ARIANE M. TABATABAI, JEFFREY MARTINI, BECCA WASSER

The Iran Threat Network (ITN)

Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships

Nonstate clients became one of the key pillars of Iran's national security strategy and its gray zone activities following the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.[1] The regime began to enlist foreign forces during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and, since then, its network of proxies has grown exponentially. Today, Iran has tens of thousands of close allied fighters over whom it exerts near-complete control, and tens of thousands more with which it has real, but far more limited, ties and on whom it cannot rely in a crisis. Altogether, by some accounts, the number of these forces is estimated at approximately 200,000 (Jones, 2019). These fighters comprise the Iran Threat Network (ITN), a loose network of non-Iranian, nonstate groups supported by Tehran.

Members of the ITN are diverse in their origins, ethnic and religious backgrounds and affiliation, status and influence within their countries, and relationship with Tehran. However, they are all nonstate actors having received some level of support from the Islamic Republic—organizational, financial, political, or military. Therefore, the ITN encompasses Iranian proxies and partners. The ITN is not simply a hub-and-spoke system with Iran in the center. Instead, different members of the ITN also interact with Lebanese Hizbullah (LH), Iran's most trusted and capable proxy, which is at the forefront of many of these interactions. Nevertheless, the ITN remains a loose network supported by Iran.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Iran Threat Network (ITN) is a formidable force of tens of thousands of fighters. The ITN is Tehran's most potent deterrent at its disposal against the United States. The ITN is presently—and likely to remain well into the future—Tehran's primary means of power projection and preferred instrument of influence in the Middle East.

- ITN members—not Tehran—are most likely to launch attacks against U.S. and other targets.

- The ITN also poses a broader dilemma for the United States, because rising U.S.-Iran tensions have required the United States to increase its posture in the Middle East and decrease its resources for other U.S. defense priorities.

- It is important that the U.S. government adopt a multidimensional approach to counter Iran's use of the ITN to undermine U.S. interests or potentially harm U.S. military and civilian personnel.

Defining the ITN

Although it has been used since at least the early 2010s, the term *ITN* has only recently gained traction in think-tank reports, in U.S. official talking points, and among military planners. Notably, ITN does not appear in the 2010 Defense Intelligence Agency report assessing Iran's military power. However, that report summarizes the basic concept of the ITN, noting that "[o]ver the last three decades, Iran has methodically cultivated a network of sponsored terrorist allies and surrogates capable of conducting effective, plausibly deniable attacks against the United States and Israel" (Gates, 2010). A few years later, U.S. officials began to publicly use the term *Iran Threat Network*. For example, in 2013, Wendy Sherman (who was then Undersecretary of Political Affairs at the U.S. State Department) described the threat posed by Iran's nonstate clients as follows:

Iran is the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism, which it uses as a strategic tool of its foreign policy. Led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the "Iran Threat Network" comprises an alliance of surrogates, proxies, and partners such as Hizballah, HAMAS, and Iraqi Shi'a militants, among others. Iran funds, trains, and equips these terrorist organizations, in whole or in part, to use in attacks around the world. This clandestine threat network destabilizes countries throughout the Middle East and threatens regional security. (Sherman, 2013)

By the mid-2010s the term gained wide currency. It was used, for example, in a Senate version of the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act, which mandated "the Secretary of Defense to present a plan to counter the ITN to the committee. . . . Further, the committee directs that up to $50.0 million of the funds . . . be made available to support counter-ITN efforts" (U.S. Senate, 2015). However, there is little consensus on the scope and criteria of the collection of surrogates that comprise the ITN. For example, some take the ITN to include not just Iranian-backed proxies and nonstate partners, but also organizations within the Iranian system in charge of supporting them, including members of the armed forces and intelligence units (Austin, 2014). We do not include Iranian entities in our definition of the ITN, because they are inherent parts of the Iranian state and, therefore, represent a fundamentally different set of challenges. Indeed, Iranian entities in charge of Iran's ties with the ITN are not nonstate actors and do not operate in a vacuum and outside the Iranian political sphere.

Similarly, some use the term to describe groups that receive indirect support from Iran and over which Iran might not exercise any command and control (C2)—such as Salafi jihadi groups to whom Iran might provide a measure of sanctuary. We exclude these groups from our discussion of the ITN because the modest cooperation between Tehran and these "frenemies" takes place against the backdrop of conflict. The Taliban and al-Qa'ida stand out among these groups. Tehran sees these organizations' close

Abbreviations	
AAH	'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq
C2	command and control
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
FTO	foreign terrorist organization
HHN	Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba'
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ITN	Iranian Threat Network
I&W	indications and warnings
KH	Kata'ib Hizbullah
LH	Lebanese Hizbullah
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

proximity to its territory, ideologies, and activities as a threat to itself and provides them with minimal support—such as authorization for operative transit and money transfers through the Iranian territory—to avoid contributing to any actions that these groups might take against its own security (Byman, 2012; Moghadam, 2017).

Iran typically publicly denies any relationship with these groups as it does not have any control over their activities and they are considered a liability domestically, regionally, and internationally ("Iran Denies Links with Al Qaeda," 2003; Sharafedin, 2018; "Iran Denies Accusations of Aiding Taliban in Afghanistan," 2018). Similarly, the Taliban and al-Qa'ida downplay their relationship with Iran as perceived ties with Shi'a Iran would potentially stymie recruitment and fundraising efforts and delegitimize the groups with their base ("Taliban Denies US Claims on Receiving Arms from Iran," 2018; Byman, 2012). In order for the regime to consider providing some degree of assistance to them, these organizations have to be largely self-reliant, operate in close proximity to Iran, and exert enough influence in their countries or theaters of operation to be seen as enough of a threat or opportunity.

Significance of the Iran Threat Network

The ITN operates in various theaters and presents a security threat to the United States, and U.S. allies and partners. Iran has challenged the U.S. Army through its employment of the ITN in key theaters, particularly in Iraq, where Iranian-backed militias attacked coalition forces in the late 2000s and where Tehran is singularly focused on countering U.S. forward presence (Rayburn and Sobchak, 2019). Since then, Iran has leveraged the ITN to raise the costs of perceived U.S. hostile policies, most recently in response to the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign. Yet, the lack of a clear and coherent definition of the term, which would silo and contrast different entities in charge of ITN strategy in Iran, and the different groups that comprise the network, presents a challenge for military planners. Without a clear understanding of the ITN and its

> Without a clear understanding of the ITN and its scope, the United States cannot devise a coherent strategy to counter its threat.

scope, the United States cannot devise a coherent strategy to counter its threat.

Since the United States military and the ITN directly clashed in the late 2000s in Iraq, the network has become a much larger and more mobile force. As the deployment of that force to Syria demonstrates, the ITN has also become expeditionary with its members deploying outside their borders to support contingencies in neighboring states or even farther afield. The ITN's activities will continue to challenge the United States—and the U.S. Army in particular—when it deploys to the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) region. Iranian maritime provocations and rocket attacks on U.S. installations in Iraq in the spring and fall of 2019 were largely carried out by its proxies. Beginning in spring 2019, Tehran sought to impose a cost on the United States for its withdrawal of the nuclear deal and the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). Although Iran ramped up its nuclear program, shot down a U.S. drone over the Strait of Hormuz, and seized oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, its most powerful tool in the escalation was its ability to leverage nonstate partners—particularly those belonging to the Targeters, which is designed to counter U.S. presence in the region.

In May 2019, a rocket hit the Green Zone in Baghdad following a U.S. announcement that the United States was evacuating its staff from the Erbil Consulate and the Embassy in Baghdad because of

> From Iran's perspective, the ITN allows it to pursue its objective of imposing costs on the United States in the region without escalating the confrontation to a conventional war.

heightened risks posed by Iranian forces and proxies (Rubin and Hassan, 2019; Wong, 2019). That same month, the United States accelerated and rerouted military assets moving to the region, citing concerns about Iranian activities (Rubin and Hassan, 2019). In addition to the ITN directly presenting a risk to U.S. service members, diplomatic staff, and commercial interests in the region, it also presents a threat to regional partners. For example, Houthi rocket and drone attacks on Saudi territory and airports have demonstrated an increased capability and intent to take the war from Yemen to Saudi territory.

From Iran's perspective, the ITN allows it to pursue its objective of imposing costs on the United States in the region without escalating the confrontation to a conventional war. Hence, the 2018 *U.S. National Defense Strategy* (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018) and the 2017 *U.S. National Security Strategy* (White House, 2017) establish Iran and violent nonstate actors as the fourth and fifth priority threats.[2] This report focuses on the ITN, which sits at the intersection of those two threats, exploring where Iran as a state adversary meets the nonstate network it trains, funds, advises, and equips. In this report, we assess several indicators of Iran-ITN relations to offer an overview of the nature, depth, and breadth of Iran's relationship with these key nonstate partners, which we classify according to Iranian objectives.

Why Iran Works Through Proxies

Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic has developed asymmetric capabilities to make up for its conventional inferiority vis-à-vis its chief adversary, the United States, and other regional players,

such as Israel and Saudi Arabia (Connell, undated). Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran lost critical elements of its military power. Prior to 1979, Iran relied on the United States as its key backer and supplier, a critical partnership that helped Tehran repel threats on several occasions and build up its armed forces. Following the revolution, the two countries severed diplomatic and military ties and their relationship became adversarial as the Islamic Republic's leaders adopted anti-Americanism as a chief pillar of their ideology and revolutionaries took U.S. diplomatic personnel hostage in 1979. Iranian armed forces were now unable to rely on U.S. training, advice, and equipment. In addition, as the weapons and equipment that the Iranian forces had purchased under the Shah began to age, Iranian leaders could neither replace them nor procure the necessary parts for maintenance. In some cases, they could not operate the system without U.S. assistance. Second, the Iranian armed forces underwent several internal changes, which stymied their conventional force, including the purges of the early days of the Islamic Revolution and the weakening of the country's military through the introduction of coup-proofing mechanism, chiefly the IRGC.

As a result of these changes, today, if Iran were to be stripped of its asymmetric capabilities and gray zone tactics, including the ITN, the balance of power in the Middle East would be deeply skewed against Tehran (Juneau, 2018). In that sense, the ITN is the chief challenge posed by Iran to the United States and its armed forces, particularly the U.S. Army, in the region. Other than Iran's ballistic missile forces and potential future nuclear development, the ITN is one of few formidable defense capabilities that the country has developed since 1979. This network of nonstate

actors is an essential component of the Iranian defense doctrine and one of the main tools that the regime possesses to deter adversaries, bolster its homeland defenses, increase its strategic depth, grow its regional reach and influence, and project power outside its borders. In that sense, the ITN complements other Iranian asymmetric capabilities—chiefly, its nuclear ballistic missile program—as force multipliers that make up for shortfalls in the country's conventional capabilities.

These benefits are the drivers behind Iran's state sponsorship of terrorism and support for insurgencies more broadly (Byman, 2013). The benefits of the ITN for the Islamic Republic were particularly tangible during June and July 2019, when U.S.-Iran tensions almost brought the two nations to the brink of a military exchange (Shear et al., 2019). Although the details of the events of that period remain obscure in the public domain, it is clear that risks to U.S. forces, nationals, and interests in the region mostly stemmed from Iranian proxies rather than the country's own forces. Indeed, Tehran is generally reluctant to deploy troops in combat missions outside its borders and tends instead to rely on nonstate partners when it becomes involved in foreign conflicts. In the case of U.S.-Iran tensions, understanding the risks associated with direct confrontation with a conventionally and technologically superior adversary, the Islamic Republic opts to work by, with, and through proxies to preserve plausible deniability and raise the threshold and costs of a U.S. response.

Just as Tehran benefits from the ITN, so does the ITN benefit from Tehran. Although association with Iran can bring increased military pressure and reputational costs, the perceived benefits often outweigh the costs for recipients of Iranian support. For some individual groups within the ITN, Iranian support has been critical to their operations or, in some cases, their establishment. In particular, Tehran has helped bolster the resistance credentials of some ITN members, provided them with weapons and materiel, and hindered counterinsurgency or military efforts against them, such as in the case of the Houthis in Yemen (Byman, 2013, pp. 982-986).

Overall, Iran's ability to use existing grievances to build rapport and bring groups into the fold are an important contributor to the success of the regime's

attempts to cultivate nonstate clients (Wehrey et al., 2009). The regime has tried to appeal to minorities in neighboring countries and ethnic and religious groups whose disenfranchisement opens avenues for Tehran to recruit fighters (Fassihi, 2014). This makes the ITN an enduring and robust problem for the United States. U.S. counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism operations cannot address the problem by themselves. Also, approaches that could tackle the root causes of the problem—including insecurity, lack of economic opportunities, human rights abuses, and exclusion and alienation of whole communities—are neither cheap nor quick. Hence, the United States needs to leverage a broad set of tools to respond to the ITN.

Although historically the Islamic Republic has denied working with nonstate proxies and partners, today it is increasingly moving toward embracing and legitimizing these groups publicly—even as it experiences backlash at home for its support for foreign terrorist groups and militias. In spring 2019, for example, as the Iranian government and armed forces were scrambling to respond to the floods plaguing several regions in the country, media outlets and social media accounts published images and accounts of these groups' relief activities ("Gozareshi az fa'aaliat-e roozaneh-ye razmande-gan-e Fatemiyoun dar manadeq-e seylzadeh-ye Iran

Iran's ability to use existing grievances to build rapport and bring groups into the fold are an important contributor to the success of the regime's attempts to cultivate nonstate clients.

+ tasavir," Bashgah-e khabarnegaran-e javan," 2019; "Chera razamandegan-e Fatemiyoun be manateq-e seylzadeh raftand? + aks va film," 2019; "Modafean-e haram az Iraq, Afghanistan va Pakistan be yari-ye seylzadegan amadand," 2019). Similarly, IRGC-affiliated media outlets have published reports of these groups' regional activities (Amozesh-e tirandazi-e razmandegan-e Fatemiyoun dar Surieh+film," 2018; "Didar-e Sardar Soleimani ba khanevadeh-ye hashid Tavassoli," 2016; "Abu Hamed: Farmandeh-e jahad-e bedun-e marz," 2015).

For their part, some of these groups also at times acknowledge their ties to Tehran. For example, in an open letter congratulating now-deceased IRGC-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander General Qassem Soleimani on the occasion of the collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (published and publicized by Iranian state media and outlets affiliated with the IRGC), commanders of the Afghan militias deployed in Syria, known as the Fatemiyoun, noted that their forces had fought under his command and that of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ("Bayanieh-ye mohemm-e lashkar-e Fatemiyoun khatab be sardar Soleimani," *Mashregh News*). Similarly, Iranian media have published videos of Soleimani visiting the Fatemiyoun on the Syrian battlefields ("Hozur-e sardar Soleimani dar kenar-e razmandehgan-e Fatemiyoun dar khatt-e moqadam-e jebheh-ye Surieh + film," 2018). Nevertheless, these groups and Iran do not always disclose the nature and extent of their relationship, because, for example, such disclosures could hinder recruitment, legitimization, and fundraising efforts ("Hozur-e sardar Soleimani dar kenar-e razmandehgan-e Fatemiyoun dar khatt-e moqadam-e jebheh-ye Surieh + film," 2018).

Approach and Structure

Over the past four decades, several studies have assessed various aspects of Iran's relationship with these actors, including where they fit into the country's grand strategy, the nature and evolution of the regime's support for these groups, and how the United States can counter the growing web of Iranian-backed nonstate forces.[3] However, few studies have systematically examined Iran's nonstate clients and their relationship to Tehran to identify key commonalities across the ITN and the unique attributes of specific relationships within it. Instead, most research into the ITN either takes a completely holistic look at the network (thus, ignoring the distinctions therein) or offers insight into one or a small number of groups.

Such approaches do not map out the ITN, leaving a gap in the literature and an important blind spot in the U.S. government's and the U.S. Army's understanding of these adversaries. Therefore, we have compared and contrasted each member of the ITN—using publicly available information and leveraging Arabic and Farsi sources, where possible—to create a set of typologies that describe the Iranian objectives and how various groups within the ITN factor into them.[4] Grouping several organizations together and identifying their unique attributes provide the United States with a better understanding of organizations' strengths and weaknesses, the limits to Iran's nonstate client strategy, and the potential strategies

Iran has gradually moved into different theaters in the region and leveraged the ITN to remain under the threshold of war and reduce the attribution of activities back to Iran, operating in what is often referred to as the *gray zone*.

the United States could employ to deter and counter these proxy groups and, in turn, Tehran.

We begin by discussing the evolution of Iran's nonstate client strategy, before presenting a typology of the groups in the ITN. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for the United States and the U.S. Army, the service most likely to encounter threats from the ITN and to serve at the forefront of U.S. counter-ITN efforts in the region.

We have relied solely on unclassified assessments of the groups profiled. We acknowledge that this limits treatment of the details of these groups' operations and what the United States is doing to combat them. However, we opted for this approach to make the study accessible to the widest readership possible, and because we believe the key contribution of the report—the typology of the ITN it presents—can be accurately depicted through open-source research.

The research and writing for this report was completed in August 2019, prior to a U.S. drone strike in January 2020 that killed Soleimani in Iraq. As such, events that took place after his death, including the IRGC ballistic missile attack on U.S. forces at al Asad Air Base and subsequent Kata'ib Hizbullah (KH) rocket attacks on U.S. installations in Iraq, fall outside the focus of this study. Although there have been significant developments since this report was authored, the analysis of the ITN, the typology developed, and the recommendations provided in this report remain valid and worthy of reading.

The Evolution of Iran's Proxy Strategy

Immediately after its ascension to power, the Islamic Republic attempted to execute its leaders' vision of exporting the revolution beyond Iran's borders (Central Intelligence Agency, 1980). Iran's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had long seen the movement that brought him into power as one transcending the nation's borders, and sought to export it to neighboring Muslim countries (e.g., see Khomeini, 2018a; Khomeini, 2018b). To this end, the regime created the Office of Liberation Movements, later replaced by the special forces within the IRGC known as IRGC-QF (Pollack, 2005).

The first major task of the Office of Liberation Movements was to establish the foundations of the ITN by helping to organize Shi'a in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia to create a bulwark against U.S.-backed governments and Israel in the region. Among the groups created during the first decade after the revolution were LH, the Badr in Iraq, and the less successful Hizbullah Al-Hijaz in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain. As the revolutionaries settled into their roles as decisionmakers, revolutionary ideology and the concept of the export of the revolution lost ground to more-pragmatic considerations in Iranian security thinking—particularly by the end of the Iran-Iraq War (Menashri, 1990, p. 51; Takeyh, 2009, p. 2). As a result, the drivers behind the creation of nonstate clients also changed. Nevertheless, Iran has gradually moved into different theaters in the region and leveraged the ITN to remain under the threshold of war and reduce the attribution of activities back to Iran, operating in what is often referred to as the *gray zone*.[5] The ITN has expanded from a few groups in Iraq and Lebanon to roughly a dozen groups in 2019.

Today, the IRGC is primarily responsible for coordination with the ITN chiefly through its special branch, the IRGC-QF. The IRGC-QF has been tasked with supporting members of the ITN since early 1990s. In addition to many members of the ITN being labeled as an FTO by the United States,[6] the Trump administration also designated the IRGC as an FTO in April 2019 (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The IRGC-QF was overseen by Soleimani, known for his leadership in key theaters across the region, especially Iraq and Syria. Soleimani held personal relationships with key figures across the ITN and a direct channel to the highest office in Iran (Khamenei) to whom he reports directly (Soufan, 2018). (For an illustrative example of the personal ties between Iran and Soleimani and the leader of an ITN member, see Sidebar 1.) The IRGC-QF is responsible for coordinating and providing material support to the ITN, including the key role at the front end of the process through recruitment, and training, equipping, and advising the forces prior to and during their deployment (Soufan, 2018).

The IRGC and the IRGC-QF are not autonomous or rogue actors, whose regional activities

Sidebar 1. Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis

Jamal Jafaar Al-Ibrahimi (best known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis) is the commander of KH and an example of the close ties between ITN leadership and the Islamic Republic. Al-Muhandis is Iraqi-born (Basra) but to an Iranian mother, lived in Iran for more than a decade after he fled there in 1990, and is married to an Iranian woman. Al-Muhandis' first political affiliation was with the Badr, the earliest and most established Iraqi exile organization for exporting the Iranian Revolution to Iraq. Upon Al-Muhandis return to Iraq after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, he established KH, which was initially formed to prosecute "resistance" against U.S. forces in Iraq. The organization in general (Al-Muhandis specifically) is believed to have been part of the network of militias employing explosively formed penetrators against U.S. forces to raise the costs of the U.S. intervention.

Highlighting his position within the ITN, Iran's Arabic-language media praised Al-Muhandis as a companion of IRGC Commander Qassem Soleimani and a friend of LH leader Mustafa Badreddine, the latter killed in Syria in 2016. Al-Muhandis was killed alongside Soleimani in a January 2020 drone strike in Iraq.

Al-Muhandis was also an example of the blurred legitimacy of ITN leaders. From the U.S. perspective, Al-Muhandis was a specially designated global terrorist who leads a designated FTO. However, from an Iraqi perspective, Al-Muhandis lead a military unit that was recognized by the Iraqi government and reported to the Prime Minister as established by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Law. Furthermore, Al-Muhandis was the second in command of the PMF Commission, which is the entity that represents these units within the Iraqi government. Al-Muhandis was also open about coordinating with Iraqi political leaders to push for the expulsion of U.S. forces from Iraq, which he believed was required because the U.S. position toward the PMF is one of "escalation and working to dissolve it."

SOURCE: "Thawra fī Rajul (A Revolution in a Man)," 2018; "Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis li Nas: Hadhahi hiya Al-Fuwāriq bayn Al-Hashd Al-Sha'bī wa Al-Huras al-Thawrī wa Hizbullah (Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis to Nas: These Are the Differences Between the PMF and the Revolutionary Guards and Hizbullah)," 2019.

(including cultivation of ties with the ITN) take place outside the formal Iranian decisionmaking process. Instead, the strategies implemented by the IRGC and IRGC-QF are generally agreed upon by the entirety of the system following input by different power centers, including the IRGC, which plays a critical role in shaping and enacting policy. As a result, the decision to form, train, advise, assist, equip, and deploy members of the ITN is not taken in a vacuum by the IRGC but in consultation with key power centers in the system and approved by the Supreme Leader.

Prior to the attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11) in the United States, Iran's policy regarding nonstate clients was predominantly driven by its interests in each key country as the regime sought to cultivate ties with local actors whose ideologies aligned with its own and which it could directly manage. However, following the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Tehran developed a more comprehensive nonstate client policy (Ostovar, 2019). Nevertheless,

the strategy remains largely inferred and far from robust. To date, there is no publicly available Iranian doctrine on client relationships. However, it is clear from Iran's regional activities that the strategy now transcends country-by-country engagements, with Iran developing a network of organizations that can collaborate across the Middle East. Tehran does not seek to establish relationships it controls entirely and cultivate groups that are completely reliant upon it. Instead, it encourages its partners and proxies to cooperate with each other to advance their own and Iran's objectives.

Moreover, the Islamic Republic no longer restricts its engagement to the groups it established or those which share its ideology. Instead, Iran has shown increased flexibility in partnering with groups of different ideologies and identities, to include non-Shi'a actors and even adversarial ones, such as al-Qa'ida and the Taliban. This shift is significant. In the 1980s, Iran was focused on partnering

with groups that were made up of Twelver Shi'a, the dominant form of Islam practiced in Iran, who also embraced *wilayat al-faqih*, rule of the jurisprudent as practiced in Iran, as the "correct" system of government. There are newer members of the ITN who still fit this ideal type (e.g., the Fatemiyoun), but Iran has become more flexible over the years in partnering with groups that do not fit this identity and ideological straitjacket.

Operational demands in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have, in part, driven Iran's development of a more flexible and comprehensive strategy over the course of the past two decades. The country's limited reach beyond its borders and lack of capabilities stymied Tehran's regional ambitions in the initial years of the Islamic Republic. The challenges of the Iran-Iraq War—a prolonged military conflict, coupled with the trials of governance—led the Islamic Republic to gradually shift its worldview from an ideologically driven approach to a more pragmatic one (Wehrey et al., 2009; Takeyh, 2009, p. 2). At the end of the war, Iran focused on regrouping and reconstruction, mostly limiting its regional policies to tackling what it perceived as immediate threats—for example, conducting airstrikes in Iraq to undercut and contain some Kurdish groups and the Mujahedin-e Khalq, which it viewed as threats to Iranian national security and regime stability (Brumberg, 2001, p. 153; Tarzi and Parliament, 2001, pp. 125–133; "Iranian Jets Bomb Kurdish Base in Iraq, Killing 1 and Hurting 3," 1994; Iddon, 2018).

Following 9/11, however, the challenges posed and opportunities offered by the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and, later, the Arab Spring led to growing Iranian involvement in the region. This, in turn, drove Tehran to adopt a more comprehensive strategy to maximize the benefits and lower the costs of its regional endeavors, and it did so by developing a more robust strategy toward its nonstate clients. At the same time, Iran has tried to create a tighter network by "push[ing] groups with which it works to unify" (Byman, 2013, p. 986). The Islamic Republic now cultivates local groups while emphasizing their ability to move across borders. And far from highlighting ideological alignment or dependence on Tehran, the regime seeks to have a diverse set of nonstate partners, with varying ideologies, identities,

degrees of C2, and dependence on Iranian support (Clarke and Smyth, 2017; Jamal, 2019). This strategy is expressed through four models of client-patron relations, which will be discussed in the following section and illustrated in Figure 1.

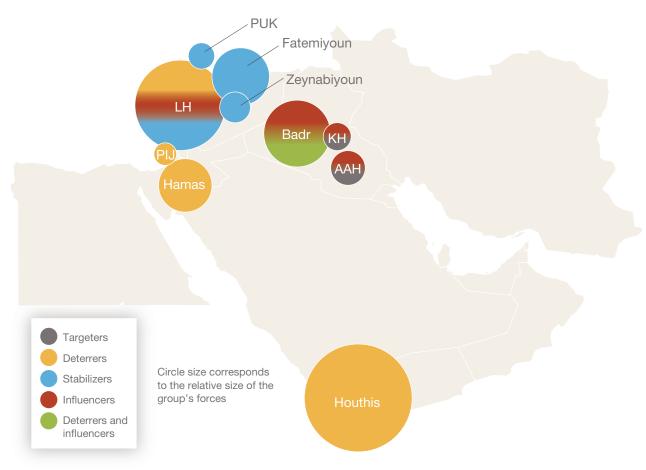## Models of Client-State Relations

The Islamic Republic has gradually developed a comprehensive nonstate client strategy based on four models, which it has embedded into its gray zone strategy. Iran eschews a unified approach to its nonstate clients, embracing the flexibility afforded by its different approaches towards these partners. These models, which can be broken into four categories—Targeters, Deterrers, Stabilizers, and Influencers—revolve around varying Iranian objectives and how the groups fit in them currently. The groups may be in several categories at once and/or move between them as the international and regional landscapes change and Iran alters its objectives. Iran can also pursue several objectives at once and use these groups to perform several tasks and play multiple roles. In that sense the groups that make up the ITN are versatile and serve as a Swiss Army knife to Iran. This diversity is useful for Iran as it allows the regime to pursue and achieve different objectives, allocate resources as needed to its clients, preserve plausible deniability, and build a larger network. This demonstrates a certain level of flexibility and innovation in Iran's nonstate client strategy, even as the core notion of the ITN is informed by the legacy of the early days of the Islamic Revolution.

The Targeters: Countering U.S. Forward Presence

The primary objective of the ITN's first category is to undercut U.S. forward presence in the region by raising the costs of maintaining U.S. troops and personnel there. KH and AAH presently comprise the Targeters (see Figure 2). These groups' inclusion into the network came out of particular circumstances arising from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In particular, the stationing of U.S. forces in Iraq in the 2000s created a target opportunity for KH and AAH,

FIGURE 1
Iran Threat Network Map

PUK

Fatemiyoun

Zeynabiyoun

LH

Badr   KH

PIJ   AAH

Hamas

Targeters

Deterrers

Stabilizers

Influencers

Deterrers and
influencers

Circle size corresponds
to the relative size of the
group's forces

Houthis

SOURCE: Hoffman, 2018; Moghadam, 2017; Byman, 2012; Lahoud, 2018; Reisinezhad, 2019; Murray and Woods, , 2014; Souresrafil, 1989; Pelletiere, 1992; Jamal, 2019; "Amozesh-e tirandazi-e razmandegan-e Fatemiyoun dar Surieh+film," 2018; "Didar-e Sardar Soleimani ba khaneva-deh-ye hashid Tavassoli," 2016; "Abu Hamed: Farmandeh-e jahad-e bedun-e marz," 2015; Mashal and Faizi, 2017; Schneider, 2018; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2017; Exum, 2006; Levin, 2018; Federation of American Scientists, 1998; Cunningham, 2017; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018; Stancati, 2015; Constable, 2018; Counter Extremism Project, 2019c; Gordon, 2007; Levitt, 2005; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2018; Dehghanpisheh, 2015; Gall, 2017; Alfoneh, 2018; Nada and Rowan, 2018; Beehner, 2006; Counter Extremism Project, 2019a; "Who Are the Northern Alliance," 2001; Counter Extremism Project, 2019b; Riedel, 2017; University of Maryland, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2014. NOTE: PIJ = Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

which objected to the occupation of their country and sought to end it through military pressure. Since then, Iraq has served as a rich area for Iran to develop its network of nonstate allies and the theater in which it has been most inclined to target U.S. forces through its proxies.

AAH and KH have high levels of dependence on Iran, which, in turn, exercises significant C2 over them. However, as these groups move from insurgency into the realm of politics (discussed later in this chapter in the "Influencers: Influence in Politics" section), Iran seems to be losing some C2 over them and seeking new groups it can task and restrain

as needed to undercut U.S. presence in the region. This is because Tehran needs significant C2 over the groups in this category to navigate and balance the exigencies of deterring and harassing the United States. If proxies target Americans without Iranian consent or a green light, they might trigger a chain of events involving an undesirable U.S.-Iranian confrontation. Similarly, for effective deterrence, the Islamic Republic needs to be able to task these proxies to raise the costs of U.S. actions when needed. As a result, as Iranian C2 over these proxies decreases, Tehran might find itself in a position where it must replenish its ranks with new entities.

FIGURE 2
The Targeters

	① Objective: Countering U.S. forward presence				
Group (est.)	Countries	Forces	Dependence on Iran	Iranian C2	Type of support
KH (2003)	Iraq	400–30,000	High	High	🔫 💵 📊
AAH (2006)	Iraq	10,000–20,000	High	High	🔫 💵 📊

Currently, AAH and KH are the foremost groups within this category, although both are increasingly embedding themselves in Iraqi politics and security forces. AAH is a breakaway faction from the armed wing of the Sadrist movement. Because Muqtada Al-Sadr was willing to engage in electoral politics, which includes partnering in governing coalitions, and because he engaged in ceasefires against coalition and Iraqi government forces (i.e., in 2004 and 2007), hardline elements within the Sadrist movement broke away to retain their militant credentials. AAH, led by Qais Al-Khaz'ali, is one of the breakaway factions.

KH also has ties to the Sadrist movement, although its now-deceased leader al-Muhandis (see Sidebar 1) had an even more direct link to Iran, having been granted Iranian citizenship and having served as an adviser to the IRGC-QF. During the 2003–2011 Iraq War, the U.S. government referred to these militias as "the Special Groups" to signal their status as Iranian surrogates that were targeting U.S. forces. An even more recent entrant is Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba' (HHN), itself a splinter of AAH. HHN differentiated itself in becoming one of the first Iraqi militia groups to fight on behalf of Syria's Assad regime, including deploying fighters to areas far from the Iraqi border (e.g., Aleppo).[7] All three groups receive financial support, arms, and training from Iran.

Iran helped build these groups from the ground up, first by playing a critical role in organizing Shi'a in its neighborhood and later by helping to formally establish these groups. Today, Tehran exerts significant influence over the groups' decisionmaking given the special relationship they have with Iran, due in

part to the instrumental role the Iranians played in their establishment. These clients also have close economic ties and are very reliant on Tehran for resources (Levitt, 2005). Although the commonly used term "proxy" does not capture the nuances of Iran's relationship with each of these groups, this category of nonstate clients is perhaps best suited for this description among the ITN. Nevertheless, because these groups integrate their countries' political systems, they might become less useful for Iran in deterring and harassing the United States. Iran might then need to replenish the ranks of this category with more-reliant and loyal forces.

Deterrers: Deterring and Harassing Regional Rivals

The Deterrers is the second category of ITN members and is composed of groups focused primarily on deterring and harassing Iran's regional rivals, including LH, the Badr Organization, the Houthis, Hamas, and PIJ (see Figure 3). This category is also the largest and most diverse one. This is because Iran's chief focus is to counter regional rivals to create a favorable balance of power. To this end, it partners with a diverse set of nonstate actors, some of which are closely aligned with the Islamic Republic in religious and ideological terms while others share nothing but a common adversary. This category's members have different levels of dependency on Iran, and Tehran's C2 levels vary within this grouping. That some of these groups are located in contiguous states, in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon provides a convenient means of increasing Iranian strategic depth and makes it easy

FIGURE 3
The Deterrers

Group (est.)	Countries	Forces	Dependence on Iran	Iranian C2	Type of support
2 Objective: Deterring and harassing regional rivals					
LH (1985)	Iraq, Lebanon, Syria	20,000–70,000	Medium	High	🔫 💵 ⬛ ℹ️
Badr (1982)*	Iraq	10,000–50,000	High	High	🔫 💵 ⬛ ℹ️
Houthis (1994)	Yemen	75,000–120,000	Low	Medium	🔫 💵 📍 🏠
Hamas (1987)	Israel, Palestinian territory	25,000	Low	Low	💵
PIJ (1981)	Israel	1,000	Low	Low	💵

NOTE: * founded by Iran.

for Iranian forces to provide logistical support to their proxies all the way to Lebanon.

In the early days of the revolution, ideological alignment was a determining factor in incentivizing Iranian revolutionaries—whose revolutionary zeal was still strong—to support a movement outside their borders. The IRGC wanted to capitalize on existing revolutionary fervor (and Iranian ties across the region) and export the worldview of its leader to other Muslim nations, particularly those with sizable Shi'a populations. Lebanon and Iraq were a natural destination for the IRGC because of historical and religious ties with the former and shared borders, ethnic, and religious ties in the latter. Shi'a communities in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon had long cultivated ties, including through education and marriage, making those populations prime target audiences for the voice of Iranian revolutionaries. Moreover, already under the Shah, the Iranian intelligence organization (then known by its Persian acronym of SAVAK) had undertaken covert operations and funded and supported Lebanese Shi'a groups and the Kurds in Iraq (Samii, 1997).

In the Arabian Peninsula, Shi'a minorities—and Bahrain's Shi'a majority ruled by a Sunni minority—constituted a natural target audience for Tehran (Alfoneh, 2012). Iran made several attempts to exacerbate divisions and fuel discontent in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait (Coates Ulrichsen, 2015). The Iranians saw the Western-backed monarchs of the Arabian Peninsula as akin to the regime they just deposed at home, which they had toppled in large part because of the Shah's ties with the West in general and the United States in particular.[8] By drawing parallels between the Shah and the Gulf Arab monarchies, the revolutionaries were able to find common ground and forge ties with what they saw as the "oppressed" peoples of the region.[9] However, the designs to export the revolution largely failed in the first decade of the regime's tenure (Gause, 2007). As Iran tempered its expectations in the Gulf Cooperation Council states, its ability to mobilize surrogates in that subregion waned.

Iran was more successful in cultivating its original protégés in its efforts in Lebanon and its hosting of Iraqi Shi'a exiles who would eventually fill the vacuum created by the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime (Feltman, 2019). The relative success of Iran's efforts in some countries and its disappointing results in others was likely not a function of Tehran's performance in implementing its strategy, but rather a reflection of more propitious circumstances in certain arenas. In Lebanon, Iran had the advantage of intervening in a weak state already in civil war where

the Shi'a community was emerging with a strong demographic plurality (because of higher birth rates and Christian emigration) but remained politically and economically disadvantaged (Faour, 2007).

Moreover, Iran's partner (LH) could frame its actions as supporting Palestinian rights, an issue that generally transcends sectarian divides in the region, allowing it to build legitimacy and a support base beyond the Lebanese Shi'a community. In the case of Iraq, Iran could tap into a Shi'a community that was out of power despite constituting approximately 65 percent of the country's population and in which leading Iraqi Shi'a clerics like Muhammad Baqr Al-Sadr had espoused—and been killed for—adopting a Khomeinist vision (World Population Review, 2019). Because there was little organized opposition inside Iraq to Saddam Hussein's rule—the former regime was effective in targeting internal critics—the United States' removal of the political order in 2003 left a gap that was largely filled by those who sought sanctuary in Iran.

Iran's interest in the Palestinian cause has yielded more complicated results and is motivated by three considerations. First, because the Palestinian issue is the historic focus of "resistance" in the Arab and Muslim worlds, Iran needed to show sufficient commitment to the cause to bolster its own resistance credentials. Second, at the time of the Islamic Republic's founding, Syria (bordering Israel and Palestine) was the only Arab state that rallied to Iran's side. As Iran considered expanding its reach into neighboring Arab regions, the Palestinian issue proved a tempting point of entry for Tehran. Third, to be seen as a regional power, Iran needed to develop the capabilities to compete with what it identifies as its chief regional adversary—Israel. All of this led Iran to deprioritize identity and ideological considerations to partner with Sunni-Arab Palestinian groups. However, Iran's attitudes toward key Palestinian groups and its C2 over them (and these groups' loyalty to and reliance on Iran) vary. The PIJ is relatively dependent on Iran and, consequently, Tehran's level of C2 over the PIJ is higher than that over Hamas. On numerous occasions, Hamas has proven to be an unreliable force for the Islamic Republic. The fact that Hamas has received support from different patrons, including Syria and, at times,

such Sunni-Arab states as Qatar, has also made them a less reliable partner for Iran.

Hamas has also made it clear that it neither responds nor sees itself as beholden to the Islamic Republic ("Hamas wa Iran: Hal Tastamirr Al-Qatī'a?", 2015). In fact, the group has declined to become involved in tensions between the United States and Iran on several occasions. Particularly straining for Hamas has been Iran's interventions to support 'Alawi, Shi'a, and Zaydi combatants against Sunnis in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Hamas diverged with its patron on these conflicts, most notably in Syria where it advocated for a political—vice military—solution to the conflict that would include Damascus compromising on core demands of the opposition. And in Yemen, Hamas felt pressure to support Saudi equities and endorsed the internationally recognized government—led by a Sunni Arab—that Riyadh backed against the Iranian-supported Houthis. Hamas' response to these conflicts proved to be an important litmus test vis-à-vis Iran, with Hamas leaders reporting Tehran cut off financial support to it in retaliation for the positions it took ("Hamas wa Iran: Hal Tastamirr Al-Qatī'a?", 2015).

If it was the 2003 invasion of Iraq that created the conditions for Iran to strengthen its network in Iraq, the Arab Spring was the distinct but reinforcing event that opened up space for Iran in Yemen. The Houthis existed prior to the Arab Spring, but they gained significant influence in the wake of this event. (We discuss the Houthis in the illustrative example in Sidebar 2). Following protests over corruption, inflation, and poor government performance, the Houthis took over the Yemeni capital of Sana'a in September 2014. Although the Iranians objected to this move and advised the Houthis not to storm Sana'a, they later saw the Houthis' growing power and ability to bog down the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen as an opportunity, reportedly increasing their assistance to the organization (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016).

Tehran is believed to have upped its support for the Houthis because the group demonstrated its effectiveness in bogging down the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. However, the organization remains largely independent from Iran in ideological, political, economic, and military terms (Bayoumy and Stewart, 2016). As observed by a Yemeni analyst of

Sidebar 2. The Houthis

The Houthis, or Ansar Allah to their followers, are a military-*cum*-political movement that currently controls Yemen's capital and much of what was the territory of North Yemen prior to unification. The Houthis historic base is drawn from Saada governorate with the group enjoying a strong Zaydi following, although the Houthis have recently gained supporters from different ideological backgrounds (e.g., a wing of the General People's Congress) and from non-Zaydis (e.g., Yemeni Hashemites).

Analysts differ somewhat in the emphasis they place on the level of Iranian support to the Houthis, but most agree there was an uptick in support from Tehran after the 2011 uprising in Yemen. Although there has been an increase in assistance, Iranian support to the group remains modest compared with Iranian support to LH, for example. This is explained by a variety of factors. The first is that the Houthis operate in a country awash with weapons and are aligned with breakaway units from the regular Yemeni military. The conflict has created a demand for spare parts and additional weaponry, but the Houthis have access to local arms, including armor, artillery, and ballistic missiles.

Second, Iran can funnel assistance to the Houthis using dhows as a means of reaching the intended beneficiary. However, there is an air-and-sea blockade of the Houthis, which limits Iran's ability to provide large shipments of military equipment. To be sure, Iran has attempted to smuggle systems—ranging from small arms to ballistic missile parts—to the Houthis using these smaller vessels, but the supply route is contested by international and Arab Coalition efforts to thwart Iranian assistance. What is unknown is the degree to which IRGC trainers, or trainers from another Iranian proxy force (such as LH), have worked with the Houthis to improve their military effectiveness. Military analysts have noticed subtle shifts in the Houthis' tactics, techniques, and procedures, such as their employment of coastal defense systems in the Red Sea that suggest Iranian advising. Similarly, the Houthis' use of land mines as a component of massive improvised explosive devices also appears to some as a potential Iranian influenced tactic.

SOURCE: Juneau, 2016; Feierstein, 2018; Al-Muslimi, 2017; Nadimi and Knights, 2018; For an overview of the Houthis Equipment, see International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018, pp. 370–371; Conflict Armament Research, 2016; "Tadmir Taqm al-Munafiqin bi Kamin," 2018

the Houthis, "Iran does not have interests to protect in Yemen. Rather it sees a forward location that Iran considers a front from where it can attrit Saudi Arabia without much risk and at a low cost" (Al-Din, 2017). The Houthis also have divergent religious beliefs from those espoused by Iran.[10]

Unlike the first category of nonstate clients, this group is more diverse in its members' attitudes toward Tehran. Likewise, the regime's C2 over and support for the groups within this category are more limited. This is, in part, a product of the diversity of Iranian regional rivals and partly the result of the members' own priorities and the extent to which they overlap with those of Iran. For example, although Tehran has sought to bring Hamas into the fold in other regional conflicts, the group has refused, preferring to focus its efforts on Palestinian issues or to align itself with Sunni players. Unlike Iran's more cohesive approach to the Targeters, the Deterrers receive different levels of support from, and respond differently to, Iran—determined in part by the regional rival that Iran is trying to deter and harass, whether there is an ongoing conflict between the group and the rival state, the level of overlap between Iranian and proxy priorities and objectives, and the group's own capabilities.

The Stabilizers: Stabilizing Allies and Partners

Accordingly, the varying degrees of C2 in the Stabilizers category are owed to the diversity of each group, Iran's relative prioritization of the theater or country where they operate, and the security landscape leading to these organizations' creation or addition to the ITN. Moreover, Iran can sacrifice C2 more easily in the context of countering regional rivals because it might not need to tread as carefully in deterring and harassing its regional rivals as the United States does, because those countries generally lack the capabilities or will to directly confront the United States and Washington has generally been reluctant to intervene on their behalf. Thanks to this diverse group of clients, Iran has expanded its influence far beyond what many had envisioned. Because Tehran's investment in these groups can be

FIGURE 4
The Stabilizers

Group (est.)	Countries	Forces	③ Objective: Stabilizing allies and partners		Type of support
			Dependence on Iran	Iranian C2	
Fatemiyoun (2014)*	Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen	5,000–60,000	High	High	🔫 💰 🖥️ ℹ️
Zeynabiyoun (2014)*	Iraq, Syria	500–1,000	High	High	🔫 💰 🖥️ ℹ️
PUK (1975)	Iraq, Syria	100,000	High	Low	🔫 💰 ℹ️

NOTE: * founded by Iran.

opportunistic, they are the product of fertile grounds for Iranian involvement resulting from power vacuums and conflicts and have yielded benefits while lowering the costs of intervention for Tehran. For example, Tehran's support for the Houthis has allowed the country to bog down Saudi Arabia and its allies in an interminable war, which has resulted in divisions between Riyadh and its chief military backer, Washington (Malsin and Said, 2019).

This category comprises proxies currently helping stabilize Iranian allies, including the Fatemiyoun, Zeynabiyoun, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (see Figure 4). The Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun in their current form emerged out of the Syrian civil war following the Arab Spring—although the Fatemiyoun, in particular, hold its roots in the early days of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, where Tehran recruited and deployed Afghans to fight on the frontlines. (To provide an overview of the group and contrast it with one of the original ITN members [LH], we discuss the Fatemiyoun in the illustrative example in Sidebar 3) (Clarke and Smyth, 2017; "Abu Hamed: Farmandeh-e jahad-e bedun-e marz," 2015).

Iran's ability to use existing grievances to build rapport with and cultivate fighters is an important contributor to the success of the regime's attempts to create this set of clients (Wehrey et al., 2009, p. xiv). The regime has tried to appeal to minorities in neighboring countries and ethnic and religious groups whose disenfranchisement opens avenues for Tehran to recruit fighters, which it can leverage to help stabilize allies without deploying its own troops to combat—particularly those it deploys in foreign theaters. Similarly, poverty, unemployment, and the lack of opportunities have afforded the regime and the leaderships of these nonstate clients with the means to lure individuals into joining the ITN by promising them a better future, including residency rights in Iran (an upgrade from war-torn countries such as Afghanistan) and security and more opportunities for their families (Fassihi, 2014). Tehran uses all these tools in its outreach and recruitment efforts to populate the Fatemiyoun, whose fighters it has incited to deploy to Syria thanks to promises of money and residency rights in Iran (Constable, 2018).

Iran's relationship with the Kurds goes back to the Imperial State of Iran (as the country was known prior to 1979). The PUK has ethnic ties to Iranian Kurds, which Tehran leverages, although in this case, ethnic ties are also a source of tension, because Tehran has long feared Kurdish separatism. (We discuss Iran's relationship with the Kurds in the illustrative example in Sidebar 4). The initial primary driver behind the Iran-PUK relationship prior to 2003 was the common adversary in Saddam Hussein. Since his collapse, the PUK has shared other overlapping interests and objectives with Tehran, which the country leverages to keep Iraq stable and united—a disintegrated or chaotic Iraq would have consequential implications for Iranian security and territorial integrity.

Sidebar 3. The Fatemiyoun

Since 2013, Iran has recruited, trained, equipped, and deployed Afghan Shi'a fighters to participate in the Syrian civil war in support of the Assad regime. Although this new force emerged in the context of the Syrian conflict, its roots can be traced to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). During the eight-year war dubbed as the "Sacred Defense" by Iran, the country deployed Afghan forces to fight alongside Iranian troops. Following the war, Tehran largely stopped deploying Afghan forces outside of Afghanistan until the Syrian civil war. To mobilize this force, which by some estimates consisted of 5,000 to 60,000, Tehran worked through the network of Shi'a Afghan fighters who had fought on the frontlines of the Iran-Iraq War. One of the war's Shi'a Afghan veterans, Ali Reza Tavassoli (known by his nom de guerre, Abu Hamed), was instrumental to the Fatemiyoun's creation. By Iranian accounts, Tavassoli helped organize 22 fighters to "defend the holy sites" in Syria, thus laying out the foundations of the Fatemiyoun Division. Tavassoli died in combat in 2015.

The Islamic Republic has leveraged ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious ties to Afghan Shi'as, as well as the large Afghan population currently residing in Iran to fill the ranks of its forces—reportedly praying on Afghan refugees at risk of deportation. Although they are Shi'a Afghans, many of the Fatemiyoun's fighters are not driven by religion to join the force. Instead, although some are interested in "protecting the holy sites" in Syria, many are incentivized by money or the promise of residency rights in Iran. Given their literacy rates and lack of proper training, these forces are often deployed to perform the most-dangerous tasks.

The Fatemiyoun Division has the most potential among the ITN for a mobile force, which can transcend borders. The Islamic Republic of Iran has reportedly sent some Fatemiyoun units to fight in Yemen, while others are being sent back to Afghanistan. Iran provides direct support to the Fatemiyoun, which is heavily reliant on Iran for funding and equipment. Tehran has strong C2 over the division.

The United States designated the Fatemiyoun under a counterterrorism authority in January 2019. From the United States' perspective, the force contributes to regional instability by assisting the IRGC-QF in its regional activities and the Assad regime. The Fatemiyoun are also accused of employing child soldiers, some as young as 14, to fight on the battlefield. The Afghan security forces have expressed concerns about the potential security challenges associated with the fighters' return to Afghanistan.

SOURCE: Jamal, 2019; "Amozesh-e tirandazi-e razmandegan-e Fatemiyoun dar Surieh+film," 2018; "Didar-e Sardar Soleimani ba khanevadeh-ye hashid Tavassoli," 2016; "Abu Hamed: Farmandeh-e jahad-e bedun-e marz," 2015; Mashal and Faizi, 2017; Schneider, 2018; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2017.

The Influencers: Influence in Politics

The final category, the Influencers, within the ITN consists of Iranian proxies and partners that have become integrated into their countries' formal political and security establishments and encompasses LH, KH, AAH, and the Badr Organization (see Figure 5). In addition to their militant activities, several of these proxies have also established successful political wings that they have used as vehicles for participating in formal politics. It is not clear whether Iran initiated or encouraged this process; however, without Iranian complaisance, these groups would likely not be successfully assimilating into Iraqi and Lebanese politics. Perhaps surprisingly, Iran has welcomed the integration of these groups into their country's formal political and military institutions and processes ("Yaddasht | 10 farman-e nakhost vazir-e Iraq bara-ye tasbit o estemrar-e Hashd al-Shaabi," 2019; "Taklif-e ma var arz-e digital che mishavad? / Tahavolat-e Hashd al-Shaabi-e Iraq che taasiri bar rabeteh-ye Iraq ba Iran migozarad?" 2019). Indeed, this move might lead to trade-offs for Iran: As these groups become more established into formal entities, Tehran might lose some degree of C2 with these proxies decreasing their reliance on and increasing their independence from Iran. However, Iran seemingly sees these trade-offs as worthwhile. From the regime's perspective, although these groups' evolution and integration into formal political players have the potential to reduce Iranian C2, they can also help Tehran further embed itself into

Sidebar 4. The Kurds

The Kurds are one of Iran's oldest nonstate partners. Along with the Lebanese Shi'a, the Kurds helped lay out the foundations of Iran's nonstate client strategy starting in the 1950s. Following the 1958 coup in Iraq, the Shah sought to leverage ethnic and sectarian divides and tensions within Iraq to secure its influence there. The Kurds were at the heart of this strategy thanks to their ethnic ties to Iran. Throughout the 1960s, Tehran expanded its efforts in Iraq Kurdistan. By the mid-1970s, Iran—along with its partners, the United States and Israel—was confronting Baghdad in the region. An important aspect of the 1975 Algiers Accord that Iran and Iraq signed was that both states had to give up the "Kurdish card" each played to destabilize its neighbor. However, the use of the Kurds as proxy forces proved too tempting and during the Iran-Iraq War, the Kurds became a key player and Kurdish regions an important battleground, where Baghdad and Tehran vied for influence. Both countries would try to leverage Kurdish separatism to undermine their adversary. Saddam Hussein targeted the Kurds, including by using chemical weapons, as they fell in line with Iran.

Iran's relations with the Kurds have since continued against a backdrop of tension. On the one hand, Iran sees Iraqi Kurds as an important stakeholder and has worked with them to fight common adversaries—Saddam Hussein and, later, ISIS. On the other hand, Iran has watched the Kurds gain more power and, in 2015, hold a referendum to establish an independent Kurdish state. For Tehran, these developments further exacerbate its own challenges with Kurdish separatism at home. Moreover, the Kurds are an important U.S. partner in Iraq, making them one of Tehran's only nonstate clients to also have decent ties with Washington.

SOURCE: Reisinezhad, 2019, p. 2; Murray and Woods, 2014, p. 62; Souresrafil, 1989, p. 18; Pelletiere, 1992, p. 412.

the political and military landscapes of key countries and to gain and maintain influence there.

For example, both Hizbullah and the Badr Organization have seats in Parliament and effectively control ministries, giving them access to state funds to expand their patronage network. As the members of the Shi'a militias in Iraq have become more integrated into Iraqi politics and the country's armed forces, Iran has gained more access in neighboring Iraq. Badr's presence in the Iraqi government has provided Tehran with several advantages, including influence over standard military-to-military relations, basing, and access to Iraq (a particularly beneficial feature given Iran's eagerness to maintain land access to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria to lower the costs of facilitating logistical support to LH). When Iraq's Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi issued a decree on July 1, 2019, to formally integrate the Shi'a militias into the Iraqi national military, Iranian outlets close to the IRGC assessed that this move would be beneficial to their country. It would increase these groups' influence and, consequently, Iran's influence in Iraq while allowing the forces to secure funding to provide for their fighters—thus decreasing their reliance on Iran for funding ("Yaddasht | 10 farman-e nakhost vazir-e Iraq bara-ye tasbit o estemrar-e Hashd al-Shaabi," 2019; "Taklif-e ma var arz-e digital che mishavad? / Tahavolat-e Hashd al-Shaabi-e Iraq che taasiri bar rabeteh-ye Iraq ba Iran migozarad?", 2019).

Surprisingly given their resistance credentials, both are now part of the ruling bloc that leads their country's government. The degree and nature of Iranian support for the groups that comprise this typology is much more expansive than that provided to others in the ITN. It includes more significant financial support, intelligence sharing, more advanced weapons and systems, and training as these groups transition from militias opposing their countries' central authorities to occupying positions in their political and military establishments (Levitt, 2005). Iran has also been more forthcoming about its ties to these groups—publicizing images of meetings between key political and military officials and the leaders of LH, including Khamenei and LH leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, for example—especially as they legitimize themselves in their countries ("Nagofteha-ye Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah az vali-e

FIGURE 5
The Influencers

			4 Objective: Influencing politics		
Group (est.)	Countries	Forces	Dependence on Iran	Iranian C2	Type of support
LH (1985)	Iraq, Lebanon, Syria	20,000–70,000	Medium	High	
KH (2003)	Iraq	400–30,000	High	High	
AAH (2006)	Iraq	10,000–20,000	High	High	
Badr (1982)*	Iraq	10,000–50,000	High	High	

NOTE: * founded by Iran.

amr-e Moslemin, 2011; "Ravayat-e Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah az didar-e ba Imam Khamenei dar avayel-e bohran-e Suriyeh," 2017.).

Nevertheless, because these groups seek to become integrated into their countries' political and military establishments, they must assert themselves as independent players whose allegiance is to their country rather than a foreign power. Hence, there are times when these groups have to emphasize their independence from Iran, either to avoid appearing as foreign agents to local constituencies or because acknowledging their full coordination with Iran would expose them to greater military pressure from the United States or Israel. An example is Hizbullah's nuanced position on *wilayat al-faqih*, a litmus test for its subordination of authority to Iran. To appease domestic constituencies who would not support Hizbullah's deference to complete Iranian control and to ease fears that Hizbullah has designs to impose that type of political system on Lebanon, the group embraces the doctrine but claims it is only appropriate if the overwhelming majority of a society embraces it (Saad-Ghorayeb, 2001). Because Lebanon is multiconfessional and the Shi'a are estimated to be perhaps one-third of the overall Lebanese population, this is in effect an acknowledgement by LH and an acceptance by Tehran that the system is not appropriate for Lebanon. A more recent example is when the Badr Organization, AAH, and KH publicly denounced the May 2019 rocket attacks in the Green Zone, which took place amid growing U.S.-Iran tensions (Fine, Linick, and Calavaresi Barr, 2019).

Despite these groups occasionally emphasizing their independence from Iran, in reality, they are an integral part of Iran's foreign and defense policies. Because they were essentially created by Tehran, these proxies have a greater degree of loyalty to Iran. The regime asserts a great deal of power and C2 over these forces, and its support is vital to these fighters' ability to operate. These proxies are—even in some cases—in a position to serve as a conduit between Iran and other groups, providing Tehran with another layer of plausible deniability. LH, in particular, trains, advises, assists, and arms various groups, including the Houthis (Clarke and Smyth, 2017). Hizbullah has established its own weapons' procurement and smuggling channels, which run in parallel to and complement those of Iran (Levitt, 2019). Also, Hizbullah has hosted delegations from Iraqi militias, such as AAH, to bolster these groups' prestige and provide guidance ("Qais Al-Khaz'ali fī Lubnan," 2017). Indeed, deference to LH leaders is common from the newest entrants into the ITN. The leader of KH (see the illustrative example in Sidebar 5) has described Hassan Nasrallah as "the master and soul of the resistance," and proclaimed there is "no meaning to the resistance if you are not its master and no value to the rejectionist [axis] if you are not

Sidebar 5. Lebanese Hizbullah

LH is the most militarily capable component of the ITN. It also is an important part of two more recent trends within the ITN. The first is Iran's use of proxy groups in an expeditionary capacity in the sense of Iran encouraging proxies to deploy across national borders (e.g., Lebanon to Syria, Iraq to Syria) to support Iranian interests. The second is Iran's adoption of the "train-the-trainer" model, in which the most-advanced components of the ITN (in this case, LH) is used to train newer additions to the ITN, reducing Iran's exposure even as it grows its network.

LH is an important ITN contributor to Iran's efforts to stabilize the position of the Assad regime while laying the infrastructure for future threats to Israel. LH overtly entered the Syrian civil war in spring 2013 during the battle of Al-Qusayr, helping the regime to maintain control of supply lines between the capital and its coastal Allawi stronghold. Hizbullah's deployments in Syria have focused on securing strategic terrain in Western Syria (Al-Qusayr, Qalamoun, Zabadani, Homs), but Hizbullah also played a role in the regime's race across the badia in 2017 to secure the remaining Euphrates river towns after the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces liberated Raqqa from ISIS control. In addition to providing manpower for regime offensives, Hizbullah has also developed its presence on the border of the Golan Heights, fanning Israeli concerns that Hizbullah's deployment in Syria is intended to put in place military infrastructure, notably missile forces, to open a second front against Israel in a future conflict.

LH also represents Tehran's progress in establishing a train-the-trainer model in which an Iranian-trained proxy force (Hizbullah) has become a viable trainer of new entrants into the ITN. LH advised AAH during its early establishment and trains various like-minded and like-organized brigades in Syria. The advantage of this approach is that it increases Iran's plausible deniability in these efforts, limiting its exposure to a military response. It also reduces the burden on Iranian forces to provide direct advising to local forces, allowing Iranian forces deployed to a conflict zone to focus on other roles, such as military campaign planning.

SOURCE: Exum, 2006; O'Bagy, 2013; Jones, 2018; Majidyar, 2017; Yadlin and Heistein, 2017; Ali, 2019; Smyth, 2018.

its prophet" ("Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis li Sayyid Nasrallah: Nahnu wa Iyak 'ala Jabha Wahda," 2017).

Conclusion

The ITN is presently—and likely to remain well into the future—Tehran's primary means of power projection and preferred instrument of influence in the region, including to deter and counter the United States. As the United States and many of its regional partners, such as Israel and the United Arab Emirates, increase their conventional military capabilities, Iran will concurrently seek to strengthen its asymmetric capabilities through the ITN. Based on past behavior, it is ITN members—not Tehran—that are most likely to launch attacks against U.S. and partner military targets. For example, in the context of growing U.S.-Iran tensions over the course of 2019, CENTCOM reported heightened ITN threat in response to the maximum pressure campaign (Fine,

Linick, and Calavaresi Barr, 2019). This is owed to Iran's desire to avoid escalating to a conventional military conflict with the United States where its conventional inferiority would drastically stymie its ability to win in combat. The U.S.-Iran tensions, which were heightened after attacks on commercial oil tankers and a U.S. drone in June and July 2019, demonstrated that the ITN served as the single most potent deterrent Tehran had at its disposal against the United States. These recent events have highlighted the importance of this tool in the Iranian toolkit. Understanding the nature, breadth, and depth of Iran's relationship with and C2 over different groups within the ITN will be instrumental in helping the U.S. Army and broader U.S. government respond to ITN provocations and attacks.

At the time of writing, U.S. force presence in the region is sizable, even amid the reduced footprint in Syria. Approximately 15,000 active component Army personnel and 18,000 Army reserve and civilian personnel, non-Army servicemembers (including 28,000 Navy

personnel), and nearly 50,000 contractors are dispersed throughout the CENTCOM region (Mueller et al., 2017; Peters and Plagakis, 2019; Werner, 2019). Moreover, the United States has access to several military installations in the Middle East (including U.S. Army bases and arms depots in Kuwait and Qatar, as well as Patriot missile sites throughout the region). U.S. forward presence in the Middle East is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it reassures partners, deters adversaries, and decreases response time to contingencies. However, it also introduces targets for adversaries. The presence of vital energy infrastructure and maritime shipping lanes critical to international commerce are also enticing targets for malign Iranian activities. The recent Iranian provocations in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf, and the risk to U.S. interests, personnel, and troops in Iraq identified by the State Department, demonstrate the vulnerability of U.S. assets in the region in the case of a direct U.S.-Iranian confrontation or even heightened tensions between the two countries—a risk mostly associated with Iranian proxies (Rubin and Hassan, 2019; Wong, 2019).

LH's success could suggest that the group is Tehran's ideal model for what its nonstate clients should look like and that Iran strives to mold other ITN members in that likeness. There are no clear indicators that this is indeed what Iran seeks to achieve with other ITN members over the long term. However, a closer look at the ITN, with attention to the similarities and differences between the groups, indicates that Iran can achieve many, if not all of its goals without molding other ITN members into LH's image. Our analysis suggests that Iran presently has different models of ITN for different contexts, which may be in recognition of the potential liabilities that could arise by developing each ITN member into an LH-like organization. Tehran recognizes that what works in a state with a Twelver Shi'a majority might not work in a state in which it lacks cosectarians. Similarly, Tehran recognizes that it has different strategic interests in neighboring states than those farther afield. And when Tehran lacks a nonstate partner that shares its ideology, it is flexible enough to partner on the basis of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." When coupled with the benefits for Iran to maintain a reasonable distance from the actions of some groups (particularly those over which

it possesses little C2, the reasons outlined above provide clear reasons for the ITN to not be a one-size-fits-all approach. As a result, while a possible attack by the second category may not necessarily be conducted with Iranian consent, a green light from the Islamic Republic would likely be critical to the operations of the first typology against U.S. forces.

The U.S. government and the U.S. Army should formulate specific responses to each category of groups within the ITN. The Targeters are designed to counter U.S. presence in the region by increasing the cost of U.S. forward deployment. U.S. force presence in the region is a useful deterrent to Iran and a potential tripwire if Iran or any ITN members seek to coerce or destabilize U.S. allies and partners. However, it also provides the ITN members with potential targets and opportunities, such as residual U.S. personnel in Iraq or the recently deployed air and naval assets in the Gulf region. Additionally, because these groups are also part of the Influencers by virtue of their integration into Iraqi politics, they make it more complicated for the United States to effectively respond to them militarily. Their integration into the state and, in some cases, into the military forces and security services in these countries creates the risk that the U.S. Army might inadvertently strengthen these groups through security cooperation activities. Therefore, the U.S. Army must ensure that all Title 10 activities have been properly Leahy vetted to ensure that the Army does not accidentally train, for example, AAH or KH militias that are part of the PMF that have been integrated into the Iraqi security forces. Leahy laws prohibit the U.S. government from allocating aid to foreign security forces credibly believed to have been implicated in gross violations of human rights (U.S. Department of State, undated).

The United States and its partners are likely to experience tensions with the Deterrers, who seek to burnish their resistance credentials and establish themselves as players in their respective countries. Many of these Deterrer groups will be looking to capitalize on their successful intervention in Syria. Additionally, U.S. allies and partners are likely to experience subversion from these groups as they seek to foment instability. Nevertheless, these groups are predominantly focused on regional adversaries and

thus do not present a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. The U.S. Army should continue to strengthen military-to-military relations in the region to convey American commitment to partner security and to build the capability of these partners to counter this internal threat. Although most U.S. partners in the region are focused on strengthening their conventional forces, which might not play a large role against an asymmetric threat posed by an ITN member, joint exercises provide a show of force—and often add additional U.S. presence—which could dampen Iranian and ITN ambitions. The U.S. Army might seek to strengthen partners' air and missile defense capabilities in particular, given that several of these groups have launched rocket and drone attacks against them, as in the case of LH against Israel, and the Houthis against Saudi Arabia.

The ITN members that comprise the second and third categories are not strategic threats to the United States and U.S. Army. They are mostly focused on local and regional issues. Some of these groups have a long history of cooperation with the United States and the U.S. Army, such as the PUK. Others pose a challenge to U.S. allies and partners in the region but they do not threaten the U.S. homeland and their grievances are mostly local. Therefore, the U.S. Army should continue to pursue efforts to build regional partner capacity, to enable partner nations to take responsibility for their own security at a lower cost to the United States. However, the U.S. Army should be cautious about the risks that may accompany this, as building an independent military capability means that regional partners can use this capability as they see fit—including against Iranian ITN groups, as demonstrated by Saudi and Emirati actions against the Houthis in Yemen, and Israeli airstrikes against LH in Syria.[11] Furthermore, Iran could negatively interpret an increase in U.S. Army building partner capacity efforts as tipping the balance of power away from its favor, and respond with an increase in malign behavior.

Furthermore, although the Stabilizers are focused on shoring up Iran's allies in the region, it is possible that they may seek to challenge U.S. presence in the region in support of Iranian allies—particularly in Syria. Iran created the Fatemiyoun and Zeynabiyoun for a specific context, however, it may also leverage

them in other theaters going forward. In this case, it is critically important for U.S. Army intelligence analysts to identify critical indications and warnings (I&W) that could signal when these groups might seek to attack U.S. forces. For example, because such groups operate nearby, U.S. Army forces located at Al Tanf, Syria, such I&W will be important to determine when and how to enhance U.S. force protection.

The groups in the Influencers are now sufficiently embedded within the Iraqi and Lebanese political systems that escalation with them could destabilize those two countries, affecting U.S. interests in Iraq, and Israeli security in the case of Lebanon. Simply put, an all-out confrontation with LH in Lebanon or with Badr and its allies in Iraq would push both countries into civil war. Therefore, the United States should tread carefully in these arenas. Members of this category are hybrid groups that balance their militant identities with active political participation and have also infiltrated the formal security forces of the states in which they operate. As with the groups identified in the Targeters—AAH and KH—the U.S. Army needs to remain cognizant of these proxies' penetration of Lebanon and Iraq's security forces and should avoid inadvertent security cooperation activities. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Defense should ensure that U.S. arms are not provided to these organizations through end-use monitoring, because they could possibly be used against regional partners or the U.S. military.

As Iran grows its presence and influence outside its borders, it could cultivate new members of the ITN. These groups could fall into the four models we have described here, or Iran could develop a fifth model to incorporate new entrants. Either way, the ITN is likely to remain the foremost challenge posed by the Islamic Republic to the U.S. Army's operations and personnel in the region for the foreseeable future and one of the major components of the country's military doctrine.

Notes

[1] As we note later in the report, the Shah's Iran also used non-state clients against its adversaries. However, Iran's use of proxies took on greater prominence after the 1979 Revolution.

[2] Iran and nonstate actors follow China and Russia, two great power competitors, and North Korea, a fellow revisionist actor, in the *U.S. National Defense Strategy* and *U.S. National Security Strategy*, respectively.

[3] Some examples include Ostovar, 2019; Byman, 2005; Byman, 2008, pp. 169–181; Clarke and Smyth, 2017; Ostovar, 2016; Friedman, 2018, pp. 438–453; Soufan, 2018; Jones, 2019.

[4] A typology is defined as an organized system of types and is an analytic tool used in social science to sort and compare cases, create new categories, and refine concepts. For more on typologies, see Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright, 2012.

[5] For more on the gray zone, see Votel et al., 2016.

[6] Hizbullah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Kataʿib Hizbullah (KH), and Al-Ashtar Brigades are designated FTOs. ʿAsaʾib Ahl Al-Haqq (AAH) and Harakat Hizbullah Al-Nujabaʾ (HHN) are not designated FTOs.

[7] HHN is open about and proud of its involvement in Syria. Until recently, the group's website had noted,

> Harakat Al-Nujabaʾ is one of the Islamic Resistance groups in Iraq that aims to defend the nation and its holy sites, especially in Syria and Iraq, where the sons of the movement have penned the most magnificent images of sacrifice and bravery in their steadfastness and their continual victories against the forces of evil, terrorism, and takfir. (Harakat Al-Nujabaʾ … Hizbulla fi Nuskhatihi Al-ʿIraqiya, [Harakat Al-Nujabaʾ … Hezbullah in its Iraqi Copy], *Al Jazeera*, September 13, 2016.

[8] Khomeini saw the Shah as an American puppet, as he described it in his first remarks after returning to Iran from exile (see Khomeini, 2018c).

[9] The original protégées adopted rhetoric similar to that of Iranian revolutionaries. They often spoke of their solidarity with al-mazhlumīn (oppressed) and al-mustadaʿfīn (the weak or wretched) who they claim to champion. See, for example, "Kalimat Al-Amīn Al-ʿAmm li Hizbullah fī Mihrajan Dhikra Al-Shuhadaʾ Al-Qāda," 2019.

[10] The Houthis are Zaydi, also known as Fivers, who have a distinct belief system from Iran's Twelvers.

[11] As one former U.S. official explained in the *Washington Post*, "The danger of creating an independent military capability is that you create an independent military capability" (see Fahim and Ryan, 2017).

References

"Abu Hamed: Farmandeh-e jahad-e bedun-e marz," *Javaan*, May 9, 2015.

"Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis li Sayyid Nasrallah: Nahnu wa Iyak ʿala Jabha Wahda," *Al-Manar*, August 31, 2017.

"Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis li Nas: Hadhahi hiya Al-Fuwāriq bayn Al-Hashd Al-Shaʿbī wa Al-Huras al-Thawrī wa Hizbullah" (Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis to Nas: These are the Differences Between the PMF and the Revolutionary Guards and Hizbullah)," *Nas News*, January 15, 2019.

Al-Din, Miysa Shajaʿ, "Al-Huthiyūn wa Iran: Tahālufāt Siyasīa wa Tawaturāt Al-Madhhab," *Al-Masdar Online*, June 2017.

Alfoneh, Ali, "Between Reform and Revolution: Sheikh Qassim, the Bahraini Shi'a, and Iran," The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, *Middle Eastern Outlook*, No. 4, July 2012. As of August 14, 2019: http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/-between-reform-and-revolution-sheikh-qassim-the-bahraini-shia-and-iran_133334850397.pdf

———, "Using Syria as a Training Ground: The Case of the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade," blog post, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 17, 2018. As of November 14, 2019: https://agsiw.org/using-syria-as-a-training-ground-the-case-of-the-pakistani-zeinabiyoun-brigade/

Ali, Mohanad Hage, *Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Middle East Center, March 29, 2019. As of November 18, 2019: https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/29/power-points-defining-syria-hezbollah-relationship-pub-78730

Al-Muslimi, Farea, "Iran's Role in Yemen Exaggerated, but Destructive," Century Foundation, May 19, 2017.

"Amozesh-e tirandazi-e razmandegan-e Fatemiyoun dar Surieh+film," *Tasnim News*, January 24, 2018.

Austin III, Lloyd, "United States Central Command and International Security Assistance Force," statement of U.S. Central Command Commander at House Appropriations Committee, Defense Subcommittee, Washington, D.C., March 14, 2014.

"Bayanieh-ye mohemm-e lashkar-e Fatemiyoun khatab be sardar Soleimani," *Mashregh News*, November 21.

Bayoumy, Yara, and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Supply to Yemen's Houthis Via Oman—Officials," Reuters, October 20, 2016.

Beehner, Lionel, "Iraq's Militia Groups," Council on Foreign Relations, October 26, 2006. As of November 14, 2019: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraqs-militia-groups

Brumberg, Daniel, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 153.

Byman, Daniel, *Deadly Connection: States that Sponsor Terrorism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

———, "Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2008, pp. 169–181. As of August 14, 2019: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100701878424

——, "Unlikely Alliance: Iran's Secretive Relationship with Al-Qaeda," *IHS Defense, Risk and Security Consulting*, July 2012. As of August 14, 2019:
https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/iran-al-qaeda-byman.pdf

——, "Outside Support for Insurgent Movements," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 36, No. 12, 2013, pp. 981–1004. As of August 14, 2019:
http://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.842132

Central Intelligence Agency, "Iran: Exporting the Revolution: An Assessment," Washington, D.C., March 1980. As of November 11, 2019:
https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81B00401R000500100001-8.pdf

"Chera razamandegan-e Fatemiyoun be manateq-e seylzadeh raftand? + aks va film," *Tasnim*, April 15, 2019.

Clarke, Colin, and Phillip Smyth, "The Implications of Iran's Expanding Shi`a Foreign Fighter Network," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, Issue 10, November 2017. As of August 14, 2019:
https://ctc.usma.edu/the-implications-of-irans-expanding-shia-foreign-fighter-network/

Coates Ulrichsen, Kristian, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Collier, David, Jody LaPorte, and Jason Seawright, "Putting Typologies to Work: Concept Formation, Measurement, and Analytic Rigor," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 1, March 13, 2012, pp. 217–232.

Conflict Armament Research, "Maritime Interdictions of Weapons Supplies to Somalia and Yemen," November 2016.

Connell, Michael, "Iran's Military Doctrine," *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, undated. As of November 14, 2019:
https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine

Constable, Pamela, "Recruited by Iran to Fight for Syrian Regime, Young Afghans Bring Home Cash and Scars," *Washington Post*, July 29, 2018.

Counter Extremism Project, *Badr Organization*, New York, last updated October 2019a. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Badr%20Organization-10032019.pdf

——, *Taliban*, New York, last updated October 2019b. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Taliban-10222019.pdf

——, *Hamas*, New York, last updated December 2019c. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Hamas-12192019.pdf

Cunningham, Erin, "While the U.S. Wasn't Looking, Russia and Iran Began Carving Out A Bigger Role in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2017.

Dehghanpisheh, Babak, "Iran Recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for Combat in Syria," Reuters, December 10, 2015.

"Didar-e Sardar Soleimani ba khanevadeh-ye hashid Tavassoli," *Press TV*, August 2, 2016.

Esfandiary, Dina, and Ariane Tabatabai, "Yemen: An Opportunity for Iran-Saudi Dialogue?" *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 155–174. As of August 14, 2019:
https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1204415

Exum, Andrew, "Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2006.

Fahim, Kareem, and Missy Ryan, "The UAE's Hunt for Its Enemies Is Challenging Its Alliance with the United States," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2017.

Faour, Muhammad A., "Religion, Demography, and Politics in Lebanon," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 6, November 2007, pp. 909–921.

Fassihi, Farnaz, "Iran Pays Afghans to Fight for Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2014.

Federation of American Scientists, "Northern Alliance," webpage, last updated August 8, 1998. As of November 14, 2019:
https://fas.org/irp/world/para/northern_alliance.htm

Feierstein, Gerald, "Iran's Role in Yemen and Prospects for Peace," *Iran Primer*, United States Institute for Peace, December 5, 2018.

Feltman, Jeffrey, "Hezbollah: Revolutionary Iran's Most Successful Export," Brookings Institution, January 17, 2019.

Fine, Glenn A., Steve A. Linick, and Ann Calavaresi Barr, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, Washington, D.C., 2019. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/Q3FY2019_LeadIG_OIR_REPORT.pdf

Friedman, Brandon, "Iran's Hezbollah Model in Iraq and Syria: Fait Accompli?" *Orbis*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2018, pp. 438–453. As of August 14, 2019:
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438718300413

Gall, Carlotta, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In," *New York Times*, August 5, 2017.

Gates, Robert, "Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran: Congressionally Directed Action," Washington, D.C., April 2010. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.iranwatch.org/sites/default/files/us-dod-reportmiliarypoweriran-0410.pdf

Gause, F. Gregory, III, "Threats and Threat Perceptions in the Persian Gulf Region," *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. 14, No. 2, June 2007, pp. 119–124.

Gordon, Michael R., "U.S. Says Iranian Arms Seized in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 18, 2007.

"Gozareshi az fa'aaliat-e roozaneh-ye razmandegan-e Fatemiyoun dar manadeq-e seylzadeh-ye Iran + tasavir," *Bashgah-e khabarnegaran-e javan*, April 13, 2019.

"Hamas wa Iran: Hal Tastamirr Al-Qatī'a?" *Al Jazeera*, July 26, 2015.

"Harakat Al-Nujaba' . . . Hizbulla fi Nuskhatihi Al-ʿIraqiya, (Harakat Al-Nujaba' . . . Hezbullah in its Iraqi Copy),"*Al Jazeera*, September 13, 2016.

Hoffman, Bruce, "Al-Qaeda's Resurrection," Council on Foreign Relations, March 6, 2018. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection

"Hozur-e sardar Soleimani dar kenar-e razmandehgan-e Fatemiyoun dar khatt-e moqadam-e jebheh-ye Surieh + film," *Bashgah-e khabarnegaran-e javan*, March 28, 2018.

Human Rights Watch, "Iran: Afghan Children Recruited to Fight in Syria," webpage, October 1, 2017. As of November 14, 2019: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/01/iran-afghan-children-recruited-fight-syria

Iddon, Paul, "Iran Bombarded Iraq Throughout the 1990s," *War Is Boring*, July 23, 2018.

International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2018*, Washington, D.C., 2018. As of November 18, 2019: https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2018

"Iran Denies Accusations of Aiding Taliban in Afghanistan," *PressTV*, May 21, 2018.

"Iran Denies Links with Al Qaeda," Reuters, May 29, 2003.

"Iranian Jets Bomb Kurdish Base in Iraq, Killing 1 and Hurting 3," Associated Press, November 10, 1994.

Jamal, Ahmad Shuja, *The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 443, March 2019. As of August 14, 2019: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/sr_443-the_fatemiyoun_army_reintegration_into_afghan_society-pdf_0.pdf

Jones, Seth, "The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria," Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 20, 2018. As of November 18, 2019: https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-conflict-hezbollah-syria

———, "War By Proxy," Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019. As of August 14, 2019: https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-proxy-irans-growing-footprint-middle-east-0

Juneau, Thomas, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3, May 2016, pp. 647–663.

———, "Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory," *Mediterranean Politics*, 2018. As of August 14, 2019: https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1479362

"Kalimat Al-Amīn Al-ʿAmm li Hizbullah fī Mihrajan Dhikra Al-Shuhadaʾ Al-Qāda," *Al-Manar*, 2019.

Khomeini, Ruhollah, *Sahifeh-ye Imam [An Anthology of Imam Khomeini's Speeches, Messages, Interviews, Decrees, Religious Permissions, and Letters]*, Vol. 13, Abdol-Husayn Shirazi, ed., Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2018a. As of November 14, 2019: http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/c5_3216/Book/English/SAHIFEH-YE_IMAM_Volume_13_

———, *Sahifeh-ye Imam [An Anthology of Imam Khomeini's Speeches, Messages, Interviews, Decrees, Religious Permissions, and Letters]*, Vol. 18, Yunus Poorshab, ed., Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2018b. As of November 14, 2019: http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/c5_3205/Book/English/SAHIFEH-YE_IMAM_Volume_18_

———, "Matn va video-ye kamel-e sokhanrani-e Imam Khomeini dar Behesht-e Zahra, 12 Bahman, 57," *Tabnak*, February 1, 2018c.

Lahoud, Nelly, "Al-Qaʾida's Contested Relationship with Iran–the View from Abbottabad," New America, August 20, 2018. As of August 14, 2019: https://s3.amazonaws.com/newamericadotorg/documents/Al-Qaidas_Contested_Relationship_with_Iran_2018-08-20_151707.pdf

Levin, Daniel, "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad," Wilson Center, July 9, 2018. As of August 14, 2019: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad

Levitt, Matthew, "Hezbollah Finances," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2005. As of August 14, 2019: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-finances-funding-the-party-of-god

———, "Hezbollah's Procurement Channels: Leveraging Criminal Networks and Partnering with Iran," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, No. 3, March 2019. As of August 14, 2019: https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2019/03/CTC-SENTINEL-032019.pdf

Majidyar, Ahmad, "Syrian, Iranian-Led Forces Capture Abu Kamal, Threaten to Confront U.S. and S.D.F.," Middle East Institute, November 8, 2017.

Malsin, Jared, and Summer Said, "Saudi Crown Prince Pivots to Asia from Critical West," *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2019.

Mashal, Mujib, and Fatima Faizi, "Iran Sent Them to Syria. Now Afghan Fighters Are a Worry at Home," *New York Times*, November 11, 2017.

Menashri, David, "Khomeini's Vision: Nationalism or World Order?" in David Menashri, *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990, p. 51.

"Modafean-e haram az Iraq, Afghanistan va Pakistan be yari-ye seylzadegan amadand," *Kayhan*, April 12, 2019.

Moghadam, Assaf, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qaʾida's Tactical Cooperation," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 4, April 2017, pp. 12–19. As of August 14, 2019: https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/05/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss41.pdf

Mueller, Karl P., Becca Wasser, Jeffrey Martini, and Stephen Watts, *U.S. Strategic Interests in the Middle East and Implications for the Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-265-A, 2017. As of October 10, 2019: https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE265.html

Murray, Williamson, and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Nada, Garrett, and Mattissan Rowan, "Part 2: Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq," *The Islamists*, Wilson Center, April 27, 2018. As of November 14, 2019: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq

Nadimi, Farzin, and Michael Knights, "Iran's Support to Houthi Air Defenses in Yemen," The Washington Institute, April 4, 2018.

"Nagofteha-ye Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah az vali-e amr-e Moslemin," *Khamenei.ir*, June 6, 2011.

O'Bagy, Elizabeth, "The Fall of Al-Qusayr," Washington, D.C., Institute for the Study of War, June 6, 2013.

Ostovar, Afshon, *Vanguard of the Imam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ostovar, Afshon, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019, pp. 150–188. As of August 14, 2019:
https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862

Pelletiere, Stephen C., *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 1992.

Peters, Heidi M., and Sofia Plagakis, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2018*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, May 10, 2019. As of November 14, 2019:
https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf

Pollack, Kenneth, *The Persian Puzzle*, New York: Random House, 2005, p. 198.

"Qais Al-Khaz'ali fī Lubnan," *Al-Hayat*, December 10, 2017.

"Ravayat-e Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah az didar-e ba Imam Khamenei dar avayel-e bohran-e Suriyeh," *Tasnim*, September 12, 2017.

Rayburn, Joel D., and Col. Frank K. Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War–Surge and Withdrawal (2007–2011)*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: United States Army War College Press, 2019, pp. 473–476.

Reisinezhad, Arash, *The Shah of Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Lebanese Shia*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Riedel, Bruce, "Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War With Them?" Brookings Institution, December 18, 2017.

Rubin, Alissa J., and Falih Hassan, "Rocket Hits Green Zone in Baghdad as Tensions Flare Between U.S. and Iran," *New York Times*, May 19, 2019.

Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, London: Pluto Press, 2001.

Samii, Abbas William, "The Shah's Lebanon Policy: The Role of SAVAK," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 1997, pp. 66–91. As of August 14, 2019:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283847

Schneider, Tobias, "The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan Fighters in the Syrian Civil War," Middle East Institute, October 2018. As of August 14, 2019:
https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2018-11/PP11_Schneider.pdf

Sharafedin, Bozorgmehr, "Iran Denies Saudi Allegations of Harboring bin Laden's Son," Reuters, March 20, 2018.

Shear, Michael D., Eric Schmitt, Michael Crowley, and Maggie Haberman, "Strikes on Iran Approved by Trump, Then Abruptly Pulled Back," *New York Times*, June 20, 2019.

Sherman, Wendy, "U.S. Policy Toward Iran," written statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., May 15, 2013. As of November 14, 2019:
https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/us/rm/2013/202684.htm

Smyth, Phillip, "Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria," The Washington Institute, April 26, 2018.

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, Washington, D.C., October 30, 2018. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-10-30qr.pdf

Soufan, Ali, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, No. 10, November 2018. As of August 14, 2019:
https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112018.pdf

Souresrafil, Behrouz, *The Iran-Iraq War*, London: C.C. Press, 1989.

Stancati, Margherita, "Iran Backs Taliban With Cash and Arms," *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015.

"Tadmir Taqm al-Munafiqin bi Kamin [Destruction of the Hypocrites Personnel Carrier in an Ambush]," *Al-Jawf.net*, March 7, 2018.

Takeyh, Ray, *Guardians of the Revolution*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009.

"Taklif-e ma var arz-e digital che mishavad? / Tahavolat-e Hashd al-Shaabi-e Iraq che taasiri bar rabeteh-ye Iraq ba Iran migozarad?" *Tabnak*, July 4, 2019.

"Taliban Denies US Claims on Receiving Arms from Iran," *Mehr News*, December 2, 2018.

Tarzi, Amin, and Darby Parliament, "Missile Messages: Iran Strikes MKO Bases in Iraq," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 125–133. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/82tarzi.pdf

"Thawra fī Rajul (A Revolution in a Man)," *Al Alam Channel*, June 17, 2018.

Ulrichsen, Kristian Coates, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 27.

University of Maryland, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "The Northern Alliance (or United Islamic Front for Salvation of Afghanistan–UIFSA)," webpage, last updated October 25, 2014. As of November 14, 2019:
https://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/northern-alliance-or-united-islamic-front-salvation-afghanistan-uifsa

U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., January 19, 2018. As of December 31, 2019:
https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf

U.S. Department of State, "Leahy Law Fact Sheet," webpage, undated. As of December 9, 2019:
https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/human-rights/leahy-law-fact-sheet/

———, "Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," fact sheet, April 8, 2019. As of November 18, 2019:
https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps/

U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Under Secretary Sigal Mandelker Speech before the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies," press release, June 5, 2018. As of November 14, 2019:
https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0406

———, "Treasury Designates Iran's Foreign Fighter Militias in Syria Along with A Civilian Airline Ferrying Weapons to Syria," press release, January 24, 2019.

U.S. Senate, "S. Rept. 114-49—National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 Report," Washington, D.C., 114th Congress, First Session, May 19, 2015. As of November 18, 2019:
https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/114th-congress/senate-report/49/1

Votel, Joseph L., Charles T. Cleveland, Charles T. Connett, and Will Irwin, "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 80, January 2016.

Wehrey, Frederic, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer J. Li, *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-781-AF, 2009. As of November 7, 2019:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG781.html

Werner, Ben, "More U.S. Navy Personnel Deployed to Middle East Than Anywhere Else," *USNI News*, June 24, 2019.

White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, Washington, D.C., December 2017. As December 31, 2019:
https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf

"Who Are the Northern Alliance," BBC News, November 13, 2001.

Wong, Edward, "U.S. Orders Partial Evacuation of Embassy in Baghdad," *New York Times*, May 15, 2019.

World Population Review, "Iraq," webpage, last updated August 27, 2019. As of November 14, 2019:
http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/iraq-population/

"Yaddasht | 10 farman-e nakhost vazir-e Iraq bara-ye tasbit o estemrar-e Hashd al-Shaabi," *Tasnim*, July 4, 2019.

Yadlin, Amos, and Ari Heistein, "Ending the War in Syria: An Israeli Perspective," Council of Councils, September 21, 2017.

About This Report

About the Authors

Ariane M. Tabatabai was an associate political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct senior research scholar at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs.

Jeffrey Martini is a senior Middle East researcher at the RAND Corporation, where he works on political and security issues in the Arab World.

Becca Wasser was a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, where her primary research areas included wargaming, international security, and U.S. defense and foreign policy in the Middle East.

www.rand.org