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Strategic Depth, Counterinsurgency & the Logic of Sectarianization: Perspectives on the Islamic

Republic of Iran's Security Doctrine and Its Regional Implications[1]

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'Take heed, our capacities and capabilities are not merely those things we possess domestically, we also have

important capacities outside the country; we have supporters, we have strategic depth…in some cases

because of Islam, in others because of language, and still others because of the Shiʿi religion. These are the

country's strategic depth (*ʿomq-e rahbordi*); these are part of our capabilities; we must use all of our

capabilities.' [2] - Ayatollah Khamenei

'The Shiʿi Crescent is in the process of formation.'[3] – Major General Mohammad Ali Jaʿfari

'His Eminence says that Syria is our strategic depth.' [4] – Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani (d. 2015)

'We don't have a Shiʿi Crescent.'[5] – President Hassan Rouhani

Introduction

Following the conclusion of the Islamic Republic of Iran's preliminary agreement over its nuclear

programme with the world powers comprising the P5+1, *The New York Times* published an op-ed by three

fellows based at the Washington Institute for New East Policy, Soner Cagaptay, James F. Jeffrey and Mehdi

Khalaji, entitled 'Iran Won't Give Up on Its Revolution'. The article argued with gusto that 'Iran is a

revolutionary power with hegemonic aspirations. In other words, it is a country seeking to assert its

dominance in the region and it will not play by the rules.'[6] We are told that like Nazi Germany before it,

Iran is a 'hegemonic power', which as if by some ontological necessity is compelled to dominate

neighbouring states and reduce them to pliant, cowed vassals. Such 'hegemonic aspirations' were not even regime-specific, but rather profoundly deep-seated, if not primordial, and spanning at least half a millennium, finding their provenance in the Safavid dynasty, which conquered and ultimately unified Iran as we know it today in the 16th and 17th centuries. The drive to dominate, moreover, had a distinctly, not to mention enduring, sectarian flavour. Even Nixon's 'Gendarme of the Persian Gulf' was not spared. Accordingly, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi 'extended financial and military support to Shiite communities and its proxies around the Middle East' and was secure in power as the Syrian Alawites entered into 'Iran's permanent fold'. Perhaps sensing the heady nature of their claims the authors do eventually acknowledge some of the inconvenient facts, which undermine the credibility of an exclusively sectarian explanation for Iranian state behaviour. These include the Islamic Republic's alliance with 'belligerent Sunni actors' and Christian Armenia against Shiʿite majority Azerbaijan. That which is immutable and unchanging is the 'imperial ambition that drives Iranian foreign policy', supplemented 'by a religious or millennial worldview that rejects the principles of the classic international order.'

The following chapter will attempt to provide a very different explanation of Iranian foreign policy and the logic of sectarianization, with an assessment of Iranian counterinsurgency policy and the various constraints it has faced in Syria and Iraq following the Arab Uprisings of 2011. It will argue that rather than uniquely aggressive and sectarian, the Islamic Republic should be understood as a 'regional middle power' whose foreign policy has been primarily determined by the systemic insecurity of a regional system penetrated by hegemonic great powers.[7] The historical development of post-revolutionary Iran's security policies, which are intimately intertwined with its espousal of asymmetric 'strategies of opposition', has often taken the form of financial and military support for politically responsive co-sectarians. These processes have dovetailed with crises of security, trust and legitimacy in weak states, ultimately galvanizing the logic of sectarianization in local and region-wide conflicts. To frame this in terms of Tehran's unyielding drive for the incorporation of Arab capitals into a Shiʿi-Persian Empire for the 21st century will be shown to be a gross oversimplification. By contrast, this chapter will try to show through an examination of the manifold interactions between system-level and meso-level dynamics of securitization, with particular attention to

the examples of Iraq and Syria, that the Islamic Republic's engagement in these conflicts varies widely and depends on a host of variables, many of which lie beyond its immediate control.

The Islamic Republic as a Regional Middle Power in a Penetrated System

Following Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, this chapter will contend that the Islamic Republic of Iran should be viewed as a 'regional middle power'. Namely, a state that is decisive to the regional balance of power and harbours a credible deterrent capability, which through the deployment of both hard and soft power, is able to resist coalitions of adversarial regional states against it. While regional middle powers are middle powers on a global scale, they are key actors within the regional system of which they comprise a part.[8] Such powers assert regional leadership in the name of more general interests, but are nevertheless economically and technologically constrained by the core which has traditionally sought to prevent any single power from organizing the regional system. Moreover, following Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, the following analysis acknowledges that the regional security complex (RSC), far from being negligible, is of decisive importance.[9] Meaning, the security of regional states is sufficiently close that their securities cannot be considered separable from one another.[10]

The Middle East's security complex's geo-strategic location,[11] vast oil wealth, as well as the presence of the Israeli state, have ensured that throughout the course of the second half of the 20th century it has been subject to constant penetration by the great powers.[12] Adam Hanieh has made a compelling case regarding the entwined and mutually reinforcing processes of energy flows to the core and the internationalization of capital underwriting the American presence in the Persian Gulf since the 1970s. The '[p]etrodollar flows from the Gulf, particularly from Saudi Arabia, played a critical role in strengthening both the financialization of the system as a whole and the specific role of the United States as the dominant power'.[13] The region's fully-fledged incorporation into the world economy, and the sometimes tacit, but often explicit *quid pro quo* agreed between amenable elites and the United States' government, has historically entailed security guarantees, foreign aid, technology and knowledge transfers in exchange for ensuring the steady, secure flow of energy to Western markets. Nor is it a surprise that these dynamics have proven decisive in shaping

the character of regional alignments, military campaigns, and security agreements in preceding decades e.g. Gulf War of 1990-1991, and the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 etc. Such a perspective undercuts the claims to unmitigated sovereignty assumed by unalloyed realist theory, and should therefore be included in the account of the structural determinants of interstate competition.[14]

Middle regional powers, cannot completely insulate themselves from the military penetration of global powers, or from entanglement in a complex web of capitalist relations, which following WWII progressively forged a complementary series of economic and security interests binding together regional and great power elites. Under such circumstances middle regional states such as the Islamic Republic can merely attempt to minimize their vulnerability by diversifying their economic relations, and if possible, leveraging multi-polarity and great power rivalry to augment their bargaining power.[15] Another possibility is the pursuit of 'internal balancing', and what Stephen M. Walt calls 'strategies of opposition', which I will discuss in further detail below.

While the first Gulf War has been widely interpreted as inaugurating the establishment of *Pax Americana* and the 'unipolar moment' circumscribing Tehran's ability to capitalise on the great power competition which had characterised the Cold War, such triumphalism proved short-lived as the invasion of Iraq highlighted the profound limits of American power, as well as the complacency of U.S. elites in their capacity to successfully undertake state building dating back to the post-WWII Marshal Plan. More recently this trend has been compounded with the global economic crisis of 2008, attesting to the long-term decline of the U.S. economy which had begun as early as the late 1960s as a result of over-accumulation, coinciding initially with the Vietnam War,[16] and intensified economic competition from Germany, Japan, and later Deng Xiaoping's China.[17]

Bureaucratic-Institutional Rivalries and Consensus Building in Iran's National Security Policy

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a blow-by-blow account of the various phases of Iranian foreign policy over the last thirty years.[18] At least since 1989, and the death of the revolutionary patriarch,

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic has instituted a host of mechanisms for consensus building on issues pertaining to foreign and national security policy. Where in the course of Khomeini's own lifetime the personalisation of policy-making might have been more prominent e.g. the acceptance of UNSC 598 which ended the Iran-Iraq War, the pressures of the regional and international system and exigencies of state-building during the eight-year war with Iraq, impelled the bureaucratization, rationalization and coordination of national security policy across the breadth of responsible state institutions.

As is well established, the Supreme Leader, President and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (*Shura-ye 'ali-ye amniyat-i melli*), Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Intelligence, Defence and Interior, relevant Majles Commissions, regular army, Revolutionary Guards, all participate in these intra-elite discussions. There is a division of labour, with each institution possessing its own nomenclature, priorities, metrics and capital. So, for example, the Foreign Ministry will generally employ the language of international 'diplomacy', while Revolutionary Guard commanders will often speak in terms of military solutions and 'security' and so on. In Bourdieuian terms, one might say that there are overlapping political, religious, military etc., fields and that contestation and the accumulation and exchange of political, economic, religious, and symbolic capital crisscrosses these numerous fields.[19] There is plenty of movement between these numerous bodies, as former members of the IRGC are elected to the Majles or executive responsibilities change hands between various shades of the political spectrum. Moreover, while factional loyalties and interpersonal relationships remain relevant, they play a quite different role than is often the case in the domestic context.

Competition between state institutions over resources and favoured means, can also colour discussions as distinct institutions routinely declaim their fidelity to the 'national interest', which they envision in complementary, as well as conflictual ways. One of the better sources in our possession for understanding some of the mechanisms involved in consensus-building among the state elite is Hassan Rouhani's *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, the incumbent president since 2013 and former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, as well a former parliamentarian and longstanding member of the Islamic

Republic's defence establishment.[20] In a number of instances, he addresses the nature of disagreement, consensus building and the less often acknowledged potential for miscalculation. For instance, he mentions how Iranian military officials were taken aback by the routing of the Iraqi army in a mere three weeks, having believed it would take at least 6 months to a year for the U.S. army to reach Saddam's palace.[21]

At present, the chief venue for intra-elite discussions on matters of domestic and international security is the Supreme National Security Council on which the heads of all three branches of state sit, along with the Guardian Jurist's representative and highest-ranking military personnel. The SNSC was formed in 1989 with the revision of the Islamic Republic's constitution following Khomeini's death and its responsibilities were codified in article 176 of the constitution, where it was stipulated that the council must take up the role in '[d]etermining the defence and national security policies within the framework of general policies determined by the Leader'. The reason for its establishment was to streamline elite level decision-making pertaining to national security at both home and abroad, and hasten the process whereby policy could be decided and executed.[22] All relevant state institutions send their intelligence directly to the SNSC's secretariat allowing for comprehensive evaluation by one or more of its several sub-committees. One of the examples Rouhani recounts is the coordinated nature of the Islamic Republic's public response to 9/11 and the issue of an official statement condemning the attacks as an act of terrorism. In this instance, the Guardian Jurist, Ayatollah ʿAli Khamenei, President Mohammad Khatami, the Director General of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, ʿAli Larijani, and Rouhani, then secretary of the SNSC, conferred and quickly made the appropriate decision.[23]   Another example is given by ʿAli Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani where he contends that the U.S., U.K. and France, made known their plans to create a 'safe zone' for the predominantly Shiʿi population of southern Iraq in August 1992 after having expelled the Iraqi army from Kuwait. The Foreign Minister of the time, ʿAli Akbar Velayati, conveyed the U.S.'s message stating that their interests did not clash with those of Iran. After conferring at the highest levels it was decided that the Iranian authorities would not object to the American presence, which of course ultimately never came to pass.[24]

Rouhani's reflections on the decision-making process also evince sensitivity to public opinion and perceptions and the need to retain trust, both at the level of elites and the populace.[25] This account of elite consensus-building mechanisms is also supported by other ones such as that of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif who in his recently published memoir *Mr Ambassador*, describes open channels for frank discussion between the regime's manifold personalities and institutions.[26] This, however, does not mean that individuals such as the president cannot influence or initiate a change in style, tone, and occasionally substance, as the case of Ahmadinejad on the nuclear file vividly illustrates,[27] and needless to say the political and constitutional authority of the Guardian Jurist is decisive on key political decisions and the overall direction of policy. In addition to this personal component, there is also the need to acknowledge competing articulations of 'security', and its status as a contested concept,[28] both in Iran and elsewhere, and this is perhaps where factional and institutional rivalries become most acute.

Though by no means strictly defined along institutional lines, it is unsurprising that the military and diplomatic corps, as well as disparate political factions compete over which view of national security ought to be privileged in the formulation and execution of diplomacy and national security policy.[29] For example, in numerous instances it has been indicated that Ayatollah Khamenei had specifically insisted, in keeping with his broad strategic oversight, on Tehran's support for Bashar al-Assad remaining in power in the face of Western demands that he immediately step aside.[30] Meanwhile some in the Iranian diplomatic corps had considered proposals Assad step down in favour of a regime insider less visibly associated with the bloody repression of the preceding years, and above all the deployment of chemical weapons. In keeping with their *Weltanschauungen*, skill set, capital and the division of labour within the regime apparatus, these institutions *qua* institutions, manage distinct, albeit intimately connected aspects of various conflicts. In this way the Foreign Ministry can propose diplomatic initiatives calling for a political resolution to an on-going conflict, while Revolutionary Guards' commanders simultaneously proceed to supervise and train militias in hotspots across Iraq and Syria. And while the President or Foreign Minister might forcefully denounce sectarianism, IRGC commanders managing co-sectarian assets on the ground may express geopolitical rivalry in thinly veiled sectarian rhetoric, by for example overtly attacking Wahhabism in the context of ongoing conflicts in Iraq or Syria, and indirect conflict with the Saudi kingdom and its allies.

Another rhetorical device employed in recent years across almost all state institutions is the virtual conflation of all groups at war with allies in either Syria or Iraq as 'terrorists'. In this way the Iranian politicians and military personnel can eschew the severe repercussions of invoking openly sectarian language, and instead espouse the post-9/11 *lingua franca* of the 'War on Terror', which both Western and non-Western great powers are less inclined to dismiss out of hand. These *modus operandi* comprise the twin elements of a fundamentally political strategy marrying persuasion and brute force, soft and hard power, domination and hegemony. In this way the Islamic Republic can avail itself and adduce the norms and laws regulating international relations, while partaking in internal balancing and irregular warfare, which will be discussed in some detail below.

Strategies of Opposition and Strategic Depth

U.S. imperial overstretch and subsequent administration caution,[31] have contributed to a situation whereby middle regional powers can take advantage of opportunities to exercise varying degrees of autonomy and increase their power within the bounds of the regional system without fear of swift, disproportionate reprisal. The Islamic Republic has proven willing to exploit the diminished state capacity of regional countries wracked by civil conflicts, to protect and, in certain instances, deepen what high-ranking Iranian officials, including the Guardian Jurist himself, have referred to as Iran's 'strategic depth' (*'omq-e rahbordi*).[32] This of course allows the Islamic Republic to keep instability and encroaching threats, emanating from its antagonists at a safe distance, while ensuring relative quite prevails at home.[33] On the regional scale, strategic depth can also be thought of in terms of the logic of 'offensive realism',[34] 'look[ing] for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals'.[35] While in defensive fashion, leveraging the cost of U.S. regional penetration, which has been perceived by powerful individuals and institutions as a major threat to regime survival since the 1979 revolution.

Though the Islamic Republic has sought to expand trade, cultural and religious ties in both Syria and Iraq,[36] it is its support for a cornucopia of paramilitary organizations that has proven to be the Iranian state's most

potent tool for power projection. As opposed to soft or economic power, its relationships with militias form the centrepiece of its manifold 'strategies of opposition' vis-à-vis regional and external adversaries. Such forms of 'internal balancing' are observed where weaker states mobilize their internal resources in terms of an asymmetric strategy, shifting their competition with more powerful states to those arenas where the imbalance of power is less starkly felt.[37] Balancing of this sort is complemented by a range of strategies such as *balking*, namely deliberate non-cooperation; *binding*, which entails the entanglement of self-avowed liberal states in the framework of international law and rules; *blackmail,* whereby dividends are extorted by threats or pressure, and *delegitimation*, where the legitimacy of rival regimes is persistently undermined in the international arena.[38]

The manner in which the Islamic Republic's security doctrine has developed in view of the threat posed by great power penetration is further reflected in the country's official defence budget which stands at approximately \$12-14 billion (2014), including support for foreign non-state actors.[39] The Islamic Republic's conventional military forces continue to heavily rely upon arms procured under the Shah, while as previously mentioned the U.S. arms embargo has ensured that in the wake of the revolution that the Iranian state has been severely hampered in the ability to modernize its military or acquire new state of the art military technology. This stands in stark contrast to a number of Iran's Gulf Arab neighbours. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the military spending of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in 2014 stood at around \$22.7 billion and \$80.7 billion respectively.[40] There are good reasons why the sale of billions of dollars' worth of military hardware to Iran's chief regional competitors, in tandem with the Clinton era policy of 'containment', have reinforced the Islamic Republic's calculus vis-à-vis the indispensability of support for non-state political-paramilitary actors to its security. Rather than directly engaging in conventional conflicts, since the Iran-Iraq War the Revolutionary Guards has honed its conduct of asymmetrical and irregular warfare. It would be fair to say that the Iranian state might characterise its utilization of such means in the mould of Clausewitz's famous dictum, 'war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political discourse carried on with other means'.[41] Fighting protracted wars of attrition on multiple fronts to both deter and accumulate political influence and leverage.

Iran's asymmetric strategies in the post-Khomeini era are best understood as emerging from its security dilemma as opposed to territorial ambitions or the intractable need to perpetually export *the* Islamic Revolution. That being said it is undeniable that the Guardian Jurist and Commanders of the Revolutionary Guards regularly make a distinction between the 'state' (*dowlat, hokumat*) and 'regime' (*nezam*). The former being geographically and temporally bound and conforming to the boundaries of the Iranian nation-state, while the *nezam* is held to be irreducible to the state, and embody a commitment to ideological and socio-political revolution which is total and uncompromising in scope.[42] As should be clear thus far, I hold the latter, in any meaningful sense, to have largely dissipated with the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, even while it remains an important means of framing mobilizations at both home and abroad,[43] and on occasion deployed to undermine the legitimacy of the incumbent executive on the domestic front.

Furthermore, a disproportionate emphasis on this ideological aspect of Iranian state discourse, actually obscures explanation of the Iranian state's actual behaviour, given its genuine structural constraints, and fuels value-laden and sensationalist characterizations of the latter. The Islamic Republic's profound lack of technological edge, and the dated nature of its military hardware due to international isolation and the U.S. arms embargo, make any notion of the Islamic Republic's actual control of manifold Arab states and their incorporation into some Persian imperial order an entirely untenable proposition. Certain politicians and military personnel's inflammatory comments, most notably those of ʿAli-Reza Zakani, a prominent conservative parliamentarian, who bombastically declared Iran's control of four Arab capitals,[44] are best interpreted in terms of the dilemma faced by weaker regional powers trying to deter stronger ones by exaggerating their capabilities and misrepresenting their own strength.[45] It also performs the role of inflating Iran's role in regional conflicts, where its reach and influence is highly qualified. This is most apparent in the case of Yemen, where certain Iranian politicians cheer every Huthi victory, thereby enraging regional adversaries and embroiling Saudi armed forces evermore deeply in the conflict to the point where 'meaningful victory' becomes hard to discern. This is not to deny that certain personages in the Iranian

state might aspire to such a role, but systemic pressures, hard and soft power constraints and elite cleavages, fundamentally preclude its feasibility.

The sectarianization of regional conflicts has been at least in part a secondary process and outcome of Iran and other regional players partaking in balancing strategies through support for receptive co-sectarians, despite the fact that sectarian identity has by no means exclusively determined political alliances of this kind. This process is merely one of several processes by which civil conflicts in the Middle East have becomes subject to the dynamics of sectarianization. Transnational solidarities and support revolving around the regional power balance have proven decisive to the construction of alliances between sub-state and foreign state actors, while the increased salience of sectarianism, both discursively and in terms of the character of civil violence, can make such alliances across confessional lines increasingly costly to the sub-state organization, partially dependent on foreign patronage; Hamas' effort to distance itself from Tehran in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising and the Assad regime's violent repression of it illustrating the point well.[46] The Islamic Republic's policy of politicizing ascriptive group identities has its lineage in the Islamist movement preceding the revolution, and Tehran's subsequent politico-ideological relationships with co-sectarian political organizations such as Hizbullah and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), dating back to the revolution's first decade.[47] To ascribe such resilience exclusively to the sectarian factor would be quite misleading, given that there is a complex web of political and economic interests, which determine the nature and preponderance of these relationships. In a similar vein, it is not sufficient to explain why such relationships have been able to endure and in certain instances flourish.

Mass Mobilizations and Emerging Anarchy

Instead of renovating its conventional capabilities for which it had only limited means as a result of the U.S. arms embargo, the Islamic Republic sought to harness, channel and discursively frame the socio-political and armed mobilizations of politically receptive elements in weak states, affording it asymmetrical capabilities and strategic depth against both regional adversaries and perceived superpower threats. Weak states, broadly speaking, are those which for manifold reasons come to lack significant *autonomy* i.e. the

ability to perform basic tasks independently of social groups, and *capacity*, i.e. the ability of the state to execute its programmes and decisions,[48] and subsequently emerged as staging grounds for interstate and great power competition. It naturally follows that these two shortcomings fundamentally impair the state's ability to exercise a monopoly or even the semblance of a monopoly on violence and coercion. Political receptivity and the pool from which such socio-political movements can effectively recruit, under conditions of state weakness are in turn related to people's perceptions of security and insecurity, or what Barry R. Posen calls 'emerging anarchy'.[49] The Islamic Republic's own Revolutionary Guards and Basij Forces, whose very name means 'mobilization', were born at the juncture of a major social revolution and interstate war, just as Lebanon's Hizbullah emerged from the battleground of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and Israeli occupation of Beirut in 1982. It was in the course of this process that the Islamic Republic was able to forge a model of political, social and armed mobilization that proved incredibly durable, and which it has turned to, time and again, over the course of some three decades.

Most recently these knowhow and resources have been deployed in the internecine conflicts of post-2003 Iraq and the post-2011 Syrian Civil War. In both cases to support regional allies experiencing challenges to their legitimacy from armed political opponents. The nature of Iranian engagement, however, is intimately bound up with several interrelated factors. The most important of which are undoubtedly state weakness and highly dysfunctional state institutions from which the numerous other corollaries arguably follow. These include the presence of ascriptive identity groups, either ethnic or sectarian, sceptical of state neutrality, poor or largely absent welfare provision,[50] a pool of political entrepreneurs and violent specialists ready to ally themselves with strong external states to further their immediate political and material goals, a political economy riddled by politicized patronage networks and afflicted by deep-seated inequality and structural unemployment.

State weakness in the case of Iraq, however, did not simply appear in a vacuum. American imperialism not only destroyed the Baʿthist state and the last vestiges of Iraqi associational life, but also played a decisive role in the new state's reconstitution, and the effective institutionalization of the ethno-sectarian constitutional order. While it would be disingenuous to claim sectarianism in Iraq began with the American

invasion and occupation, there are strong grounds to contend that the new politico-constitutional regime, often euphemistically referred to as 'consociational democracy', generated unprecedented modes and ways of sectarian identification and competition, which were novel in Iraq's history, and incentivized political actors' recourse to sectarian-laden discourses and forms of mobilization. Thus as Anne Alexander has commented, 'sectarian "balance"—and therefore its corollary, sectarian competition—was enshrined in America's Iraq from the start. The practice of *muhasasa*, or the use of a sectarian quota system for appointments, was implemented by political parties whose survival was bound up with entrenching sectarianism.'[51]

The process whereby we see the sectarianization of civil and interstate conflicts is the outcome of highly contentious civil and militarised mobilizations and counter-mobilisations stemming from a combination of domestic and interstate security dilemmas. Thus at the domestic level, where the central state is perceived as lacking both autonomy and capacity and unable to deliver security to the population, and especially when it is perceived to be confessional in its provision of security and welfare service provision,[52] the likelihood of the emergence of a security dilemma along confessional lines is increased, as is the prominence of those elements which decide to take up the role of providing security and presenting themselves as defenders of the ascriptive identity group in question.[53] Such a framework seeks to provide an account of the driving forces behind the efficacy of the Islamic Republic's balancing strategies as deployed in its patronage and alliances with various actors in Iraq and Syria and its efforts to preserve strategic depth through recourse to armed political organizations. In this way following Rogers Brubaker we can dispense with groupist assumptions, and instead regard sectarian identity as a variable, rather a constant.[54] Sinisa Malesevic's conceptualization of ethnicity is also relevant to the framing of the Islamic Republic's relationships with political organizations bearing ascriptive confessional identities. He frames such identities as politicized social action, where 'cultural differences are politicized in the context of intensive group interaction'.[55]

'Militias', which have been a key vehicle for the preponderance of Iranian state influence, and as this chapter will attempt to show, in like fashion can be thought of as armed and politicized social action, or in the words of Charles Tilly, a form of contentious politics.[56] But a genuine problem associated with the use of

the term 'militia' is that it often obscures the social-embeddness of certain armed sub-state organizations and the fact that they are ultimately political organizations pursuing political aims. It is, however, necessary to concede that not all, or even the majority, of the organizations patronized by the Islamic Republic in Iraq and Syria emanated from broad-based social movements. In fact, it often seems to be quite the opposite insofar as a number of political actors with close-knit relations to Tehran were first founded as politico-military organizations only to begin the process of establishing social, cultural and welfare networks later down the line. This is observable in the case of Syria, but certain militias in Iraq such as Kataʾib Hizbullah and Saraya al-Khorasani present a similar problem. That being said those organizations in which Iranian state operatives had a direct hand in establishing are only a number of a multitude of groups currently embroiled in these conflicts.

However, without getting preoccupied with this issue, which is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is essential to acknowledge following Melanie Cammett that, 'where public welfare functions are underdeveloped and religious or ethnic organizations provide social protection, the provision of social services both constitute and reproduces the politics of sectarianism'.[57] Social and welfare protection is thus an important counterpart to the physical security militias often claim to provide. One recent notable example is that of ʿAsaʿib ahl al-Haqq, which seceded from the Sadrist movement in 2006 and was initially best known for its January 2007 raid against U.S. Army headquarters in Karbala killing one soldier and kidnapping four more. Since this time and as its relationships with former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the latter's allies, the so-called *Malikyun*, and the Islamic Republic have developed, so has its media, educational and socio-cultural outreach.[58] Nonetheless, it should be noted that in the case of both Iraq and Syria militarized political groups, which have received arms and training from the Islamic Republic, despite intermittent recourse to sectarian language and symbols, have often embedded their claims in more comprehensive ones in the name of a contested vision of the nation and issues of social justice.[59] In doing so they are able to advance sectional interests and mobilize subaltern and proletarianized classes in the agonistic struggle for political power and resources.

Balance of Power and the Origins of the 'Axis of Resistance'

An important factor determining Iran's security doctrine in the cases of Iraq and Syria has been said to reside in a combination of defensive and offensive realism, depending on whether one is focussing on the international or regional scale. According to John Mearsheimer, offensive realism holds that states strive to become the hegemon of the anarchic system of which they form a part,[60] and this ultimately stems from the drive to increase their chances of survival. Defensive realism, as initially theorised by Kenneth Waltz, instead focused on how state behaviour under conditions of anarchy is primarily occupied with deterring threats and balancing against such threats to their security. Defensive realism contended states achieved this by behaving defensively and maintaining the extant balance of power, rather than seeking to overturn it.[61] Thus, while defensive realism argues states tend to reinforce the status quo, offensive realism holds that anarchy leads states to 'seek more power to maximize the odds of survival', making for more 'aggressive' and robust security competition.[62] However, the combination of these two models, namely a defensive realism taken up with respect to extra-regional hegemonic powers e.g. the United States, and offensive realism vis-à-vis fellow regional powers, will not suffice as an explanation, since it merely affords insight into the broader structural factors and dynamics, determining Iranian state behaviour. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that offensive realism was originally developed by Mearsheimer for analysing the behaviour of 'great powers' on a global scale. In this instance, we are speaking about a complex of regional states in which security in highly interdependent,[63] namely a regional security complex, and yet overdetermined by great power penetration, which has an obvious impact on the calculus of powerful states in the RSC such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. One way of integrating great power rivalry into the regional security complex is through inclusion of the U.S. into the RSC as does F. Gregory Gause III in his delineation of the Persian Gulf Regional Security Complex. But since the Levant is peripheral to this approach and the profoundly interdependent and strategic character of the so-called 'Axis of Resistance' i.e. Iran, Syria, Hizbullah, understated, it seems more accurate to retain a broader view of regional security, which simultaneously acknowledges great power competition still has a formidable role to play. Russia's aerial bombing campaign in Syria at the outset of October 2015 is a stark reminder of just this fact. Another possible way to frame this problem is if we decide to regard the Persian Gulf RSC as one of multiple sub-complexes within the wider Middle East.[64] Nevertheless, the simple application of the defensive and

offensive realist paradigms to the case of the Islamic Republic's security doctrine prove not unproblematic for various reasons, since they tend to neglect the historical genealogy and evolution of this doctrine, along with its specific characteristics and *modus operandi*. The following pages will attempt to qualify and complicate further the application of such inductive models to the Iranian case.

Iran's relationship with Syria dates to the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979 and was initially concerned with balancing against the rival Baʿthist regime in Iraq and its efforts to cast itself in the role of aspiring regional hegemon following the collapse of the Shah's *ancien régime*.[65] What this argument, also proffered by Ehteshami and Hinnebusch,[66] could not envisage at the time is how the alliance has proven so enduring despite the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and the subsequent emergence of a friendly regime in Baghdad, provoking a seismic shift in the regional power distribution. The overthrow of the Baʿthist regime in Iraq induced a shift in the regional power distribution from multi-polarity to bi-polarity, where Iran and Saudi Arabia remain the only two formidable powers in the Persian Gulf,[67] provoking a watershed transformation in the dynamics of securitization. The Tehran-Damascus alliance has generally been seen to rest upon geostrategic considerations such as opposition to U.S. and Israeli domination of the region and the pivotal role played by Hizbullah in bulwarking both countries influence in Lebanon. But as the Syrian uprising escalated into full-blown civil war, besides the aforesaid geostrategic considerations, the issue of omnibalancing had become especially acute, whereby the regime had to assess whether the greatest threat emanated from foreign or domestic sources.[68] The existential threat to the Assad regime itself in light of the challenge posed by the armed opposition has galvanized the Tehran-Damascus alliance and compelled the Assad regime to accept a host of encroachments,[69] many of which it would not have previously countenanced. By contrast, Iran's present-day alliance with Baghdad originates in the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and the effective liquidation of many of the erstwhile institutions of the former regime. The neoconservative architects of that war had convinced themselves it would result in a democratic, pro-Western polity that would stand as an exemplar to the region, and tilt the regional balance against Tehran and Damascus. As we know today, the exact opposite occurred and it was the burgeoning alliance with several powerful Iraqi political forces within the newly-minted political elite which led Jordan's King Abdullah II to resort to the highly problematic epithet of 'Shiʿi Crescent'.

It is worthwhile recalling that in the immediate months following the invasion of Iraq, Sadeq Kharazi, Iran's former ambassador to France and a relative-by-marriage of the Guardian Jurist, sent a proposal to the U.S. via the Swiss embassy. It pledged that there would be 'no Iranian endeavours to develop or possess WMD' and 'full cooperation with IAEA', but also to demobilize Lebanese Hizbullah, transforming it into a strictly political party.[70] Whether such an offer would have ever come to fruition had the Bush administration chosen to indulge its Iranian counterparts at this critical juncture is subject to debate, but what subsequently happened during the catastrophic viceroyship of L. Paul Bremer III, and the now infamous policy of de-Baʿthification undertaken by the Coalition Provisional Authority, guaranteed it remained a counterfactual left to the judgement of posterity. The fierce insurgency against the occupation cutting across sectarian lines, provided the conditions under which the Islamic Republic and Syrian regime could employ a slew of strategies of opposition to increase the cost of the American occupation, and thus help engender the circumstances of its eventual withdrawal. Syria's intentional neglect of its shared border facilitated Sunni jihadists travel to Iraq to fight U.S. occupying forces,[71] while the Islamic Republic supported and trained receptive groups, with a shared stake in vanquishing the Americans, and long cultivated clients such as the Badr Organisation, who progressively took over elements of the state apparatus itself.[72] These strategies can be interpreted as classic cases of 'internal balancing' undertaken by asymmetric powers. In the years which followed the Islamic Republic cultivated its relationships with numerous Shiʿi factions, and in several cases, set itself up as patron and arbiter, as was seen in the intra-Shiʿite conflicts in Karbala in 2007[73] and Basra in March 2008.[74]

Political Entrepreneurs, Proxies and Sectarianization

The composition of the myriad pro-government militias in Syria and Iraq, but foremost the latter, in view of their confessional makeup have often been taken as evidence of the incontrovertibly sectarian character of the current civil conflicts cum proxy war overrunning these countries. Some analysts depict the relationships in simple dyadic terms,[75] a vertical patron-client relationship, in which the client straightforwardly obeys the patron's demands. A more sophisticated approach, however, acknowledges that

there is a clear typology of militias. Moreover, a more attentive sociological analysis of the composition, geographical location and socio-economic makeup of the militias in question is necessary if we care to escape the problems associated with the dyadic model. In short, a typology of the kinds of militias, which operate in these arenas is essential, in addition to a qualified understanding of the nature of 'dependence' and 'control', which various forms of patronage might afford. Given the sheer number of militias operating in Iraq and Syria it is also necessary to examine the levels at which they operate, since clearly many of them do not function on a national, but merely local basis. Our chief concern is those with ties to Iranian armed forces and operatives, and the nature of those ties, which in numerous cases qualitatively vary. Armed groups can be distinguished in several ways. The nature of armed groups stands on a wide-ranging spectrum, with militias in Iraq and Syria either approximating, or amounting to an amalgam of the idealised types below, the two extremes ranging from independent social movement to dependent client.

1) An armed group embedded within a broader social movement and series of local networks, which possesses an independent political agenda, and enjoys a self-sustaining stream of revenue extracted from its social base.

2) An armed group with access to domestic state funds either through co-opted state institutions and/or leveraged by means of intra-elite bargaining, but receiving military training and political support from an external power.

3) An armed client group, funded, organized and trained exclusively by an external patron and serving the latter's goals.

Apart from only addressing the question of a militias' fiscal base, it is also necessary to consider confessional and ideological factors, which will impact the nature of cooperation and how the relationship changes in accordance with shifting geopolitical circumstances. This yields a further typology, which would overlay that enumerated above.

1) Ideologically committed and co-sectarian.
2) Ideologically committed, but non-Twelver Shi'i.

3)   Instrumental political commitment and co-sectarian.

4)   Instrumental political commitment, but non-Twelver Shiʿi.

To reiterate, these are generalized types, which serve a heuristic purpose in the effort to shed light on the nature of the Islamic Republic's sponsorship and support for armed paramilitary organizations, which as should by now be clear, vary widely on several counts, as do the roles they play in the plural dynamics of civil conflicts and their 'sectarianization'.

The initial contention was that the Islamic Republic's security dilemma at the regional and international levels has pushed the Iranian state to pursue strategic depth through support for co-sectarian paramilitary organizations such as Lebanon's Hizbullah and the Badr Organization in Iraq, to name a few. Syria's National Defence Force has its own unique dynamics in terms of its relationship with the Islamic Republic, reflecting the nature of its alliance with the Assad regime, which this paper will attempt to clarify in due course. Each one of these organizations have traversed specific paths of development, but at bottom and especially in their initial stages, were composed of what Tilly has termed 'political entrepreneurs' and 'violence specialists'. These individuals respond to the security dilemmas experienced by members of confessional communities in societies gripped by civil conflict, with highly diminished state autonomy and capacity. They agitate and organize to represent their community and present themselves as the defenders of their respective communities, and thereby often resort to emotive language, crafting narratives connecting people and soliciting their emotional investment in such narratives.[76] According to this model, interpersonal networks are central to such mobilizations.[77] Relationships with foreign states, in this instance, the Islamic Republic, can prove mutually beneficial in both material and political terms, and are not necessarily the simple outcome of transnational sectarian affinities. One guiding hypothesis, which would require a separate study to vindicate empirically, is that the 'cost' of acquiring and retaining the political loyalty of such political entrepreneurs is diminished in relation to the extent of ideological **and** sectarian overlap between sponsors and sponsored.[78] Such costs, however, are multi-faceted, and far from being exclusively monetary in nature, and naturally vacillate and depend on levels of insecurity as gauged by political entrepreneurs and the populace at large. Moreover, patronage in and of itself does have the capacity

to draw an organization, especially one devoid of an independent social constituency, ever closer into the ideological orbit of its patron, but this is by no means a forgone conclusion.

The more paramilitary organizations are able to successfully fulfil the capacities of war-making and extraction, through the likes of foreign funding, donations, protection rents and bureaucratized taxation,[79] the more they will be able to assume the basic functions of a state,[80] and perhaps even domestically legitimate their militarized social network vis-à-vis the formally recognized government. This has been the case with Hizbullah in Lebanon, while the Population Mobilization Units of Iraq continue to be in a state of flux, as various political factions and the Iranian state endeavour to influence the process of its institutionalization.[81] The more a militarized political organization assuming certain responsibilities of the state is able to generate or underwrite the conditions for capital accumulation, so the logic goes, the more it should be able to exercise autonomy vis-à-vis its one-time state sponsor. And given that the leaders of several Shiʿi militias in Iraq, including those whose detractors claim to be beholden to Tehran, have been able to assume national office and thereby attain access to the state largess of what is one of the world's largest oil producing nations, question remarks remain as to how the relationship will evolve, when and if, the threat posed by organizations such as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is eventually neutralized.[82]

As previously mentioned, political entrepreneurs partake in forms of brokerage and create connections between various sites and groups. More importantly they specialize in representation and advocate on behalf of highly politicized identities.[83] In this way they are also able to activate us-them boundaries, and contribute to the polarization of communities which had been peacefully living side by side for generations, as they emphasize merely one dimension, namely the confessional, of individuals' plural, overlapping identities e.g. Iraqi, Shiʾi, Basrawi, masculine, middle class etc. They build networks of supporters upon which they can draw, and thereby sustain and augment their own power.[84] Violent specialists, very simply, possess expertise in the use and deployment of inflicting, organizing and dispensing violence. These are not agents unique to the Middle East as anyone who has read Eric Hobsbawm's classic *Bandits*,[85] or more recent scholarship of Janice E. Thompson pertaining to early modern Europe, can testify.[86] Both works describe in great detail

the variety of actors, including pirates, mercenaries, rebels and private armies, which exercised violence in

pursuit of their own aims alongside one another and harboured the capacity to both agitate against and

cooperate with the ascendant power of the day. It is worth noting that the supposedly impervious

'monopoly of violence', which we immediately associate with the modern state only came to exist in

Western Europe in recent memory, and has never been experienced by a great many countries in the global

South.

As Tilly makes clear, the roles of political entrepreneurs and violence specialists can overlap considerably.

In the case of Iraq, former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, ʿAsaʾibʾs Qays al-Khazʿali, the Badr

Organization's Hadi al-ʿAmeri and the Sadrist movement's Muqtada al-Sadr, are all fitting examples of

individuals who have been able to fulfil the roles of political entrepreneur and violence specialist, even if

they might approximate one of the roles more than the other. But most importantly, it is through these

actors' claims to represent either the nation and/or the faithful and the framing processes which accompany

such claims, and the real and virtual prominence of such advocates in public life, that conflicts of this nature

are 'sectarianized', while their origins in the state weakness and insecurity are elided.

Realpolitik and the Pluralization of Violence: Militias and Counterinsurgency in Iraq and Syria

The Shiʿi paramilitary organizations which have developed in the course of the last several years in Iraq and

the predominantly, but by no means exclusively Alawite / Christian, National Defence Force in Syria have

been the subject of much criticism and controversy.[87] In certain instances, Iraq in particular, these irregular

armed groups have also been commended for fighting in the name of the homeland, the *watan*, particularly

in the aftermath of Mosul's fall to ISIL in June 2014, which had been widely depicted as an existential threat

to the Iraqi polity itself. Indeed, the overwhelmingly Shiʿi Popular Mobilization Units (*Hashd al-Shaʿbi*)

which formed in the aftermath of Grand Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa *wajib al-kifaʾi*, calling on Iraqis to defend

'their country and their people and their holy places', has now received formal legal recognition and in

principle made accountable to, and funded by, the Prime Minister's office, in an effort to diminish the

downward spiral into what one commentator has described as a 'militia state'.[88] In the face of the Iraqi

army's rapid disintegration, the opportunity structure was such, that a significant swathe of the Shiʿi community mobilized in reaction to the perceived threat to not only their holy places, but their lives on an individual and community basis.[89] The emergence of ISIL has introduced a new dynamic into regional power calculations and the valencies of sectarianism. The signifier *takfiri*,[90] largely used by the Islamic Republic and allies such as Hizbullah, eschews outright sectarian denunciation, whereas jihadi-Salafists openly espouse the excommunication of Shiʿis as *rawafidh*, namely, 'rejectionists'. The negation of the Other is integral to their identity in a way it clearly is not in the case of Iranian Islamism and its radical Shiʿi counterparts. The Islamic Republic pan-Islamist commitments, post-colonial imbrications, and minority status in the broader region, mitigate its overt resort and exploitation of sectarian rhetoric and symbols. Nevertheless, there is a discursive process at work which is relational and co-constitutive, and when sectarianism is manifest at the discursive level, it is not Other-centred in the same way that we observe in the language of ISIL and its cognates. Namely, the negation of Sunni Islam is not integral to its self-image and dissemination. Rather it assertively brandishes markers of Shiʿi identity, in ways that have been for the most part abjured by pan-Arabists and secularists alike.[91]

Apart from Sistani's *fatwa* and office's role in encouraging and religiously legitimating the mobilization, financing, training and coordination was a joint effort of the Iraqi government, the Shiʿi tribes (though it should be noted that many tribes cut across sect), local government, established militias (the most powerful of which have strong ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran), as well as other members of the religious establishment.[92] This was a juncture at which the central government struggled to exercise control and in certain respects engendered a scenario whereby foreign states such as Iran could further enmesh its allies and clients within the fabric of the putatively national security apparatus. This is already what had effectively taken place during the peak of sectarian violence of 2006-2007, when the Badr Organization, which was at the time still the armed wing of Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, had infiltrated the Interior Ministry and its police forces and relied on the veneer of officialdom to partake in retaliatory attacks against sectarian and co-sectarian adversaries and even assassinate former Iraqi pilots allegedly responsible for bombing Iranian cities in the Iran-Iraq War.[93] Nonetheless, it is today difficult to deny that the *Hashd* as the Minister of Interior, Mohammed al-Ghabban, himself a member of the Badr Organization, has contended is 'an

inseparable element of Iraq's fabric' with an a differentiated set of social bases and revenue streams.[94] Just as one cannot ignore the fact that many of the men heading its poly-cephalous paramilitary organizations, such as al-ʿAmeri, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Qays al-Khazʾali and Muqtada al-Sadr comprise part of Iraq's political elite and acquire their ability to act as power-brokers by virtue of their social constituencies and/or the armed men they command. These factors, namely their own domestic resources and constituencies, temper their relationship with the Iranian state, whose support has been viewed as a mixed blessing. While there is much gratitude in view of the common threat faced, much suspicion remains vis-à-vis Iranian penetration, in view of the prominence of individuals such al-ʿAmeri and al-Muhandis, who were formerly based in and solely reliant on Tehran. Domestic pressures to 'Iraqicise' have been particularly pronounced in the case of Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and according to one account, it was the Badr Organisation's 'Iran-orientation', which contributed to its break with the ISCI in 2012.[95] A further issue is that those organized groups, which have possessed longstanding ties to Iranian state elites and military institutions tend to be better organised, armed and paid, more experienced and trained, and thus benefit from an asymmetrical advantage over their more recent volunteer compatriots.

The dynamic in Syria for several reasons is fundamentally different. The Badr Organization are redoubtable Twelver Shiʿi Islamists[96] (with a view to our typology, they are largely ideologically aligned, though differences remain) comparable to their one-time Iranian patrons, and were organized along similar lines to Iran's own Basij paramilitary forces, cultivating highly integrated political and organizational relationships between the two over the course of some three decades. The first decade was preoccupied with fighting under the broader tutelage of Iran's Revolutionary Guards against the Iraqi army, both harbouring the shared aim of toppling Saddam Hussein's Baʿthist regime.[97] While more recently, Badr's commander-in-chief Hadi al-ʿAmeri was not only pictured on the battle front with the Quds Force's Major-General Qassem Soleimani, driving the campaign to free Amerli from ISIL control, but has repeatedly attested to the fraternal and longstanding nature of their relationship, and his approbation of Khamenei's leadership of the Islamic *ummah*.[98]

The nature of the organization, especially its experienced cadres, and the role of Iranian personnel in training thousands of Iraqi volunteers with the coordination of the Baghdad government has obviously placed the Islamic Republic's allies in a favourable position within the umbrella of the *Hashd*. But this should not be thought of as synonymous with control by the external power, because one needs to consider the volunteer nature of the initial surge in membership, not to mention the sheer number of political, social and religious actors embroiled in the organization's make up, which see themselves as defending Iraq's national interest, albeit mediated and inflected through a Shiʿi-majoritarian nationalist lens. Moreover, training can be understood in terms of fraternal solidarity and political alliance, without implying obedience, or even control, since there is a convergence of interests between the political entrepreneurs inside Iraq and the Iranian state in consolidating their power in the battle against ISIL.

There are a whole series of interpersonal networks and organizations, which are simply not reducible to the simplistic dyad of patron-client. From the Sadrists, to powerful predominantly Shiʿi tribes, and the traditional religious establishment and factions within the Iraqi state itself. Moreover, formidable volunteer forces have been organized within the ʿatabat, namely the shrine cities, particularly Karbala and Najaf, in what is a historical trend dating back to at least the early 19th century. And it is interesting to note at that time, notwithstanding crucial differences, according to Meir Litvak, urban gangs developed as 'a mechanism for providing communal and personal security for members of a community in response to the absence of permanent governmental authority in the frontier situation, or where the formal government was invested with very little legitimacy'.[99] In short, these forces have developed and thrived in response to domestic security dilemmas, rather than simply fabricated whole-cloth and manipulated by outside powers.

The Syrian National Defence Force (*Quwat ad-defaʿ al-watani*), by contrast, was only founded in late 2012, and was largely a measure born of necessity, as members of the largely conscripted army, began to either defect to opposition forces such as the Free Syria Army, or abscond altogether. Reflecting the character of the Iran-Syria relationship itself the NDF is the outcome of an exercise in knowledge transfer between two authoritarian allies overlaying a domestic security dilemma as individuals and groups invested in the survival of the Assad regime, or fearing the outcome of the regime's collapse, as well as elements looking to exploit

the vacuum resulting from state withdrawal, organized themselves with the aid of an external actor, namely the Islamic Republic. The NDF has little to no sectarian or ideological affinity with the Islamic Republic, and does not possesses a longstanding relationship with the external power which played a role in its initial training and organization. In this instance, the Islamic Republic acted as a facilitator helping train, streamline and organise the pro-regime Popular Committees,[100] which had taken up Bashar al-Assad's call to take up responsibility for security on behalf of the regime and police dissent within their local communities.[101] In this case we therefore see very little by way of ideological affinity, and instead observe a relationship, which is defined partially in fiscal terms, and partly in terms of knowledge transfer and training.

Insofar as 'sectarianization' was at all a factor, it might be said to be one of the repercussions of a far more profound political antagonism at the domestic level i.e. the ruling Alawite families' (not Alawites *tout court*) and their tribal allies' repression of the predominantly, but not exclusively Sunni anti-regime opposition and the militarization of this political conflict,[102] not an ideational one binding the Syria's ruling clan to the Islamic Republic's politic elite. As Thomas Pierret has argued, a key element underlying regime resilience in Syria are the kinship/sectarian ties which define its elite security apparatus and military forces.[103] By contrast, few dispute the Revolutionary Guards' occasionally evident frustration with the NDF, which according to numerous accounts is manned, at least in part, with semi-criminal toughs, often disparagingly referred to simply as the *shabiha*,[104] who had become notorious in previous decades for illegal smuggling, looting, extortion and brazen corruption. Some of these behaviours have carried through to the present, often alienating the very same communities within which they were supposed to maintain order.[105] But as Aron Lund has argued, one needs to be careful not to gloss over the actual diversity and local nature of such pro-Assad armed groups fighting in Syria, which have included 'plain-clothes police, intelligence personnel, Baʿath Party members and paramilitary groups, government-linked tribal figures, and young men recruited for money by intelligence contacts or pro-regime businessmen'.[106] In short, local dynamics are absolutely key to understanding the composition of pro-Assad forces and their alliances in disparate regions across Syria.

Furthermore, in the case of the NDF questions remain to what extent the Assad regime is able to control these myriad and highly decentralized paramilitary groups. It is for this reason the Islamic Republic has played an integral part in organizing, mobilizing and arming numerous, predominantly foreign militias and collaborated with trusted partners such as Lebanese Hizbullah, Badr Organization, and more recently established organizations such as the Iraqi Kataʾib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-ʿAbbas and Kataʾib Hizbullah to fight Assad's adversaries. In comparison to the NDF where ideological affinity is negligible, the latter groups harbour a significant degree of overlap, even while the financial and other material incentives certainly continue to play a role. Thus the nature of Iranian engagement is intimately intertwined with the nature and characteristics of the regime in power (in both cases considered an ally), the social base and client networks of the latter, and these countries' own variegated regional demographic balances, but also the confessional distribution across state institutions, especially those endowed with the capacity for coercion. Moreover, while the Iranian-Syrian alliance neither originated, nor fundamentally rests on sectarian considerations, the Islamic Republic has interestingly relied upon a 'sectarian' explanation for the presence of IRGC personnel in Syria, while repeatedly denying participation in the wider conflict, claiming instead, that the latter were in Syria in a purely advisory capacity. The official, 'sectarian' explanation offered for the presence of alleged retirees and active members of the IRGC in Syria has been the defence of the Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Ruqqaya shrines in Damascus' suburbs, under the banner of the so-called *Defenders of the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine*. In this way the Iranian authorities sought to describe their role as strictly delimited in geographical terms; the 'sacred geography' of the shrines, while disavowing the larger and essentially political ambition and role of sending advisors and senior personnel to directly partake in the defence of strategic locations along the Syrian-Lebanese border, namely Hizbullah's logistical support channels, or key cities such as Homs and Aleppo, vital to the very feasibility and preponderance of the Assad regime.[107]

While one prominent IRGC commander, Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani, went as far as to claim that Iran had established a 'second Hizbullah' in Syria,[108] the relationship and commander structure is fundamentally different, as is the *esprit de corps*, which has traditionally bound Hizbullah to its Iranian patron. It is for this reason that the Islamic Republic has essentially subcontracted a great deal of the fighting to

Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani co-sectarians. This is not merely a matter of retaining plausible deniability, but also in the bluntest of terms, reducing the costs, both political and economic, of Iranian involvement. The Iranian state is not accountable in the same way to its own social base or the wider public when it comes to the death of foreign Shiʿi fighters hailing from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan. When senior members of the Revolutionary Guards are killed in action their deaths must be accounted for, commemorated and sacralised in the public sphere, which had until October 2015 constrained the extent of the Islamic Republic's commitment to placing Iranian 'boots on the ground', to use a hackneyed phrase. The analogy with Vietnam which has on occasion been cited by some pundits early on was thus not unproblematic, since Iran after four years of conflict had proven itself highly reluctant to commit large numbers of ground troops, instead preferring to retain its forces' suppleness and versatility through advising and overseeing pro-government Syrian militias and foreign co-sectarians. In this instance, therefore, it can be said in fairness that the Islamic Republic has contributed to the framing of political mobilizations in 'sectarian' idiom. Estimates as of June 2015 contend that close to 400 Iranian and Afghan fighters have been killed since 2011,[109] and despite the death of several senior personnel in quick succession in October 2015, the figure remains relatively modest in the overall scheme of things, even while official denials of Iranian involvement have long lost any semblance of credibility. The presence of Russian troops and aerial sorties striking at forces opposed to Assad, in other words, great power cover, has however, increased Iran's willingness to employ Iranian members of the IRGC in ground campaigns. This, however, has and will in all likelihood remain relatively measured. Also given the demographic balance, there is no prospect of a mass mobilization along the lines of Iraq's *Hashd al-Shaʿbi*, by means of which Iran could emplace allies within the flux of a larger socio-political movement. Thus to paraphrase Mao, though in times of weak central statehood and acute insecurity Iraq's Twelver majority affords the Islamic Republic the ability to embed allies within a broader socio-political movement, like fish in the sea, while at the same time contending to support Iraq's national defence and territorial integrity (the broad social base can however temper the extent of such influence); Syria provides no such opportunity, and therefore the Islamic Republic has vacillated between outright denial and the 'sectarian' explanation adduced above in order to justify the hard-headed pursuit of its strategic interests.

Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to provide a tentative explanation of the drivers of Iranian security policy and its support for armed socio-political organizations in Iraq and Syria and its contribution to the logics of sectarianization in the civil conflicts currently wracking those two countries. The nested and interlocking series of security dilemmas and their interplay at the system and meso-levels, which emerge in weak states in times of acute crisis, can engender the conditions for a convergence of shared interests between foreign and domestic actors, and the presence of political entrepreneurs and violence specialists willing to step into the fold, mobilize, represent and connect communities in the face of security threats and activate the them/us boundaries which shape the nature of conflict in turn.

The Islamic Republic's desire to protect and augment strategic depth in light of its dated conventional military, and the specific genealogy of its war-making capabilities forged during the Iran-Iraq War, in tandem with its allies' own local practices of war-making and representation, has contributed to the logic of 'sectarianization', and has further fragmented the illusion of a monopoly of violence in both Syria and Iraq. The nature of Iranian political and military engagement in these two countries, despite practical similarities, varies considerably and is indissociable from both the nature of the regimes in power, questions of demography and the historical trajectory, composition and social bases of the militias and their antagonists. Moreover, if we view such militias, especially in the Iraqi case, as forms of contentious politics, harbouring case-specific mobilizing structures, repertoires and framing processes, which mediate between political opportunities, organization and action, it complicates over-simplistic notions of proxy war and the client-patron dyad, which often cast a pall over extant analyses.[110] We can consequently better grasp the extent and constraints placed on Iranian political and military engagement in these conflicts, as well as the strategic policies upon which they rest, and the political conjunctures at which so-called sectarian mobilizations wax and wane.

Under the most precarious of circumstances confessional identity has come to represent plural communities in their totality, while domestic actors competing as guarantors of security, have established material and

organizational ties with an external power, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran, in ways which are unprecedented in the histories of either Iraq or Syria. While, as this chapter has tried to show these relationships and the paramilitary groups, which have proliferated in Syria and Iraq, do not reductively lie in primordial sectarian affinities, or the Islamic Republic's exceptional, ontological compulsion to dominate the region, there is the ever-present danger of generating path dependencies whereby a deficit of security is transfigured into totalizing sectarian animosity, and perceptions of enmity displace relations of amity, and become increasingly difficult to challenge and overturn.[111] If one wishes to eschew such an eventuality from becoming the norm, in both analyses and reality, it is necessary to understand the nature of regional level security dilemmas, in addition to those polarizing disparate communities and how they are interrelated, so that they might one day be defused and trust in a plural future might be renewed once more.

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[7] Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, London & New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 9.

[8] Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, London & New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 6.

[9] Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 41; Loc 1266.

[10] Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 49; Loc 1173.

[11] Gause, III, F. Gregory, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 5; Loc 127.

[12] Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, London & New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 9.

[13] Hanieh, Adam, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, Loc 953.

[14] Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, London & New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 10.

[15] Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, London & New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 8.

[16] Arrighi, Giovanni and Beverly J. Silver, *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System*, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 214.

[17] Harvey, David, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 59; Loc 584.

[18] For such an account see, Ramazani, R.K., *Independence without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2013.

[19] Bourdieu, Pierre, *Forms of Capital*, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson, London: Greenwood Press, 1986, p. 241-258.

[20] Rouhani sat on the Majles Defence Commission in 1980 and assumed the position of Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council in 1989. A position which he held until 2005.

[21] Rouhani, Hassan, *Amniyat-e melli va diplomasi-ye hastei*, Tehran: Markaz-e tahqiqat-e esteratezhik, 1390, p. 58.

[22] Rouhani, Hassan, *Amniyat-e melli va diplomasi-ye hastei*, Tehran: Markaz-e tahqiqat-e esteratezhik, 1390, p. 63.

[23] Rouhani, Hassan, *Amniyat-e melli va diplomasi-ye hastei*, Tehran: Markaz-e tahqiqat-e esteratezhik, 1390, p. 64.

[24] Hashemi Rafsanjani, ʿAli Akbar and Hassan Lahuti, *Rownaq-e sazandegi: sal-e 1371*, Tehran: Daftar-e nashr-e maʿaref-e enqelabi, 1394, p. 277.

[25] Rouhani, Hassan, *Amniyat-e melli va diplomasi-ye hastei*, Tehran: Markaz-e tahqiqat-e esteratezhik, 1390, p. 66-67.

[26] Zarif, Mohammad Javad and Mohammad Mehdi Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir: Goftogu ba Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif*, London: Nashr-e Ney; London, 2013, p. 251-252.

[27] Hossein Mousavian paints a stark picture of his initial encounter with Ahmadinejad in his memoir detailing the nuclear crisis. Mousavian, Seyed Hossein, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012, p. 191; Loc 3435.

[28] Buzan, Barry and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, New York, 2009, p. 135; Loc 3343.

[29] See for example, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Eskandar, 'IRGC Publication: "Is the Revolutionary Guard After War?"', *Al-Monitor: Iran Pulse*, 12 October, 2012, http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2012/10/482/irgc-publication-is-the-revolutionary-guard-after-war/.

[30] 'Goftogu ba moshaver-e omur-e beynolmelal-e rahbar-e enqelab-e Islami: tahdid-e nezami "asl-e mozakerat" ra khatar mindazad', *Khamenei.ir*, 27 Ordibehesht 1394 [17 May 2015]; 'Akharin mosahebeh-ye sardar Hamedani dar mored-e Surieh va fitneh 88', *Otagh-e Khabar 24*, 10 October 2015, http://otaghkhabar24.ir.

[31] As Perry Anderson argues, however, the United States conventional and nuclear military edge continues to dwarf powers such as Russia and China by a huge margin. Anderson, Perry, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*, London & New York: Verso, Loc 3767.

[32] 'Rahbar-e enqelab ba eshareh beh puch budan-e eʾtelaf-e zed-e Daʿesh: Amrika dar Surieh shekast khord dar ʿaraq ham hich ghalati nemi tavanad bokonad', *Kayhan*, 24 Shahrivar 1393 [15 September 2014].

[33] It was framed in just this way by Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani who was killed in Aleppo in October 2015. 'Akharin mosahebeh-ye sardar Hamedani dar mored-e Surieh va fitneh 88', *Otagh-e Khabar 24*, 10 October 2015, http://otaghkhabar24.ir.

[34] Mearsheimer, John, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, Loc 749.

[35] Mearsheimer, John, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, Loc 555.

[36] Von Maltzahn addresses the issue of cultural diplomacy and soft power in the Syria-Iran alliance. Von Maltzahn, Nadia, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

[37] Walt, Stephen M., *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005, p. 133.

[38] Walt, Stephen M., *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* New York & London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005, p. 132-160.

[39] Cordesman, Anthony H., 'The Conventional Military', *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, 2010 [Updated August 2015], http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/conventional-military. Cordesman, Anthony H., and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*, Westport, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 2007, Chapter 3.
It must be acknowledged that the Revolutionary Guards' numerous conglomerates, the best known of which is Khatam al-anbiaʾ, are a crucial sources of revenue for the organization, but reliable evidence indicating the extent to which its military operations are actually funded by business initiatives such as these remains elusive.
The International Institute for Strategic Studies' estimate of Iranian military expenditure for 2013 is slightly higher, standing at $17.7 billion. 'Giri Rajendran: 2013's top defence-spenders', 5 February 2014, IISS.org.

[40] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Military Expenditure Database, http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database. Accessed 06/10/2015.

[41] Von Clauswitz, Claude, *On War*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 87; Loc 1815.

[42] 'Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Guards: The Islamic Revolution is not reducible to the Islamic Republic', *Nameh News*, 15 Mehr 1394 [7 October 2015]

[43] For the importance of framing processes to social movements see, ed. McAdam, Doug and John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald, Introduction, in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, Loc 339.

[44] Nakhoul, Samia, 'Iran expands regional 'empire' ahead of nuclear deal', *Reuters*, 23 March 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-region-insight-idUSKBN0MJ1G520150323.

[45] Mearsheimer, John, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, Loc 819.

[46] Harriet, Sherwood, 'Hamas and Iran rebuild ties three years after falling out over Syria', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/09/hamas-iran-rebuild-ties-falling-out-syria.

[47] For a detailed account of SCIRI's history and its relationship to the post-revolutionary Iranian state see, Corboz, Elvire, *Guardians of Shiʿism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, Chapter 5.

[48] Cammett, Melani and Ishac Diwan, Alan Richards, John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, Boulder: Westview Press, 2015, Loc 920.

[49] Posen, Barry R., 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 1, Spring 1993, p. 27.

[50] Melanie Cammett's important study addresses how social welfare can become a lens through which to study sectarian politics. Cammett, Melanie, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2014, Loc 164.

[51] Alexander, Anne, ISIS and counter-revolution: towards a Marxist analysis, *International Socialism*, Issue 145, January 2015, http://isj.org.uk/isis-and-counter-revolution-towards-a-marxist-analysis/.

[52] Fanar Haddad, for example, has examined how certain elements within Iraq's Sunni community are convinced the central government has discriminated against them in the educational system. While querying the validity of such perceptions, he convincingly shows how they also can reinforce levels of discontent with the neutrality of the Iraqi state. See, Haddad, Fanar, 'Sectarian Relations and Sunni Identity in Post-Civil War Iraq', in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 97.

[53] Posen, Barry R., 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 1, Spring 1993, p. 27.

[54] Brubaker, Rogers, 'Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Volume 35, 2009, Loc 256.

[55] Malesevic, Sinisa, *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006, 27; quoted in Elling, Rasmus Christian, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013, p. 6.

[56] Tilly, Charles and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, Second Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, Loc 279.

[57] Cammett, Melanie, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2014, Loc 297.

[58] 'Cultural Deputy Presides over Graduation of Popular Mobilization Unit Trainees at the University of Babel', ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq Official Website, 07/09/2015, http://ahlualhaq.com/ [Arabic]. 'Mojtaba Institute Announces Opening of Admissions for Preachers and Prayer Leaders for New Academic Year', ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq Official Website, 16/05/2015, http://ahlualhaq.com/ [Arabic].

[59] Fanar Haddad has adeptly examined the intersection of sectarianism and nationalism in, Haddad, Fanar, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, Oxford & London: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[60] Mearsheimer, John, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, Loc 547.

[61] Mearsheimer, John, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, Loc 523.

[62] Mearsheimer, John, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, Loc 555.

[63] Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 64; Loc 1450.

[64] Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 64; Loc 1344.

[65] Goodarzi, Jubin M., *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, 18, p. 28.

[66] Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, Routledge; London & New York, 1997, p. 88; Loc 1972.

[67] Gause, III, F. Gregory, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, New York, 2010, 8; 191.

[68] Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond Hinnebusch, Heidi Huuhtanen, Paola Raunio, Maaike Warnaar, and Tina Zintl, 'Authoritarian Resilience and International Linkages in Iran and Syria', in *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, ed. Steven Heydemann & Reinoud Leenders, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 224; Loc 298.

[69] 'Syrian army and rebels agree to new truce in Zabadani', *Al-Jazeera*, 27 August 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/syrian-army-rebels-agree-truce-zabadani-ceasefire-150827070432906.html. Birnbaum, Michael, 'The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche', *The Washington Post*, 15 January 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/.

[70] For a copy of Appendix A: Iran's May 2003 Negotiation Proposal to the United States see, Parsi, Trita, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, Loc 4753.

[71] Lister goes even further alleging the Syrian intelligence services' direct complicity in cultivating Sunni jihadist elements. Lister, Charles R., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, Chapter 3.

[72] Hassan, Hassan & Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, New York: Regan Arts, 2015, Loc 494.

[73] Rayburn, Joel, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press; Stanford, 2014, p. 191; Loc 2577.

[74] Krohley, Nicholas, *The Death of the Mahdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia*, London: Hurst & Company, 2015, p. 1-5

[75] Phillip Symth's work on this topic is one such example. Based predominantly on one-dimensional discourse analysis and iconography he assumes several armed Shiʿi groups to be advocates of a abstract ideology named 'Khomeinism', and thus essentially clients of the Islamic Republic and adherents of *velayat-e faqih*. *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, Phillip Smyth, Policy Focus 138, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015.

[76] For an interesting approach to affective politics and digital media see, Papacharissi, Zizi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

[77] Ed. Beinin, Joel and Frederic Vairel, 'Introduction: The Middle East and North Africa Beyond Classical Social Movement Theory', in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2nd ed., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 7; Loc 286.

[78] This hypothesis is partially influenced by the analytical framework provided by Justin J. Gengler in the context of the domestic politics of the Gulf Arab states. Gengler, Justin J., 'Understanding Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf', in ed. Potter, Lawrence G., *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, Loc 780-794.

[79] Tilly, Charles, 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in ed. Skocpol, Theda and Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, Loc 4536.

[80] Ahram, Ariel I., *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 3; Loc 133.

[81] Sowell, Kirk H., 'Badr at the Forefront of Iraq's Shia Militias', *Sada; Carnegie Endowment for Peace*, 13 August 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=61016.

[82] Ahram, Ariel I., *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 15; Loc 354.

[83] Tilly, Charles, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 34.

[84] Tilly, Charles, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 34.

[85] Hobsbawm, Eric, *Bandits,* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010.

[86] Thompson, Janice E., *Mercenaries, Pirates, & Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

[87] 'Iraq: Militia Abuses Mar Fight Against ISIS', *Human Rights Watch*, 20 September 2015, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/20/iraq-militia-abuses-mar-fight-against-isis.

[88] Sowell, Kirk H., 'The Rise of Iraq's Militia State', *Sada; Carnegie Endowment for Peace*, 23 April 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=59888. The figures pertaining to the number of Sunni members of the Hashd varies widely. Some figures are as high as 20,000, but are not easy to verify. Safir-e ʿAraq dar Tehran dar goftogu ba "Qods": 20 hezar Sunni dar "Hashd al-Shaʿbi" hozur darand, *Qods Online*, 7 Bahman, 1393 [27 January 2015], http://qudsonline.ir/detail/News/343092.

[89] Ed. Beinin, Joel and Frederic Vairel, 'Introduction: The Middle East and North Africa Beyond Classical Social Movement Theory', in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2nd ed., Stanford: Stanford University Press; Stanford, 2013, p. 28, Loc 706.

[90] *Takfiri* as a term has generally come to denote Salafi-Jihadi forces, and brings to the fore their theological excommunication of Muslims who fail to conform to their particular vision of 'orthodoxy'. It has been used to ideologically delegitimate fellow Muslim politico-military opponents, casting them instead as apostates, which in turn transforms the laws regulating conflict between them. The animosity expressed towards 'Shiʿi Muslims' writ large,

has been particularly venomous and toxic in its consequences for sectarian relations. However, the designation 'takfiri' has been used by official Iranian state media and Hizbullah to label forces with which Iran and its allies have been in conflict, effectively tarring all sub-state adversaries in Syria and Iraq with the same brush. This process in turn strips politico-military rivals of anything by way of identifiable political demands and depicts the latter wholly as unqualified sectarian fanatics. Both discursive interpellations turn one's opponent into an inhuman abstraction, and beyond the pale of rectitude and dialogue. For the theology of *takfir* see, Lav, Daniel, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[91] Haddad, Fanar, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, Oxford & London: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 50; Loc 1008.

[92] Cigar, Norman, *Iraq's Shia Warlords and their Militias: Political and Security Challenges and Options*, Kindle: Didactic Press, 2015, Loc 143.

[93] Rayburn, Joel, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press; Stanford, 2014, p. 85; Loc 1130; Harnden, Toby and Aqeel Hussein & Colin Freeman, 'Iran 'sponsors assassination' of Sunni pilots who bombed Teheran', *The Telegraph*, 29 October 2005, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/1501837/Iran-sponsors-assassination-of-Sunni-pilots-who-bombed-Teheran.html.

[94] Quoted in, Cigar, Norman, *Iraq's Shia Warlords and their Militias: Political and Security Challenges and Options*, Didactic Press; Kindle, 2015, Loc 332.

[95] Corboz, Elvire, *Guardians of Shiʿism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, p. 157.

[96] Twelver Shiʿi Muslims are the largest branch of Shiʿi Muslims, which include the Ismaʿilis, Zaydis and also, but not always, the Alawis. They are 'Twelver' in virtue of the designated and sacrosanct sequence of twelve infallible Imams through the matrilineal line of Fatemeh, the Prophet Muhammad's daughter and his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAli bin Abi Talib. Twelvers believe the Twelfth Imam went into hiding in the ninth-century and remains in occultation till this day.

It should be added that while one can refer to such groups as 'Islamists', in so far as they believe that 'Islam' has a role to play in the political ordering and management of society, it far from clear whether groups such as ISCI subscribe to the official Iranian state doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. In fact, many instances can be adduced where at least ISCI has explicitly distanced itself from the latter doctrine. Its change of name from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq is just one such example. Similarly, the Islamic Daʿwa Party while often described as Islamist has never subscribed to the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* since their formation in the late1950s.

[97] Jabar, Faleh A., *The Shiʿite Movement in Iraq*, London: Saqi, 2003, p. 253.

[98] Parker, Ed and Babak Dehghanpisheh & Isabel Coles, 'Special Report: How Iran's military chiefs operate in Iraq', *Reuters*, 24 February 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-committee-specialrepor-idUSKBN0LS0VD20150224.

[99] Litvak, Meir, *Shiʿi Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq: The ʿUlamaʾ of Najaf and Karbalaʾ*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 123. Also see, Cole, Juan R. I. and Moojan Momen, 'Mafia, Mob and Shiism in Iraq: The Rebellion of Ottoman Karbala 1824-1846', *Past and Present*, 112 (1), 1986, p. 112-143.

[100] 'Insight: Syrian Government Guerrilla Fighters Being Sent to Iran for Training', *Reuters*, April 4, 2013, http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404.

[101] Lund, Aron, 'Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 March 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59215.

[102] Goldsmith, Leon T., *Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace*, London: Hurst & Co., 2015, p. 6.

[103] Pierret, Thomas, 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict', *Peace Brief*, 162, United States Institute of Peace, 18 November 2013.

[104] Lund, Aron, 'Chasing Ghosts: The *Shabiha* Phenomenon', in ed. Kerr, Michael & Craig Larkin, *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, London: Hurst & Company, 2015, p. 208.

[105] 'Janeshin-e farmandeh-ye qods dekhalat-e sepah dar havades-e surieh ra taʿid kard', *Radio Farda*, 7 Khordad 1391 [27 May 2012].

[106] Lund, Aron, 'Chasing Ghosts: The *Shabiha* Phenomenon', in ed. Kerr, Michael & Craig Larkin, *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, London: Hurst & Company, 2015, p. 212.

[107] Blanford, Nicolas, 'Leaked video: Iran guiding thousands of Shiite fighters to Syria', *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 September 2013, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2013/0923/Leaked-video-Iran-guiding-thousands-of-Shiite-fighters-to-Syria.

[108] 'Farmandeh-ye arshad-e Sepah: Iran Hezbollah-ye dovvom ra dar Surieh tashkil dad', *BBC Persian*, May 5, 2014.

[109] Bastani, Hossein, 'Iran quietly deepens involvement in Syria's war', *BBC News*, 20 October 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34572756.

[110] For the importance of framing processes to social movements see, ed. McAdam, Doug and John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald, 'Introduction', in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, Loc 340.

[111] I am adapting the dichotomy elaborated upon by Alexander Wendt. See, Wendt, Alexander, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 298; Loc 6754.