration of the PMF, the Iraqi state took on the role of funding its payroll, and now Baghdad pays the wages of actors who undermine its own sovereignty. The Iran-backed militias have become more politically active and are wealthier and more militarily capable than the other militias active in the PMF. Through all these efforts, Iran has prevented the Iraqi state from holding a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in its territory, and as a result has become highly influential in Iraqi political, economic, and security affairs.

Opening the Door Wider: Syria

In parallel to these developments in Iraq, the year 2011 saw the beginning of the political turmoil across the MENA region, known as the Arab Spring. As the Assad Regime in Syria began to unravel, Tehran faced the prospect of losing its primary state ally, its land bridge to support Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as Palestinian terror groups, and its front-line approach to Jordan and Israel. Moreover, Syrian rebel leaders declared that they sought to cut Damascus' military ties with Iran and end arms supplies to Hezbollah and Hamas, which would have constituted a dramatic re-orientation of Syrian foreign policy.¹⁴

For all these reasons, Iran considered it a strategic imperative to intervene to keep Assad's regime in power. In early 2012, Iran began taking an active role in the Syrian civil war, beginning with small advisory teams and training units.¹⁵ Hezbollah also began its intervention with intelligence and liaison missions. Drawing on Iran's own experience in putting down anti-regime protests in 2009, IRGC teams began to advise Syrian forces on tactics. This first stage was directed toward staving off a total collapse of the regime.

Iran's goals were, on the one hand, to ensure the survival of the regime and its control of major population centers. On the other hand, it sought to create a network of militias in Syria loyal to Tehran that would pursue Iranian interests regardless of the outcome of the civil war. The erosion of Syrian sovereignty presented an opportunity for Iran to create another direct threat against Israel by establishing a presence in Southern Syria.¹⁶ This would serve as an additional front from which to launch missiles at Israel's north, a strategic deterrent against Israel, and make Iran less reliant on Hezbollah in Lebanon for these purposes. Tehran's underlying aim was to strengthen Iran's hold on Syria relative to its two rival regional axes: Sunni Islamism supported by Qatar and Turkey and Arab monarchal traditionalism led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Numerous local armed groups who preferred Assad's rule to the that of the jihadis or to total chaos arose, and they were organized under the umbrella of the National Defense Forces (NDF). Iran capitalized on the lack of leadership for this disparate group in order to nurture militias with which it shared either ideological/religious affinity or pragmatic political alignment.¹⁷ In this stage, the NDF was not integrated into the formal regime structures, but rather its militias fought in parallel to the official Syrian forces. Iran began by recruiting from the small Syrian Twelver Shiite community and from Iraqi Shiites who were living in Syria. These formed the basis of the Baqir Brigade and the al-Abbas Brigade, both specifically Shiite fighting forces, closely affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah. Estimated at 5,000-8,000 fighters, they would fight under the command of IRGC or

Hezbollah and received light weaponry from their foreign sponsors or from the Syrian regime.¹⁸ Iraqi Shiite militias, including groups previously cultivated by Iran such as AAH and KH, were also sent to fight in Syria under IRGC and Hezbollah's direction, contributing to critical battles. In addition, Iran sought to appeal to non-Shiite communities, whose militias were operating under the NDF umbrella. Despite the lack of ideological affinity between Iran and the non-Shiite forces, many were cooperative and received material support from Tehran.

By mid-2015, the future of the regime was still in question, despite Iranian support, and Assad made a decision to regroup, abandon some regions of Syria, and consolidate the regime's hold on critical areas.¹⁹ At this point, Iran raised its assistance by sending forces of Afghan and Pakistani fighters under its command, known as the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades, to Syria. These forces are estimated at 10,000-15,000 (Afghani Fatemiyoun) and 2,000-5,000 (Pakistani, Zainabiyoun).²⁰ The fighters were drawn primarily from Afghani and Pakistani Shiite communities residing temporarily in Iran and their addition proved crucial for ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. Both brigades are funded by and commanded through the IRGC.²¹

The second turning point in 2015 was the Russian intervention in support of Assad and its decision to cooperate with Iran in Syria both strategically and operationally. Russia's relationship with Iran had long been one of pragmatic cooperation alongside deep suspicion and mutual ideological tensions. The tensions remained, but the strategic imperative of cooperation overcame distrust. It was reported that the Moscow-Tehran collaboration was initiated by Iran, in particular by Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani.²² Russia would provide the airpower and ISR capabilities that Iran lacked, and Iran would contribute personnel from the Shiite militias who could capture and hold territory.

Similar to the dynamic in Iraq, the Syrian regime eventually sought to bring the various militias under its umbrella rather than having them act independently. For this reason, the NDF framework was remade into the Local Defense Forces (LDF) and brought into the state structures. This decision also formalized Iran and Hezbollah's support of these groups and embedded Iran into the Syrian State. In Syria's case, however, the funding of the groups would continue to be paid for by Iran and Hezbollah, reducing the financial burden on the regime while also granting external actors greater control of the fighting forces in its territory.²³ Over the past decade, Iran-backed militias and Iran's organizational assistance proved crucial in stabilizing the Assad regime and reconquering some of its territory. Though Iran has since drawn down the size of Afghan and Pakistani forces in Syria, it could potentially deploy these experienced and battle-hardened units to other arenas in which it seeks influence.

During this time, Iran established an air-transport corridor over Iraq to Syria. Under the guise of "humanitarian assistance," the IRGC flew civilian and military aircraft to bring in advisers, munitions, and UAVs to its militias.²⁴ Starting in 2013, and most intensely from 2016 onward, Israel has taken extensive action to prevent Iran's goal of establishing a new front along its border with Syria by conducting hundreds of airstrikes against Iranian shipments of missiles and other military technology. It has seen significant success in reducing this threat and in preventing a replication of the situation with Hezbollah in Lebanon, however, it has not completely eradicated Iranian or Iranian-backed force building efforts along the Syrian Golan.

The turmoil of the 2000s in Iraq and the 2010s in Syria, opened the possibility for the realization of an Iranian land-corridor from Iran, crossing through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean. Much of Iran's work was done by third-parties who eroded the authority of the previous regimes in Iraq and Syria. The result has been an enhancement of Iran's strategic reach into the Eastern Mediterranean.

Although Iran has drawn down the number of foreign fighters in Syria, its intervention has placed it in an entirely different footing in that arena. It played a crucial role in the survival of the Syrian regime, which is now beholden to Iranian influence to an extent that it never was previously. It also served as a footstool for Iran's military cooperation with Russia. Though Russia would prefer not to share influence over the Assad regime with Iran, Moscow seems to have come to terms with the

fact that Tehran is an essential partner in Syria. Iran's cooperation with Russia in Syria also laid the basis for bilateral cooperation in Ukraine, which in turn has also made Russia more considerate toward Iranian interests in Syria.

Hezbollah's Transformation: From Guerilla Force to Ordered Military

No other proxy is more important to Iran, or more closely aligned ideologically to the Islamic Republic, 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 vast rocket, missile and UAV arsenals and the capability to conduct terror operations abroad. It has also become the dominant force in Lebanese politics and security policy and serves as a mentor to additional Iranian proxies throughout the Middle East.

From its founding until Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah acted primarily as a guerilla warfare organization, with IEDs, rocket-propelled grenades, light weaponry and an arsenal of a few thousand short-range unsophisticated rockets.²⁵ It used these to attack IDF and South Lebanon Army positions and to harass the civilian population of northern Israel. By the 1990s, it had acquired some additional anti-tank and artillery capabilities.

Following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah's priorities shifted from fighting the IDF to expanding the threat it could pose to Israel's civilian population and strategic infrastructure.²⁶ Iran stepped up its assistance, providing Hezbollah with short and medium range surface-to-surface missiles, anti-tank guided missiles, anti-ship capabilities, and expanding its arsenal of rockets to the tens of thousands.²⁷ With Tehran's support, Hezbollah created a network of command structures, bunkers, tunnels, weapons stores, and other defensive infrastructure, linked by communications systems. This was all done under the nose of UNIFIL.²⁸ By 2006, it had also grown its missile arsenal to 13,000 short range rockets²⁹ which it used threaten Israel's civilian population and infrastructure. During the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Hezbollah even struck an Israeli Navy corvette with an anti-ship cruise missile, an Iranian copy of the Chinese C-802 missile.³⁰ These additional capabilities were oriented toward posing a strategic threat to Israel, to hold its civilian population hostage and deter Israeli action against Iran and its nuclear program by threatening grave retaliation via Hezbollah.³¹

After the Second Lebanon War, Iran assisted with the rebuilding of Hezbollah's military capabilities by providing larger sums of money and vaster amounts of rockets and missiles. Hezbollah also began the process of integrating itself into the Lebanese political system, in order to influence the state decision-making in its favor.

When comparing Hezbollah of 2006 and Hezbollah of 2023, it can be said that the terrorist organization has evolved in five central 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 has grown, recruiting tens of thousands and this had made it more embedded in Lebanese society. Finally, its regional influence has grown, now training other terrorist militias.³²

While it is true that Iran provided Hezbollah with rockets and missiles since the 90s, the 2006 war was a turning point after which Hezbollah's arsenal grew exponentially in size, range, and sophistication. Over the course of nearly two decades, the group's arsenal expanded to include everything from thousands of unguided, short-range Katyushas to hundreds of long-range precision guided UAVs and missiles. The sum total of the components of this arsenal is estimated at approximately 150,000 rockets and missiles today.³³ These weapons place all of Israel's population centers at risk of indiscriminate rocket fire, and some of Israel's critical assets at risk of precision missile fire.³⁴

Most of Hezbollah's more advanced weapons enter Lebanon via the Syrian border. Iranian weapons are often sent to civilian and military airports in Damascus or shipped to ports in Tartus

and Latakia, and then brought over land into Lebanon.³⁵ The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and other state agencies have ignored this issue, either out of concern over the issue's potential to cause civil strife or, in some cases, out of support for Hezbollah among officers and soldiers of the LAF.³⁶ The LAF have been intimidated by Hezbollah and this has prevented them from taking any action against the group to enforce UNSCR 1701. Hezbollah has also developed its own R&D as well as production and assembly facilities in Lebanon and Syria; this way Hezbollah is not entirely dependent on foreign supply at risk of being cut off.

As a result of its role in Syria, Hezbollah also gained valuable experience operating as a more conventional military force. In Syria, Hezbollah deployed light infantry, elite troops, sniper units, and communications-interception teams. Its activities combined counterinsurgency and conventional warfare tactics, collaborating with state militaries on the one hand, and directing informal militias on the other. It worked with Iranian and Russian officers to plan and conduct operations, and it operated alongside Syrian forces on the ground.

Hezbollah's Radwan force was established in 2008 but it only gained battlefield experience years later in Syria, where it learned how to fight in platoons and battalions while utilizing advanced weaponry provided by Iran.³⁷ Radwan forces are now posted along the border with Israel with the stated intention of invading, capturing and controlling Israeli territory.³⁸

Over the course of its involvement of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah also created a mechanized battlegroup, which meant entirely new capabilities were introduced to the organization. Now it apparently has tanks, armored personnel carriers, Kornett anti-tank missiles, mounted machine guns on SUVs, an artillery battery, and an engineer corps with armored bulldozers.³⁹

Indeed, this past decade has seen Hezbollah's greatest transformation during which it has morphed into a proper military force, in addition to its terrorist missile deterrent capability. The group's enhanced capabilities were all attained with Iranian guidance, direction, and support. For example, the group's manpower has grown considerably thanks to Iranian financing: With Iran's help, Hezbollah has been able to recruit, indoctrinate, train, arm and pay additional active duty and reservists forces. Today, the group consists of between 30,000-45,000 personnel.⁴⁰ Hezbollah's annual operating budget is largely supplied by Iran, and it is estimated at around \$700m per year.⁴¹

This Iran-backed militia has become the single most powerful political force in Lebanon.⁴² It has great influence on Lebanon's civilian authorities and holds effective veto power over the choice of prime minister and the actions of the Lebanese cabinet.⁴³ In the 2018 elections, Hezbollah and its allies won 71 of the parliament's 128 seats.⁴⁴ As mentioned, it also holds influence of the Lebanese Armed Forces who are either too intimidated, too indifferent, or too sympathetic to take any decisive action against the group.⁴⁵

Hezbollah demonstrates its value to Iran beyond Lebanon's borders by assisting Tehran in the management and mentoring other proxies, especially other Arab militias (the Houthis in particular). It has hosted proxy leaders, provided basing in Lebanon, financial assistance, and military training.

While Hezbollah is valuable as a deterrent against Israel, if war should erupt and Hezbollah is destroyed or severely damaged then it may cease to be of much use to Iran. This means that it is likely only to be activated in a case where Iran believes that Israel can be overcome and destroyed, or in the event that the Islamic Republic's existence or territorial integrity is under threat. In light of this, if the US makes clear that it supports Israeli action against Hezbollah while if Iran escalates it will result in the US entering the war directly as well, then Iran will likely acquiesce and cut its losses.

Hezbollah's International Terrorist Activities: Since its inception, Hezbollah has conducted acts of terrorism in regions far beyond the Middle East. Its European operations were designed to take hostages as bargaining chips, target Jewish and Israeli establishments, and carry out Iran's campaign of assassinations against anti-regime dissidents.⁴⁶ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hezbollah bombed targets in Denmark and France and operated in Germany and Italy.⁴⁷ Hezbollah

operations in Europe continue until today,⁴⁸ with the most infamous of its recent activities being the 2012 bombing of a bus full of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria.⁴⁹

Hezbollah also has an active presence in South America, and particularly strong cooperation with the rogue regimes in Nicaragua and Venezuela.⁵⁰ In Venezuela, it operates at the nexus of transnational organized crime and international terrorism, using drug trafficking and money laundering to fund terror activities.⁵¹ In 1992, in Argentina, Hezbollah bombed the Israeli embassy, killing 24 and then in 1994, it bombed a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, killing 85.⁵²

In the United States, Hezbollah has been active since 1990 in realms such as organized crime and financial and logistical operations, including weapons procurement.⁵³ From 1997-2020, 128 suspected Hezbollah members were arrested in the United States.⁵⁴ It is also important to note that Hezbollah's 1983 attacks on the US Embassy in Beirut killed 17 Americans and its bombing of the US military barracks in Beirut killed 241 Americans.⁵⁵

Iran also actively threatens the US homeland directly. Recently, it has attempted to assassinate senior former US officials, including former national security advisor John Bolton, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and former Special Envoy for Iran Brian Hook. In 2022, Iran attempted to assassinate human rights activist Masih Alinejad who is a vocal opponent of the regime currently residing in New York.⁵⁶ Earlier, in 2011, Iran attempted to orchestrate a plot in cooperation with Mexican drug cartels in order to assassinate Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the US in a Washington DC restaurant.

The Tip of the Crescent: The Houthis in Yemen

Since its unification in 1990, the Republic of Yemen has had an ambivalent relationship with the US.⁵⁷ Yemen supported Iraq in the Gulf War, and the US has been skeptical of Yemen's commitment to fighting terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).⁵⁸ Relations improved following 9/11, when Yemen nominally supported the US War on Terror and cooperated with American counter-terrorism efforts. The countries had a defense relationship, in which the US provided FMF, and established an International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Overall, the United States provided more than \$142 million in assistance to Yemen in FY2014, in addition to \$256 million in FY2013 and more than \$356 million in FY2012, between economic aid, humanitarian aid and military aid.⁵⁹ The Obama administration raised this support with the aim of combating AQAP, promoting development, and stabilizing the political situation.⁶⁰

The Ansar Allah movement (aka the Houthis) was founded by Husayn al-Houthi, a Yemeni Zaidi (Shiite) leader who lived in Iran between 1994-2000, studied in Qom and fully embraced the ideology of the Islamic Republic.⁶¹ Upon his return to Yemen, he was a vocal critic of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government. In 2002, the movement adopted the slogan "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse the Jews, Victory for Islam," in opposition to Saleh's policy of cooperation with the US. After being put under house arrest by the Saleh government, Husayn initiated the movement's violent insurgency against the Republic of Yemen government in 2004.⁶²

During this period, from 2004 to 2010, Iranian support was present but relatively limited. A UN report confirmed that Iran had begun arms shipment to the Houthis already in 2009.⁶³ But the Arab Spring de-stabilized President Saleh's rule which opened the door for Iran to capitalize on the situation. In 2012, Hadi was nominally elected president, but never managed to consolidate his rule over the country.⁶⁴ This set the scene for the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in 2014.

Iran increased its support of the Houthis following the Arab Spring in 2011, and it provided the group with funding, weapons, and training. From 2011 onward, Iran sent cash and weapons and hosted Yemeni activists to offer training and assistance. In 2012, the Yemeni government caught a shipment of EFPs being transported from Iran to Aden. Around that time, US officials claimed that the IRGC Quds Force was shipping small arms and rocket-propelled grenades to the Houthis.⁶⁵

In 2013, an Iranian ship was caught off the coast of Yemen with Katyusha rockets, heat-seeking surface-to-air missiles, RPG-7s, Iranian-made night vision goggles, artillery systems that track land and maritime targets 40km away, silencers, more than 2.5 tons of RDX explosives, C-4 explosives, ammunition, and electrical transistors.⁶⁶

All this gave the Houthis a significant boost in their 2014-2015 effort to take over much of Yemen, including their successful takeover of Yemen's capital city Sanaa where they marched in nearly unopposed (thanks to their alliance with former President Saleh) and deposed the Hadi government. In response, the Saudis led an operation to drive out the Houthis and restore the Hadi government. In this context, Iran enhanced its cooperation with the Houthis, now providing heavier weaponry and greater economic support out of commitment to their survival and ability to project power.⁶⁷

Since then, the Houthis have undertaken an increasingly intense terror campaign against Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries using sophisticated cruise and ballistic missiles, UAVs, and other stand-off weapons.⁶⁸ The first case of an extended range ballistic missile being launched by Houthis at Riyadh was in May 2017, a range of 965 km. In July 2018, the Houthis attacked two Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea.⁶⁹ It is assessed that the weapons for these attacks must have come from Iran due to the lack of any comparable domestic military industries in Yemen and the uncanny resemblance of Houthi weapons systems used to those produced by Iran (though they are given new Houthi names and paint jobs).⁷⁰ Since then, these attacks have increased in number and operational success in 2020 and 2021.⁷¹ The Houthis have also since begun to deploy sea mines, USV technology, and explosive drone boats which are apparently provided, in whole or in part, by Iran.⁷²

In parallel to IRGC support, the Houthis also receive support directly from Hezbollah. Their satellite channel, *Al-Masirah*, is headquartered in Beirut and is advised by Hezbollah's media team. Houthi leaders visit Lebanon regularly for consultations, and Hezbollah trainers have gone to Yemen. Hezbollah has also apparently trained the Houthis in mining operations and anti-shipping attacks.⁷³

Following the Houthi rise, Iranian financial aid has transformed from sporadic cash transfers to more regular support, including fuel shipments valued at \$30 million per month in 2018, which could be sold on black market for cash. In recent reports, the Houthis' budget was estimated at around \$1.6 billion per year.⁷⁴

Iran uses the Houthis to threaten its rivals Saudi Arabia and UAE and to have the ability to threaten sea travel across Bab al-Mandeb. Iran does not directly control the Houthis but its critical assistance and ideological affinity buys it strong influence. The Houthis' goals of controlling Yemen, projecting power into the Red Sea, and eroding U.S. security architecture all align with Iran's interests. It is Iranian technology (ballistic missiles and UAVs) that allows the Houthis to do this at ranges unheard of for non-state actors, and Iranian funding that sustains the organization.

Overall, Iran's support has been crucial to the Houthis' integration of new capabilities, due to Tehran's assistance with strategic planning, political mobilization, and operating advanced weaponry.⁷⁵ Before taking Sanaa in 2014, the Houthis had only light and medium weapons and no control of Yemen's critical assets, let alone the ability to strike the critical assets of other countries hundreds or thousands of kilometers away. Within a year, they controlled large parts Yemen, including three of Yemen's largest and most important cities thanks to the aid, advice and training granted by Iran and Hezbollah. Since then, they have attacked strategic infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE and are currently threatening Israeli shipping and international commerce in the Red Sea.⁷⁶

In a broader view, Iran has played a crucial role in undermining a Middle Eastern state in a strategic location which had previously been a partner of the US, however difficult Washington and Sanaa found it to work together. Iran has since turned Yemen into a failed state with a significant portion of its territory controlled by Quds Force proxies, now posing a direct threat to key US allies in the region as well as the global economy.

The Odd Man Out: Hamas and PIJ

The Iran-Hamas relationship is not based on shared theology, but functions for pragmatic reasons. Hamas is a Sunni Islamist organization who is opposed to Iran's broader goal of Shiite Islamic hegemony. But Hamas is useful to Tehran for its proximity and hostility to Israel which make it an ideal front against Israel in Iran's "ring of fire."

The military capacities that Hamas has developed in recent decades are largely thanks to Iran and Hezbollah. Iran has supported Hamas since its inception in 1987 with financial and logistical support as well as military training. By 1994, the financial support was estimated to amount to tens of millions of dollars.⁷⁷ During the 1990s, Hamas opened offices in Beirut and Damascus to facilitate political ties with the leadership of Iran and Hezbollah. Its fighters have trained in Lebanon and Syria, and its military leaders coordinate activities with Iran and Hezbollah.⁷⁸

Iranian support increased in the aftermath of the toppling of Iraq's Baath regime in 2003, as Saddam Hussein had previously acted as a financial backer of the movement. Iran effectively stepped into Iraq's shoes, to become the movement's main foreign backer.⁷⁹ Iranian support grew further after Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007.

The similarities between Hamas' tactics and those of the other Iranian proxies around the region are not coincidental. Tactics that Hamas has employed against Israel include: rockets, IEDs and attempted kidnapping of Israeli soldiers. To build its missile force, it received expertise from the Iran-led axis. Most of Hamas' arsenal is comprised of short-range Qassam rockets but it has made increased use of Katyusha's since 2008.

The Syrian civil war led to a fallout between Hamas and the Iranian axis, as Hamas, a Sunni Islamist group affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, came out in support of the rebels. Iran reacted by decreasing funding and other support, and in 2013 Hamas was forced to move its headquarters from Damascus to Qatar and Turkey.⁸⁰ It's funding never really stopped, as from 2012-2016 IRGC continued to fund it through Hezbollah.⁸¹ Hezbollah also assisted in smuggling weapons across the border from Egypt into Gaza.⁸² In 2013, a senior Hamas official, Musa Abu Marzuq confirmed, "Iran used to be the most supportive state to Hamas in all aspects: money, arms and training. We don't deny this... Our position on Syria affected relations with Iran. Its support for us never stopped, but the amounts [of money] were significantly reduced."⁸³

However, by 2017 relations seemed to be back on track.⁸⁴ After the change in Hamas leadership, Sinwar stated that "Relations with Iran are excellent and Iran is the largest supporter of the [Izz al-Din al-Qassam] Brigades with money and arms... The relationship today is developing and returning to what it was in the old days."⁸⁵ US and Israeli officials estimate that Iran's current support levels to Hamas are around \$70m-\$100m a year.⁸⁶

A smaller and even more radical organization in Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) has been a more consistent partner with the Axis. It is even more militant, focuses exclusively on fighting Israel, and serves as a check on any inclination Hamas could have to moderate by presenting an even more extreme alternative. PIJ has received similar forms of support to that of Hamas, only on a smaller scale. The group also participated in the October 7, 2023 massacre of Israelis, and it kidnapped Israeli citizens and brought them into Gaza.

The atrocities perpetrated on October 7, 2023 could never have happened without the decades of assistance from Iran.

What Must Be Done?

Iran's regional policy has been quite effective in leveraging the country's strengths, despite its meager economy, regime instability, and weakness in conventional military power. Though its progress toward realizing the Shiite crescent of dominance has been great, its success is not

irreversible. It can be countered by a regional alliance united against it led by Israel and the Gulf States with backing from 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. Maximum pressure need not lead inevitably to a full-scale war, as mentioned above, because Iran understands that it would be on the losing end of such an altercation.⁸⁷ What can be done in the near to long term to bring the Shiite crescent into an Iranian eclipse?

Decisive military action against Hezbollah and Houthis. As outlined above, Hezbollah has been the most important Iran-backed militia in the axis, and so degrading it significantly would constitute a major blow to Iran's ability to continue to threaten Israel and the region while avoiding responsibility. The heightened and immediate threat that Hezbollah now poses to Israel has brought it to a point where Israel is now poised to take overwhelming military pre-emptive action against the group. Israel must be supported in this action through the provision of weapons and diplomatic backing to implement UNSCRs 1701 and 1559, which already mandate disbanding and disarming all militias in Lebanon, including Hezbollah.

The Houthis have been an acute threat to the Gulf states for nearly a decade, but have more recently emerged as a significant threat to Israel and to international trade and energy markets by targeting Red Sea shipping. They must not be allowed to continue operations and maintain their stranglehold on the mini-state which they have established in Yemen. A short military campaign with cruise missiles from the sea and precision guided missiles from the air would suffice to devastatingly degrade their capabilities which have been built up over the past decade. Taking out Hezbollah would also assist in cutting off the Houthi's closest advisors and trainers. In order to strike a blow to their international legitimacy and their abuse of the international financial system, the Houthis should also be immediately returned to the list of foreign terrorist organizations.

I argue not only that taking decisive action against Iran's proxy forces would constitute a grave loss for Iran's ambitions and change the strategic trend of growing Iranian dominance, but also that decisive action against its proxies can be done without necessitating a full-scale war with the Islamic Republic itself, which the US seeks to avoid. This is because, for Iran, regime survival is paramount, and it is acutely aware that the balance of power in a full-scale war with the United States is clearly not in its favor. If the United States clarifies that an escalation by Iran will force the US to respond with overwhelming force, then Tehran will choose to sacrifice its proxies before attempting a suicidal war with the US and Israel.⁸⁸ Iran still recalls the painful losses it suffered in the Iran-Iraq war and the regime prides itself on having avoided sending Iranians to battle since then. The regime is also acutely aware of its domestic instability and lack of popular support, which would be exacerbated by a war (and the second-order effects a war would have on Iran's population, particularly in the economic realm). To be sure, the Islamic Republic of Iran must ultimately be held accountable for its ongoing efforts to sow chaos and terror, but in the near term cutting off its tentacles is a necessary and feasible first step.

Economic sanctions on Iran. In the early 2010s, an unprecedented level of economic sanctions was imposed on Iran in order to pressure the regime by devastating the national economy at a macro level.⁸⁹ This inflicted considerable damage without firing a single bullet, which in turn forced Tehran to make difficult decisions and had the potential to threaten regime stability. In particular, this pressure led Iran to begin the process of negotiating with the US on the nuclear issue. The problem is that the sanctions were not maintained consistently at this high level for very long. Already during the negotiations, the US let up on some of the pressure, and with the implementation of the JCPOA in 2015, let up altogether with the promise that if Iran violated the terms of the agreement, then these sanctions would be "snapped back." It must be noted that the relaxing of sanctions after the signing of the JCPOA coincides with the ramping up of Iran's regional activities in Syria and Yemen in 2015-2018.

The nuclear negotiations made the mistake of disconnecting the nuclear issue from Iran's regional actions, playing directly into Iran's hands. By progressing in the nuclear realm and then offering to

halt further progress as a concession, Iran received a pass for the continued investment in its regional terror axis. However, building and maintaining this axis requires funding, and placing Iran under tremendous economic pressure is one important step capable of limiting Tehran's ability to bankroll its regional influence. Sanctions were returned over the last two years of the Trump administration and many are still *technically* in effect. But they are not being enforced, as President Biden has not made the decision to pursue economic pressure as a key element of the current strategy for containing or confronting the Iranian threat.

Target IRGC directly. As seen above, the IRGC is the main facilitator of the Iran-backed militias across the region. Iran should not be granted immunity for actions facilitated by the IRGC terror network. The assassination of Soleimani in 2020 dealt a major blow to the IRGC and its regional efforts. The current Quds force head, Esmail Ghaani,⁹⁰ should be targeted, alongside his deputies tasked with carrying out his orders. IRGC economic support structures should be exposed, sanctioned, and sabotaged. The IRGC maintains separate sources of income in the Iranian economy, often through illicit activities, and these, too, should be targeted so that they do not escape the brunt of the macro-economic pressure.

Support regime opponents. The Iranian regime has seen waves of instability, with protests breaking out throughout the country every few years, particularly since the 2009 "green revolution." Tehran has thus far succeeded in countering this opposition, but the regime is under constant threat of losing control of some parts of the country. Therefore, in order to raise pressure on the regime, anti-regime groups should be supported directly. This can be done financially, politically, and by giving them a broader platform in the international media.

Military strikes against supply lines to proxies. Israel has been waging an intense military campaign against Iranian arms shipments destined for Hezbollah and other militias. The center of gravity has been in Syria, but it has not been limited to this arena. The focus of this campaign should be expanded to include shipments to Houthis and to militias within Iraq.

Credible threat against Iran's nuclear program. Finally, a credible military threat against Iran's nuclear program must be constantly maintained and updated. The only factor which has prevented Iran from crossing the threshold toward attaining a nuclear weapon over the past 20 years has been the credible threat posed in response to any attempt to do so, primarily from Israel.⁹¹ However, Iran has made gradual progress and continuously approaches the threshold, while the US has attempted outreach and diplomacy in the past few years and neglected the importance of a military option. U.S. policy on Iran's nuclear program is due for a course correction: If not by a direct statement by the White House declaring the capability and intent to execute a military option if necessary, then by a clear statement from the US that it will support an Israeli operation and provide Israel any capabilities it requires to complete a successful strike.

Dr. Raphael BenLevi is a fellow at the Misgav Institute for National Security & Zionist Strategy, in Jerusalem; a Major (res.) in the IDF intelligence branch; and director of the Churchill Program for National Security of Tikvah-Fund Israel. He is author of the book: Cultures of Counterproliferation: The Making of American and Israeli policy on the Iranian Nuclear Program (Routledge, 2023). The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.

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- ⁹⁰ Jason M. Brodsky, Yossi Mansharof, "Soleimani birthed Iran's Axis of Resistance, Ghaani coordinated it," December 15, 2023, *Middle East Institute*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/soleimani-birthed-irans-axis-resistance-ghaani-coordinated-it>
- ⁹¹ BenLevi, *Cultures of Counterproliferation*, 212.