

REVOLUTION UNVEILED:

A CLOSER LOOK AT
IRAN'S PRESENCE
AND INFLUENCE IN
THE MIDDLE EAST

By Phillip Smyth,
Tim Michetti,
and Owen Daniels



Atlantic Council

BRENT SCOWCROFT CENTER
ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY



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Cover image: Two Iranian Revolutionary Guardsmen stand in front of a mural during an anti-US demonstration in Tehran on November 30, 2003. The Guardsmen were attending a demonstration in front of the former US embassy in Tehran organised as part of Iran's Basiji week. The Basijis are a volunteer force attached to Iran's Revolutionary Guards and are fiercely loyal to the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. They played an important role in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, often sacrificing their lives to clear minefields. *Photo credit:* Morteza Nikoubazl/Reuters.

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PUSHBACK
EXPOSING and COUNTERING IRAN

Pushback: Exposing and Countering Iran is a project of the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative in the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security. This series of reports examines the drivers, prospects, and constraints underpinning Iran's efforts to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking. Drawing on new digital forensic evidence and expert analysis, this effort offers strategic and policy recommendations to address the growing challenge Iran poses to stability in the Middle East.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 4

INTRODUCTION..... 6

DIGITAL FORENSIC CASE STUDIES..... 12

 IRAQ AND SYRIA: EXPLOITING PROXIES AND MATERIEL 12

 BAHRAIN: PROLIFERATING PROXY NETWORKS 26

 YEMEN: INVESTING IN CHAOS..... 30

CONCLUSION 34

GLOSSARY 37

FOREWORD

Hybrid warfare has been with us since the American Revolution, when George Washington's Continental Army was supported by a bevy of irregulars, such as Francis Marion of South Carolina. More recently, the United States has worked in close cooperation with irregular militias both to overthrow the Taliban regime in 2001-2002 and as a concomitant to the "surge" that suppressed the Iraqi insurrections in 2007.

America hardly has had a monopoly in hybrid warfare; over the past decade, Russia has refined the concept while seizing Crimea and destabilizing eastern Ukraine, employing local irregulars and soldiers without uniforms—both armed with modern weaponry, cash, hackers, and propaganda, among other tools, to achieve its aims.

Above all, however, it has been Iran that has relied most heavily on hybrid warfare. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to assert that the Iranians have virtually perfected hybrid warfare, having operated unconventionally across the region with a good deal of success since the very inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Hybrid operations have clearly become far more sophisticated. Yet despite having encountered forms of this type of asymmetric warfare in the past, notably during the Vietnam War, and despite having the world's most capable, best equipped armed forces, the United States has yet to develop new political and military approaches to cope with the latest manifestation of this challenge. Moreover, the very nature of hybrid warfare is one that calls for a highly differentiated response geared to the local context in which it is being employed. A strategic nuclear power's employment of hybrid operations and tactics calls for one type of response; a lesser power like Iran calls for an entirely different approach.

In both cases, however, sound strategy, adequate capability, and most importantly, political will should be at the core of an effective response to the heightened asymmetric challenge we currently face. All three factors first require something much more basic, however; namely, a better understanding of the adversary's intentions and the main drivers of his behavior. It is, of course, far easier to evaluate capabilities than to understand why the leadership in Tehran (and for that matter Moscow) thinks and behaves the way it does. Nevertheless, motivations drive capabilities, and understanding the former is key to containing, and if necessary, defeating the latter.

This report is an excellent start for this kind of important intellectual inquiry. If the principal rule of warfare is to know your adversary, then we have a long way to go with respect to Iran. Decades of experience and direct contact with Moscow have provided our intelligence analysts and decision-makers with valuable insight into Russian thinking. In contrast, we never had that luxury with the Islamic Republic's leadership, until the past few years. Yet despite the modest interaction between our diplomats and Iranian officials during the recent nuclear negotiations, we still know very little about those who matter and run foreign and security policy in Tehran: The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and his elite paramilitary arm, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which controls not only the country's most sophisticated weaponry but also key sectors of its economy. That individual, and that institution, remain as murky to us as ever. And those Iranian officials we do know better (sometimes inaccurately characterized as "moderates") seem quite adept at implementing the will of the Supreme Leader.

Revolution Unveiled: A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East is therefore a most valuable contribution to the debate in Washington about the unconventional challenge posed by Iran to its neighbors. While there is a large body of scholarship and policy work on Iran in the academic and think tank communities in the United States, Western Europe, Israel, and the Gulf, this effort is unique because it investigates Iran's regional reach like no other, using new technologies, field work, and various other research tools. I commend the Atlantic Council for taking on this hard problem so skillfully and convincingly. It is about time we get serious about countering effectively Iran's destabilizing behavior in the Middle East. This report is a must read for those in our government assigned with such a responsibility.

*The Honorable Dov S. Zakheim
Former Under Secretary of Defense
Board Director, Atlantic Council*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran is waging asymmetric warfare in the Middle East, to exploit social and sectarian tensions with the aim of destabilizing and gaining influence over its neighbors. Its overt military role in Syria and verifiable sponsorship of groups like Lebanese Hezbollah are well documented—but its activities go beyond that. Through four case studies, this report systematically examines new or less-known methods Iran employs to project its influence beyond its borders.

By using proxy Shia groups, ideology, arms provision, and transnational networks, Tehran destabilizes and strikes at regional adversaries. The Islamic Republic harnesses these transnational networks to build the capacity of its proxies, relying on stronger partners to spread expertise and best practices to less-experienced groups, and obfuscating the true extent of Tehran's involvement. This ambiguity allows Iran to harass its neighbors by playing on political and religious fault lines in countries like Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, and to cultivate its image as the “protector” of the region's Shia.

- In **Iraq and Syria**, support for ideologically diverse Shia groups like the Badr Organization and the lesser-known Jaysh al-Mukhtar lets Iran play an outsized role in shaping political and security developments. Discreet support for the Iraqi Jaysh al-Mukhtar, a group that fired mortars into Saudi Arabia and challenged Iran's rivals in Iraq, allows Iran to hassle its opponents while denying responsibility. By supplying weapons like the powerful AM50 Sayyad rifle to Iran-aligned fighters, Tehran creates images of its influence as a Shia protector—which are widely shared on social-media platforms—and inflates the appearance of influence over groups that do not share its ideology or objectives.

- In **Bahrain**, social media unmasks an Iranian proxy, Saraya al-Mukhtar, which is tapping into a broader transnational network by interacting with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-linked militias in Iraq. Since Iran escalated its interference in Bahrain after the 2011 popular uprising, Saraya al-Mukhtar is just one of several clandestine militant groups that have engaged in acts of terrorism against the government with IRGC support. Saraya al-Ashtar, Bahraini Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Saraya al-Karar all pose threats to security in Bahrain.
- In **Yemen**, recent interdictions of arms shipments intended for delivery to the Houthis have highlighted Iran's opportunistic role. Shipments of Kornet antitank missiles with serial numbers from Iranian national stockpiles and Qasef-1 drones demonstrate how Iran is supplying the Houthis with low-cost systems to counter the Saudi-led coalition's high-cost assets. This hampers the ability of Saudi Arabia and its partners to focus their efforts toward countering Iranian influence elsewhere.

The evidence presented in this report catalogues previously unaddressed challenges that Iran's foreign policy poses to regional stability. Combatting this threat should be among the top items on the US Middle East agenda. But, despite bipartisan support in Washington for countering Iranian threats to core US interests in the Middle East, no actionable plan for pursuing this goal exists. Troublingly, perceptions that the previous US administration was less committed to rolling back Iran's regional designs led Arab Gulf partners to pursue dangerous forms of self-help—the war in Yemen being a prime example.

Today, this perception appears to be shifting. President Donald Trump has signaled he is putting Iran “on notice,” even as he upholds the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for the time being.¹ President Trump criticized Iranian actions alongside Arab leaders in Riyadh, and has indicated that he intends to increase military support for Iran’s Arab Gulf rivals. Additionally, the Treasury Department implemented new sanctions following Iranian ballistic-missile testing, and US forces shot down an Iranian-made drone patrolling near their location in Syria. For its part, the Senate has passed a bill called the Countering Iran’s Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017.² However, it is unclear if these aggressive tactical moves signal a broader strategic shift.

There is ample room to improve US understanding of Iran’s policies and activities in the region. This report contributes to this important goal by piecing together snapshots of Iran’s influence through innovative photographic analysis, geolocation, social-media monitoring, field work, and other methods. The picture that emerges shows Iran as the preeminent state actor working to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking.

1 Donald Trump, Twitter post, February 2, 2017, 5:34 a.m., https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/827118012784373760?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2F

2 US Congress, “S.722 – Countering Iran’s Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017,” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/722>.



INTRODUCTION

Iranian Air Force commanders and staff with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on the anniversary of their pledge with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979.
Photo credit: Tasnim News/Wikimedia.

Iran has long sought to extend its influence beyond its borders. Its aspirations have not always been directly in competition with US interests; Iran under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was a crucial part of the Nixon Doctrine, which aimed to strengthen US partners to better support the United States in preventing the spread of Soviet influence around the globe. Iran served alongside Saudi Arabia as one of the “Twin Pillars” in the Gulf.

However, with the revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the country’s new elites put an obligation to export their ideology and theocratic political system in the state’s founding documents. This strategy was designed to exploit political fragilities and societal fault lines in neighboring countries, and has paid enduring dividends for Iran, at the expense of other states’ sovereignty, and of stability in the region. The theocratic regime in Tehran is a hybrid of revolutionary Shia Islamism,

populism, and anti-imperialism targeted against the United States and its regional partners, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia. Many of Iran’s clerical and security elites, including the supreme leader himself, seem to hold these beliefs sincerely, without any tangible signs of moderation since the Islamic Revolution. Terms like “regional hegemony,” “malign influence,” “destabilizing activities,” “threat network,” and “asymmetric threat” appear repeatedly in the US media and public policy discourse to describe the challenge posed by Tehran’s strategy; all point to a revisionist Iranian foreign policy that is at odds with international law, as well as norms of political order and sovereignty.

Today, Iran's deep influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon is undisputed. Iranian allies are at the forefront of Iraqi and Lebanese politics and security. In Syria, Iran's costly intervention has been central to preventing the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Tehran has worked with its closest ally, Hezbollah, and has sent Shia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries to Syria to counter rebel forces and terrorists alike. Iran has furthered Yemen's descent into chaos, through its military and political support for the Houthi rebels. In Bahrain, Tehran's demonstrable and problematic influence is manifested through a complex set of proxy militant and politico-religious networks. Beyond the Arab world, the Islamic Republic's interests and presence extend to Afghanistan, and to parts of Africa and Latin America, while holding implications for Europe and Russia as well.

Washington is still far from resolving the Iranian regional challenge, though successive administrations have tried to connect various pieces, without a clear grasp of the strategic picture. There was talk of containing Iran's regional influence at the 2016 US-Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh, but no actionable joint plan for countering Tehran's complex hybrid threats exists. The Barack Obama administration struggled to convince the Arab Gulf states to work as a bloc to counter Iran's meddling; for their part, the Gulf states perceived a reduced US commitment to actively assist in countering Iran's regional designs. That perception resulted in dangerous forms of self-help—the war in Yemen being a prime example.

The broad scope of Iran's challenge across states and issue areas makes it a top priority on the new administration's agenda. President Donald Trump has signaled that he will be "tough" on Iran and put the country "on notice," but it remains unclear what precisely this means, and how his approach will specifically differ from those of his predecessors. Regardless of whether there is change or continuity in US policy toward Iran, there is ample room for improving the nation's understanding of Iran's policies in the region.

IRAN'S OPPORTUNISM AND THE FAILURES OF OTHERS

Iran has managed reasonably well in an increasingly tumultuous and shifting strategic environment. The Islamic Republic has been locked in a struggle for survival since its inception. However, the fact that Iran faces real security challenges does not disprove its expansionism. Speech, ideology, doctrine, and systematic behavior across the region all point to a country dissatisfied with the status quo and eager to reclaim what it sees as its historical influence.

Iran faces no real threat of attack or invasion today (let alone occupation). In 2003, the US invasion removed the Iraqi threat to Iran, and created a governance vacuum that the Iranians rushed to fill. By negotiating a nuclear deal with the United States under the Obama administration, Iran avoided danger from the other country that could credibly attack it, at least so long as the JCPOA is upheld. Israeli policy remains a tricky variable, and Israel could decide to bomb Iran if it detects significant Iranian cheating on the nuclear deal, or a lack of international enforcement. Iran, however, is not helpless. It boasts retaliatory options that, if employed, could seriously harm Israel, which lacks strategic depth. Iranian deterrence against Israel, bolstered by Hezbollah's significant rocket and missile arsenal, is credible.

Throughout the US occupation of Iraq, Iran cultivated local Shia allies (who later went on to occupy prominent positions in the Iraqi government), while sponsoring a deadly insurgency against US forces that killed more than four thousand American soldiers. Yet, Tehran faced no significant reprisals from Washington. In Syria, backed by Russian air power, Iran's military intervention alongside Hezbollah and other militias saved Bashar al-Assad, even as he defied US red lines on chemical weapons use and rejected US-sponsored peace talks. Iran is now more influential than ever in Syria, and Hezbollah's position in neighboring Lebanon is still robust, despite the group's casualties from the Syrian conflict (it now also has a presence near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights). In addition, Iran has become, for the moment, a de facto partner of the United States in the counterterrorism campaigns in Syria and Iraq.

REVOLUTION UNVEILED:

A Closer Look at Iran’s Presence and Influence in the Middle East

Iranian Methods of Influence

METHOD:	DESCRIPTION:	WHERE:	EXAMPLES:
Proxy development	Iran has ties to many subnational groups throughout the Middle East, though these groups fall on a spectrum in terms of the control that Tehran wields over them. Proxy groups, of which Lebanese Hezbollah is the prime example, exhibit higher degrees of Iranian control than other Iran-affiliated groups. They effectively work toward achieving Iranian politico-military objectives, intimidating or eliminating opposition, and ultimately increasing Tehran’s regional influence.	Bahrain Iraq Lebanon Syria Yemen	Hezbollah (Lebanon); Kata’ib Hezbollah (Iraq); Fatemayoum Brigade (Syria)
Ideology propagation	Iran plays on ideology, including Wilayat al-Faqih, opposition to the US intervention in the Middle East, and sectarianism to attract support from likeminded groups beyond its borders. Wilayat al-Faqih can be polarizing to Shia outside of Iran, as it affords religious primacy to the leaders of the Islamic Republic, but Iran can still align itself with non-adherents by stoking sectarian fears and anti-US sentiment.	Bahrain Iraq Lebanon Syria Yemen	Adoption of Wilayat al-Faqih by Iraqi political parties and militias; spread of “Axis of Resistance” brand
Arms/ materiel provision and financial support	Iran supplies arms, materiel, and financial resources to a range of actors to cultivate influence. Some of the groups Iran arms do not adhere to all its ideology or strategic objectives, but benefit from Tehran’s desire to exaggerate the appearance of its control over and protection of the region’s Shia groups.	Bahrain Iraq Lebanon Syria Yemen	Arms shipments to the Houthi rebels in Yemen
Transnational network building	Iran has created transnational networks of non-state actors throughout the Middle East who facilitate training, communications, and the spread of tactics and ideology across borders to weaken Iran’s rivals. Militia members gain battlefield experience in one of the conflict zones where Iran and its proxies are active, taking their skills and lessons learned back to their countries of origin.	Bahrain Iraq Lebanon Syria Yemen	Facilitating relationships between Bahraini and Iraqi Shia militias

Iran projects its influence into regional states using several methods. Most of these methods are asymmetric in nature, often relying on sectarian tensions to exploit societal fault lines and undermine governance in neighboring states. Bolded country names indicate the in-depth case studies examined in this report.

This status quo is the product not only of Iran's efforts, but also of the consequences of others' actions and vulnerabilities. The most consequential was Washington's strategic blunder in Iraq, which turned public opinion in the United States against US engagement in the Middle East. This sentiment, which found expression in US policy under the Obama administration, removed the single greatest check on Iranian hegemonic activity. Iran is also fortunate to have weaker Arab rivals who, despite their oil wealth and high military spending, do not seem able to present a united front or formulate an effective strategy to confront Iran's regional challenge. They have also failed to cultivate loyal, motivated, and capable proxies in places like Iraq and Syria.

The repeated success of Iranian proxies in foiling Tehran's Arab rivals and their local partners is reflective of these states' infighting and strategic incoherence.

SPREADING THE REVOLUTION: PROXIES, IDEOLOGY, MATERIEL, AND NETWORKS

The development of strong proxies is perhaps the main method by which Iran challenges its neighbors and rivals while stopping short of state conflict. Assessment of which groups are "proxies" and which are "controlled" by Iran is often driven by whether a group espouses Wilayat al-Faqih, the Islamic Republic's official interpretation of Shiism, which calls for political and religious loyalty to Iran's supreme leader. Adherence to Wilayat al-Faqih is a clear sign of a deep connection to Tehran.³ Groups like Lebanese Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba in Iraq openly adhere to this belief and are considered under Tehran's control.

⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸⁹ Ideological alignment does not ensure that these proxies always agree with Tehran, or are above local interests and concerns. It does, however, demonstrate that Iran's theocratic leadership and its extensions within the IRGC exercise a high degree of control over these groups, and that they can be relied upon to work toward achieving Iran's politico-military objectives.

Iran relies on ideology and iconography beyond Wilayat al-Faqih to win support from affiliates in neighboring states. Iran uses resistance to the policy objectives of the United States and its partners, frequently drawing on sectarian narratives in its domestic and foreign policies. Even groups that do not subscribe to Wilayat al-Faqih can repeat these Iranian narratives as they collaborate with Iranian proxies to attack shared foes and pursue varying degrees of cooperation with Tehran's agenda. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command is one example. Despite its endorsement of pan-Arab Marxism, the group lauds its links to Lebanese Hezbollah, has used rhetoric favorable to Tehran, and has received

3 Hassam Mneimneh, "The Arab Reception of Vilayat-e-Faqih: The Counter-Model of Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din," Hudson Institute, May 21, 2009, <https://hudson.org/research/9847-the-arab-reception-of-vilayat-e-faqih-the-counter-model-of-muhammad-mahdi-shams-al-din>.

4 "Nasrallah: Wilayat al-Faqih ta'mirna bil hafadh ala 'tanu'a' libnan wa fakhur bantamaa'i laha eid adm istakhdam al salah l'tahqiq makaasb siasiya," *Al Arabiya*, May 26, 2008, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/05/26/50491.html>.

5 "Wilayat al-Faqih ...wa infaaal badr 'an qiyada 'ammaar al hakim," *Sada al Haqiqqa*, March 17, 2012, <http://sdhnews.com/archives/2792>.

6 Kata'ib hizbollah, www.kataibhizbollah.com/ar/?p=tegr&gr=23.

7 "Markiz al darasat wa al bahouth fi Wilayat al-Faqih yunadham (al jula al wala'iyaa) al aoula wa al ulema' yushidun bil fikra," *Ahl Al Haq*, May 16, 2015, <http://ahlualhaq-iq.com/index.php/permalink/46219.html>.

8 "Z'aim militia shi'aia yad'u li nizam 'Wilayat al-Faqih' fi al 'araq," *Basnews*, February 9, 2016, <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/ar/news/iraq/297023>.

9 Mehrdad Moarefian, "He's Just Not That Into Us: The Supreme Leader's Resistance Strategy Expands," *Critical Threats*, September 2, 2014, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/hes-just-not-that-into-us-the-supreme-leaders-resistance-strategy-expands>.

REVOLUTION UNVEILED:

A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East

extensive funding from the Iranians.¹⁰ Other ideological links between networked groups and Iran may include symbolic flourishes, like the veneration of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, or Hezbollah's Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah.

The provision of arms, financial aid, advisory support, and logistical assistance to proxies and networked groups is one straightforward method by which Iran exerts, and inflates the appearance of, its influence. The proliferation of Iranian arms in conflicts—from Syria to Iraq to Yemen and beyond—exposes links between the Islamic Republic and a range of actors. This method can also help exaggerate the extent of Tehran's control over groups with which it does not have especially strong ties and, in some cases, allows Iran to project an image of itself as a protector of the region's Shia populations.

Finally, Iran's use of the methods described above, in states throughout the region, contributes to the development of transnational networks. Iran relies upon these networks to facilitate training, knowledge transfers, and, in some cases, battlefield experience among its proxies in different states, downplaying direct links with these groups.¹² By encouraging collaboration between open and covert proxies—and providing them with arms, materiel, and training—Iran can strike at its rivals from the Levant to the Gulf, while maintaining plausible deniability or confusing the trail for local security forces.

The case studies in this report expose Iran's use of these methods in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Social media and digital analysis, combined with targeted field work, expose the ties between Tehran and its proxies, even when those links are concealed or publicly refuted. Iranian-controlled Shia militia forces are quite open about their presence on various fronts; one can track the movements of militias operating in Iraq and Syria by referencing Facebook posts and crosschecking them against reports by opponent groups, open-source media reports, and pictures posted from the front. These forces may also be geolocated based on geographic landmarks in such posts. Images and videos of more secretive groups collaborating with Iran's established proxies also find their way online, and expose the true extent of transnational networks. This report presents such evidence with an eye to untangling Iran's web of influence, which continues to ensnare the region.

10 "PFLP-GC Leader Ahmad Jibril: I Want To See Iranian Soldiers Fighting In The Galilee; We Shall March Into Jordan On Our Way To All-Out War With Israel, Whether King Abdullah Likes It Or Not," Middle East Media Research Institute TV Monitor Project, February 20, 2017, <https://www.memri.org/tv/pflp-gc-leader-ahmad-jibril-i-want-see-iranian-soldiers-fighting-galilee-we-shall-march-jordan>.

11 Phillip Smyth, *The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and the Syrian Civil War* (Herzlyia, Israel: Rubin Center, 2013), <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-popular-front-for-the-liberation-of-palestine-general-command-pflp-gc-and-the-syrian-civil-war>.

12 Phillip Smyth, "Iran's Iraq Shiite Proxies Increase Their Deployment to Syria," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-iraqi-shiite-proxies-increase-their-deployment-to-syria>.

**REVOLUTION UNVEILED:
A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East**

IRAQ AND SYRIA: EXPLOITING PROXIES AND MATERIEL

A Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU), or al-Hashd al-Sha'abi, fighter in Iraq. The PMU is effectively dominated by Iranian-backed Shia groups.
Photo credit: Tasnim News/Wikimedia.

BACKGROUND

While Iran relies on longstanding relationships with larger proxies in Iraq and Syria to shape favorable political and military outcomes, it also uses smaller, lesser-known groups to achieve local ends, or to strike at rivals while maintaining deniability.

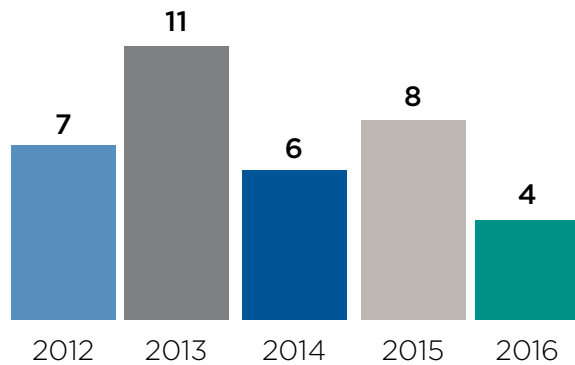
Iran has appealed to Shia groups operating beyond its borders to influence regional events since the early days of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime. Iraq has a long experience with militias influenced by Iran, going back to the 1980s and the Iran-Iraq War.¹³ But, after the US invasion in 2003 and Iraq's subsequent descent into civil war, Iran-backed Shia political parties and their affiliated militias, like the Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army, gained new prominence. Though they have evolved and returned in various incarnations, these groups have maintained their influence in Iraqi politics, and as shapers

of security dynamics. However, the Syrian civil war—in which the Islamic Republic is propping up a significant ally in Damascus—and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) fight in Iraq have prompted the formation of new Iran-sponsored groups with younger leadership. Both older and newer groups act as agents of influence, playing active and integral roles in attracting recruits and deploying for Iranian-supported causes.

The Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS in Iraq have fueled the proliferation of Iran-backed groups in both countries. Tracking the militias traversing the Iraq-Syria border during this period with digital forensic tools reveals several clear trends. As Syria experienced increasing violence in 2012-2013, the conflict saw a marked rise in the involvement of Iranian proxies. Most of these groups originated in Iraq, and crossed the border to fight in Syria against both the rebels and terrorists linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS. Iran also recruited Lebanese Hezbollah for the ground fight in Syria, and used fighters from Liwa Zaynabiyoun and Liwa Fatemiyoun, militias primarily composed of Pakistani Shia and

¹³ Kirk H. Sowell, "Badr at the Forefront of Iraq's Shia Militias," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 13, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/61016>.

Iran-Backed Shia Armed Groups Operating in Syria 2012-2016



Afghan Shia, respectively.¹⁴ Liwa Zaynabiyoun had also fought in Iraq.¹⁵ In 2013, a fighter from faraway Côte d'Ivoire was killed fighting with Iranian-backed forces in Syria.¹⁶ The Iranian- and Russian-led siege of Aleppo, which lasted from the summer of 2015 until early 2017, demonstrated a clear link between Iran's that a reality, planners and the regional proxies they relied upon to make up the rank and file for their commanders (often from the IRGC) on the ground.

With the emergence of ISIS in mid-2014, and its subsequent seizure of large swaths of Iraqi territory, Shia militias once again proliferated in Iraq. Consequently, some Iraqi groups returned home from Syria to fight ISIS, leading to a downturn in the number of Shia groups fighting on behalf of the Assad regime that year. Many

of Iraq's militias have since joined the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or al-Hashd al-Sha'abi, the government umbrella organization for Iraq's militias, which is effectively dominated by Iranian-backed Shia groups. Some of the most powerful and influential Iraqi Shia groups are ideologically loyal to Tehran, operate alongside military advisers supplied by the IRGC, and, despite their official status, do not appear to be entirely accountable to the Iraqi government.¹⁷

The battle for the Iraqi city of Mosul provides a recent example of how Iran's proxy forces are extending their influence. Shia militias have flocked to the city, and social-media postings by some of the armed groups demonstrate active ties to the Iraqi security services and attempts to influence new groups. Analysts hoped that Shia militias under the spiritual guidance of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a nationalistic Iraqi religious leader, might be able to curb the influence of Iran-backed militias operating within the PMU, but that hope has gone unrealized.¹⁸ Though several new, ostensibly "Sistanist" organizations appeared in the weeks prior to the initial Shia advance on Mosul, some—like the Karbala-based, Sistanist splinter group Liwa al-Tafoof—fought directly alongside well-known Iranian proxies like Kata'ib Hezbollah.¹⁹ Splintering within seemingly nationalistic Iraqi Shia militias presents opportunities for Iran and its proxies to pull the splinter groups into their orbit, and cooperation in battle can result in longer-term partnerships.

Iran does little to hide its connection to, and sponsorship of, many of the groups described above, and its ties to organizations like the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq are well documented elsewhere. However, the Islamic Republic's ties to fringe, covert actors it purports to disavow are underexamined.

14 Sune Engel Rasmussen and Zahra Nader, "Iran Covertly Recruits Afghan Shias to Fight in Syria," *Guardian*, June 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/iran-covertly-recruits-afghan-soldiers-to-fight-in-syria>; Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran Recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for Combat in Syria," *Reuters*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pakistan-iran-idUSKBN0TT2S20151210>.

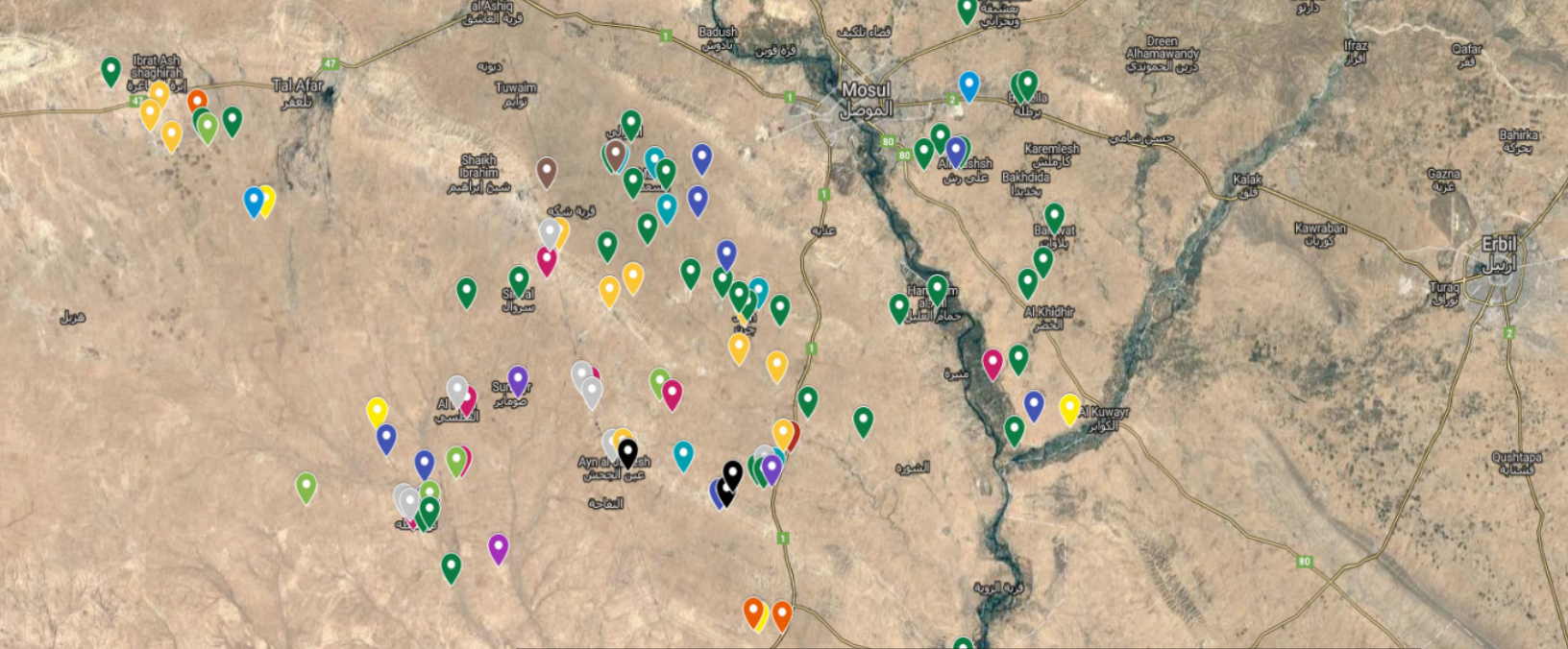
15 Ali Alfoneh, "Analysis: Shiite Pakistani Casualties of the Wars in Syria and Iraq," FDD's Long War Journal, March 17, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/analysis-shiite-pakistani-casualties-of-the-wars-in-syria-and-iraq.php>.

16 Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: The Lion of Damascus, and Afghans, and Africans! Oh My!: Fighters From Exotic Locales In Syria's Shia Militias," *Jihadology*, July 30, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/07/30/hizballah-cavalcade-the-lion-of-damascus-and-afghans-and-africans-oh-my-fighters-from-exotic-locales-in-syrias-shia-militias/>.

17 Renad Mansour, "From Militia to State Force: The Transformation of al-Hashd al-Shaabi," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 16, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/61986>.

18 Michael Knights, "Iraq's Popular Demobilization," *Al Jazeera*, February 26, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/iraq-popular-demobilisation-160224050939178.html>.

19 "Luaa' al tafoof wa Kata'ib Hizbollah yuharrun qar'ia 'al shari'a al thania' b'titja al tariq al raab biin Tal Afar wa Sinjar," *Non14*, November 22, 2016, <http://non14.net/78275>.



SHIA MILITIAS AND THE BATTLE FOR MOSUL

A map depicting some of the many Shia militias involved in the siege to retake Mosul from ISIS control, reflecting positions from the first half of 2017. Iran's proxies flocked to Mosul and nearby Tal Afar to take part in the liberation of the city, demonstrating the extent of Iran's reach.

Map Key

Iranian-Controlled Groups	Sistanist/Other Groups
Kata'ib al-Imam Ali	Firqat al-Imam Ali
Badr Organization	Liwa Ali al-Akbar
Kata'ib Hezbollah	Saraya Ashura
Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada	Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	
Saraya al-Jihad	
Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba	
Saraya Ansar al-Aqeedah	
Kata'ib Jund al-Imam	

**This map does not include all Shia militias involved in the battle.*

COVERING TRACKS: IRAQ'S JAYSH AL-MUKHTAR MILITIA

METHOD: COVERT PROXY SPONSORSHIP

In the pantheon of Iranian-backed and controlled Shia militia groups, there are several main players, ranging from Iraq's Badr Organization to Lebanese Hezbollah. These larger groups, often used by Tehran as blunt tools of influence, are more widely known and easier to track. But, less thoroughly examined is Iran's combined patronage of larger Shia groups and smaller, more covert organizations intended to shape events on the ground with as light a footprint as possible. Iran's support for such small, influential actors is important given their potential for violence, the subterfuge they execute, and the organizational opacity they rely upon to achieve

their objectives. Compared to larger groups, some smaller proxies occupy an important space on the fringe, from which they can act on behalf of the Islamic Republic while maintaining its plausible deniability. For example, Jaysh al-Mukhtar, which has espoused Wilayat al-Faqih, fired mortars into Saudi Arabia, and challenged the Islamic Republic's rivals in Iraq, is one such fringe proxy that achieves Iran's objectives, even as Tehran goes to great lengths to obscure ties. The social-media imprint left by Jaysh al-Mukhtar and other similar groups provides key evidence and insights into their activities, and demonstrates how Iran and its proxies engage in disinformation.



حزب الله جيش المختار

الاخوات والاخوة الاعزاء

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

1_ تم للانتماء الى الحزب نرجو مراجعة مقر امانة الحزب في محافظتكم وتقديم الطلب وملئ استمارة الانتماء بعد الاطلاع على شروط العضوية والنظام الداخلي

2_ في حال عدم تمكنكم من الحصول على عنوان مقر الحزب يمكنكم مراسلة موقعنا لتزويدكم بالعنوان الدقيق راجين كتابة عنوان بريدكم الالكتروني بالشكل الصحيح والدقيق مع ذكر المحافظة والقضاء

[REDACTED].com

3_ ستقوم الامانة المعنية باعلامكم قبول الطلب بعد تدقيقها المعلومات الشخصية في منطقة السكن

07 [REDACTED] للمزيد من الاستفسار الاتصال على الموبايل

07 [REDACTED]

An online recruitment poster from November, 2014 for Jaysh al-Mukhtar, including visual linkages to Hezbollah. The poster lists phone numbers and an e-mail address to be used for contact. *Source:* Facebook.

EVIDENCE AND CASE ANALYSIS

Jaysh al-Mukhtar was founded in February 2013, and is the armed extension of political group Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq.²⁰ It is known for the fiery rhetoric of its political and military leader, Secretary General Sayyid Wathiq al-Battat, during his regular TV appearances from 2013 to 2015. The militia found its strength in Iraq's Maysan Province, an area in which many of its senior members had operated when fighting Saddam Hussein. In 2015, Jaysh al-Mukhtar was partially rebranded, retaining its original name while also adopting the name Liwa al-Mukhtar

²⁰ "Kata'ib hizbollah tinfi 'saltiha' bil Battat," *Al Mada Press*, February 9, 2013, <http://www.almadapress.com/ar/news/6324/%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B7>.

al-Muntaqim.²¹ The group is organized in a similar way to other Shia militias in Iraq, with smaller units under the leadership of a larger organizational structure. Jaysh al-Mukhtar has several sub-brigades, including one named Liwa al-Zelzal. Unlike other Iranian proxies, Jaysh al-Mukhtar has never showcased heavy weapons in its propaganda releases or in social-media posts, even though it has claimed rocket attacks against targets with anti-Iranian agendas.

Wathiq al-Battat, leader of both Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq and Jaysh al-Mukhtar, has regularly claimed that he is a firm believer in Iran's Wilayat al-Faqih, going so far as to say he would support Iran if a war broke

²¹ Said Saadiq al Battat, Facebook page, July 11, 2017,

REVOLUTION UNVEILED:

A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East

out between Iraq and Iran.²² This claim has gained traction on social media, where his followers have posted photos linking the group to Iran's supreme leader.

Battat's ties to hardline Iranian proxy groups stem from his time with the Badr Brigades (the precursor to the Badr Organization) in the early 1990s, and his relationship with Hassan al-Sari, then leader of Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq.²³

An important component for understanding Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq and its military wing is the assertion made by Battat that his group is part of Lebanese Hezbollah. Battat's affinity for the Lebanese Party of God is clear in his choice to adopt his own version of that group's logo. He does not necessarily report to Lebanese Hezbollah, or its Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah. However, signs of affinity for Iran's most successful proxy deeply enmesh Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq and Jaysh al-Mukhtar into the Islamic Republic's web of proxy groups.

The inspiration Battat draws from Iran is evident from his inflammatory media appearances. He has bombastically asserted to journalists that his army numbered nearly half a million fighters, an absurd claim that would make his militia about as large as the combined forces of Iraq's military and police.²⁴ In reality, Jaysh al-Mukhtar is likely no more than a small, albeit effective, militia, and Battat is little more than a talking head with a handful of followers heavily reliant on family

ties.^{25,26} For years, Battat has repeatedly claimed responsibility for revenge attacks on Arabic-language TV stations, and threatened new attacks against Sunni jihadists, Iranian dissidents, Iraqi Baathists, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and many other adversaries.²⁷ In 2011, Battat claimed responsibility for an attack against a Kuwaiti port.²⁸ By early 2013, Battat asserted on Iraqi TV that his group had attacked "Ba'athists and al-Qaeda" supporters, and would continue these attacks to seek vengeance on behalf of Iraq's Shia community. Later, in November 2013, Battat's forces fired mortars into Saudi Arabia to retaliate for what he and other Iranian proxies claimed was Saudi assistance to an al-Qaeda cell in Lebanon that attacked Iranian interests.²⁹ These efforts frequently targeted enemies of the Islamic Republic, but brought him into conflict with the Iraqi central government, which unsuccessfully attempted to arrest him.^{30,31,32}

22 "Iraqi Shiite Militia Leader Wathiq Al-Battat: I Would Support Iran in a War against Iraq," Middle East Media Research Institute TV Monitor Project, October 23, 2013, <https://www.memri.org/tv/iraqi-shiite-militia-leader-watheq-al-battat-i-would-support-iran-war-against-iraq/transcript>.

23 Hamza Mustafa, "Wathiq al-Battat: Khamenei's Militiaman?" *Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 2, 2013, <http://english.aawsat.com/hamzamustafa/features/profiles/wathiq-al-battat-khameneis-militiaman>. Al-Sari is now a leader of Saraya al-Jihad, another Iranian-proxy militia in Iraq.

24 Ibid; Frederic Wehrey and Ariel I. Ahram, "The National Guard in Iraq: A Risky Strategy to Combat the Islamic State," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 23, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/09/23/national-guard-in-iraq-risky-strategy-to-combat-islamic-state-pub-56706>.

25 "Kalaam fii al samiim: Wathiq al Battat wa al sharaf al mafqud," al Basrah, October 24, 2013, http://www.albasrah.net/ar_articles_2013/1013/13ebi_241013.htm.

26 Abu Ruwan al Battat, Facebook page, July 11, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/mustafaalahamed>; Said Saadiq al Battat, Facebook page; Mehdi al Battat, Facebook page, July 11, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100012070742184>.

27 Mushreq Abbas, "Leader of Hezbollah in Iraq Threatens More Sectarian Violence," *Al-Monitor*, July 12, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/wathiq-battat-shiite-mukhtar-army-iraq-militia.html>.

28 "Battat: I Have Information that al-Qaeda Will Blow Up in Baghdad Next Week," Iraqi Dinar, February 16, 2013, <http://iraqidinarchat.net/?p=16035>.

29 "Iraqi Group Says Fired Shells at Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, November 12, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/11/iraqi-group-says-fired-shells-at-saudi-arabia-2013112117138729169.html>.

30 "Bil'sur... amlia iqtahaam manzil al Battat shamaal al'amaara," *Al Sumaria*, July 20, 2015, <http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/146791/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9/ar#>.

31 Ibid.

32 "Tehran jaysh fii dak wa kar Wathiq al Battat fii al'amaaru," YouTube video, 00:01:45, September 24, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFZi867Kx5E>; "Shatibaakaat 'anifha fii al'amaaru ma Jaysh al-Mukhtar," YouTube video, 00:10:02, September 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yVXO1yo6kE>.



Jaysh al-Mukhtar fighters pose with their flag, which superimposes the group's name over a logo based on that of Lebanese Hezbollah. Leader Wathiq al-Battat has claimed that Jaysh al-Mukhtar and its political wing, Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq, are actually a branch of Lebanese Hezbollah. *Source:* Facebook.

Despite his espousal of Iranian causes and ideology, the Islamic Republic and its leading Iraqi proxies have played down their ties to Wathiq al-Battat, likely to maintain plausible deniability for the fringe group's actions against the Saudis and others. Kata'ib Hezbollah, a key Iranian proxy militia and US-designated terrorist group, publicly denounced Battat and Jaysh al-Mukhtar in 2014.³³ Battat was once acknowledged as a commander within Kata'ib Hezbollah, but, in a 2014 press release, Kata'ib Hezbollah denied any connection to him, and even claimed he suffered from a "mental illness."³⁴ As late as 2016, other Iraqi political

leaders publicly denied any connection between Battat and Kata'ib Hezbollah, although they have not denied the group's links to Iran.³⁵

Whether Jaysh al-Mukhtar has officially broken from Kata'ib Hezbollah, as the latter group's members claim, is difficult to determine.

33 US Department of the Treasury, press release, "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq," July 2, 2009, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>.

34 "Kata'ib hizbollah: al mad'au Wathiq al Battat y'aani min mard 'aqli wa al mutahadith min al basra laysa mina," Kata'ib Hizbollah, February 23, 2014, www.kataibhizbollah.com/ar/pages/news.php?nid=216.

35 "Ra'is katala al muaatin al parlmania yanfii irtibaat 'kata'ib hizbollah' wa 'al Battat' bil majlis al islaami al a'ala," *Al Masalah*, March 10, 2016, <http://almasalah.com/ar/news/6664/%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89>.



A photo posted on October 2013 claiming to show Iraqi Jaysh al-Mukhtar fighters across the border in Syria. *Source:* Facebook.

In Iraq, splintering of Iranian proxies does not necessarily lead to poor relations between a larger group and its offshoots. It is possible that Kata'ib Hezbollah's efforts to distance itself from Jaysh al-Mukhtar are based on genuine differences in tactics, ideology, or leadership. However, it is equally possible that Kata'ib Hezbollah's refutation of Battat and his group is intended to sow confusion about Jaysh al-Mukhtar's links to Iran, allowing it to operate on the fringe while maintaining Tehran's distance.

There is ample evidence that Kata'ib Hezbollah is blurring, rather than outright severing, its ties to Jaysh al-Mukhtar. There appear to be continuing links between Jaysh al-Mukhtar and Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters. Images posted to social media depict fighters wearing various Kata'ib Hezbollah patches fighting alongside

apparent Jaysh al-Mukhtar combatants.³⁶ Similarly, Jaysh al-Mukhtar and Kata'ib Hezbollah are linked through the use of similar weapons systems. In a signal of its ongoing collaboration with its Iraqi partner and allegiance to Tehran, Jaysh al-Mukhtar used rocket systems that matched those used by Kata'ib Hezbollah and other direct Iranian proxies in attacks it claimed on the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian rebel group that seeks to overthrow the supreme leader and his regime. These apparent connections are built on top of Wathiq al-Battat's deep ties to militant elements backed by the IRGC.

The Iranian media introduced further confusion into the ties between Jaysh al-Mukhtar and Iran by reporting on Wathiq al-Battat's supposed "death." On December 20, 2014, Battat was

³⁶ Abu Hurr al Hiimata, Facebook page, July 11, 2017.

reportedly killed in Iraq's Diyala Province. Several Iranian outlets ran stories detailing how Battat had been accidentally shot by Shia militiamen at a checkpoint in Diyala, while another claimed that ISIS fighters had killed him.³⁷³⁸ Posts commemorating Battat spread on social media, although Jaysh al-Mukhtar pages and those of his family members were quiet on the matter, and he was never referred to as a "martyr" in a manner similar to other fallen fighters. There was no funeral or confirmation of his death, and only one grainy image claiming to show his corpse was published.³⁹ Battat appeared to miraculously rise from the dead roughly two months later, giving an interview to an Iraqi news outlet in February 2015. He also claimed responsibility for Jaysh al-Mukhtar's deadly rocket attack against MEK dissidents to the IRGC-linked Fars News in October 2015.⁴⁰ This head-scratching episode raises many questions. Why would Iranian outlets broadcast news of Battat's death, only to interview him months later? Why did it take

months for Battat to reemerge, and why did he not refute claims of his death? The answer is likely that the Islamic Republic felt the best way of distancing itself from Battat's actions would be to let him lay low. Clearly, Iran is willing to use disinformation to obfuscate its ties to some of its most loyal proxies, confusing the trail for any who would seek to hold it accountable.

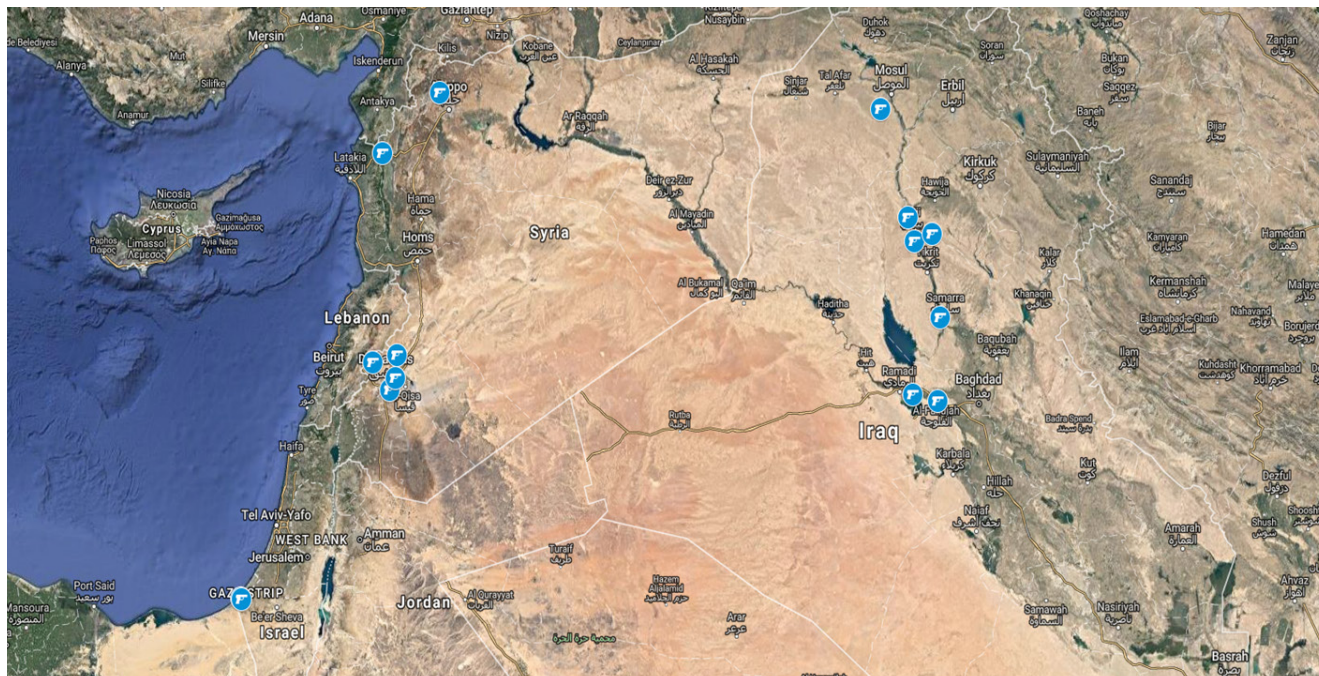
37 Behnam Gholipour, "Deaths in Iraq Show Two Sides of Iran's Role in Sectarian Conflict," *Guardian*, December 30, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/dec/30/iran-militia-leaders-killed-iraq-battat-taqavi>; Thomas Wyke, "Senior Hezbollah Leader Wathiq al-Battat 'Assassinated by Accident' in Iraq," *International Business Times*, December 22, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/senior-hezbollah-leader-wathiq-al-battat-assassinated-by-accident-iraq-1480664>.

38 Gholipour, "Deaths in Iraq Show Two Sides of Iran's Role in Sectarian Conflict."

39 'Aaiish bimaziji, "Tashiia' saeed baasem al bakhaati," YouTube video, 00:00:28, August 18, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXM_WICuVZk.

40 "Iraq Violence: Iranian Exiles Hit by Intense Rocket Fire," *BBC News*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34674185>. This bizarre episode might have been intended to create distance between Jaysh al-Mukhtar's Iranian backers and Battat's absurdist claims and declarations of responsibility for attacks. In a February 2015 interview, Battat only created more questions about his relationship with Iran, claiming Iran bore some responsibility for bloodshed in Iraq and that the Islamic Republic should discontinue support for other groups and instead increase supplies to his own. Nevertheless, even with Battat's openness regarding his ideological loyalty to Tehran, his claims represent a crafty way for Iran to shift responsibility for attacks against regional foes. Given Jaysh al-Mukhtar's targets, the weapons systems it utilizes, its messaging, and its open adherence to Wilayat al-Faqih, it seems proxy leaders like Battat have accepted their role as forces that can be called upon to accept responsibility for executing Tehran's covert objectives; "Iraqi Shiite Militia Leader Wathiq Al-Battat: Give Me a Month, and I Will Make ISIS Terrorists Wear Women's Clothing," Middle East Research Institute TV Monitor Project, February 13, 2015, <https://www.memri.org/tv/iraqi-shiite-militia-leader-watheq-al-battat-give-me-month-and-i-will-make-isis-terrorists-wear/transcript>.

REVOLUTION UNVEILED: A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East



Top: Iran has used the AM50 rifle as a symbol of its influence and status as a protector of the region's Shia. This map depicts approximate locations, based on social media posts, where the AM50 rifle has been used by Iranian backed groups and other forces. There was at least one additional sighting in Yemen.

Bottom: Abu Tahseen, a Shia militia fighter whose prowess killing ISIS militants with the Iranian-made AM50 rifle has earned him widespread recognition on social media. *Source:* Facebook.

THE AM50 SAYYAD RIFLE: EXPORTING THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION'S ARMS

METHOD: ARMS PROVISION

Iran uses arms sales and weapons shipments to project an image of strength and influence beyond its borders. It's bold, doing little to obscure the origin of the arms it supplies to its surrogates. This strategy provides groups amenable to Tehran's politico-military goals with important materiel, and allows Iran to exaggerate the appearance of control and influence over groups that may have similar short-term military goals (e.g., combatting ISIS or other Sunni extremists) but that possess divergent political objectives. Social media does much of the work. As images of fighters carrying Iranian-made weapons spread throughout the region via YouTube videos and Facebook feeds, Tehran can cast itself as a protector of Shia interests across battlefields drawn along sectarian lines. It also allows Iran to demonstrate its involvement in combat, in areas where it does not want to send its own people. A clear snapshot of this strategy is the .50-caliber (12.7x99) AM50 Sayyad rifle, which has become a symbol for Iran's protection and patronage of Shia groups in Iraq and Syria against the threat of ISIS's Sunni extremists.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The AM50 is a single-shot antimateriel rifle employed for long-range sniper operations, including those targeting lightly armored vehicles. It is the byproduct of a 2006 deal between the Austrian arms manufacturer Steyr Mannlicher and the Iranian government. Steyr Mannlicher supplied eight hundred of its HS.50s to Iran's National Police, and Tehran issued a certificate asserting the weapon would be used "to secure frontiers and to fight drug crimes."⁴¹ However, by 2007, US forces in Iraq claimed to have seized around one hundred

of the weapons.^{42,43} As copies of the Austrian-produced rifle gained popularity, Iran's Defense Industries Organization's Individual Combat Industries group began to produce the AM50 as an unlicensed reproduction of the Austrian weapon.⁴⁴ Distinctive features of the Iranian model include its smooth barrel, distinctive pistol grip, and different carrying handles.⁴⁵ The AM50's subsequent spread has been widely documented and amplified on social media, as Iranian-backed groups have taken up the rifle across the Middle East's battlefields.

Just as Clint Eastwood's character in *Dirty Harry* popularized Smith & Wesson's Model 29 .44 Magnum revolver, and an older generation of revolutionaries used the AK-47, the media-promoted heroes of the Shia militias showcase the AM50.⁴⁶ The most iconic of these heroes is sixty-three-year-old Abu Tahseen, whose name has become synonymous with elite sniping in Shia militia social-media circles. Multiple reports claim that Abu Tahseen has killed nearly two hundred ISIS members since the group's rise.⁴⁷ Another video issued by the Iraqi PMU shows Abu Tahseen claiming to have killed 321 members of ISIS.⁴⁸ As his story has gained popular coverage in Arabic-language media and the Western press, the accuracy of the

42 Thomas Harding, "Iraqi Insurgents Using Austrian Rifles from Iran," *Telegraph*, February 13, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1542559/Iraqi-insurgents-using-Austrian-rifles-from-Iran.html>.

43 There were some claims that the AM50s seized by US troops were Chinese-produced clones of the HS.50s purchased by the Iranians. John J. Tkacik Jr., "The Arsenal of the Iraq Insurgency," *Weekly Standard*, August 13, 2007, www.weeklystandard.com/the-arsenal-of-the-iraq-insurgency/article/15064.

44 Yuri Lyamin and Michael Smallwood, "Iranian AM50 and Russian ORSIS T-5000 Rifles in Iraq," *ARES: The Hoplite* (blog), May 29, 2014, www.armamentresearch.com/iranian-am50-and-russian-orsis-t-5000-rifles-in-iraq.

45 Steve Johnson, "Steyr HS 50 in Iran, Counterfeit?" *Firearm Blog*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.thefirearmblog.com/blog/2012/07/13/steyr-hs-50-in-iran-counterfeit/>.

46 Rick Hacker, "Dirty Harry's Model 29: America's Shooting Star," *American Rifleman* (blog), July 23, 2013, <https://www.americanrifleman.org/articles/2013/7/23/dirty-harrys-model-29-americas-shooting-star>.

47 Al Sura English, "Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units Sniper Kills 173 ISIS fighters - Abu Tahseen 5 War Veteran," YouTube video, 00:02:06, December 27, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sInofrqKhH4>.

48 Al Sura English, "Iraqi PMU Sniper kills 321 ISIS Fighters - Abu Tahseen 5 War Veteran Interview," YouTube video, 00:01:32, February 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sInofrqKhH4>.

41 "Austria Weapons Deal with Iran Upsets US," *Voice of America*, October 29, 2009, <http://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2005-02-09-voa18-67523132/284554.html>.

REVOLUTION UNVEILED: A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East

figures has become less significant.⁴⁹ Rather, the question of how Abu Tahseen killed so many ISIS fighters has risen to the fore; his Iranian-made AM50 rifle, prominently featured by his side in many photographs and interviews, provides an answer.

But, a closer look into Abu Tahseen's story suggests a further wrinkle of complexity. Liwa Ali al-Akbar, the militia group to which Abu Tahseen belongs, does not share Iran's ideology, and has clerical leaders who oppose positions held by its theocratic leadership.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Iran aims to project the image that it is the protector and supplier of effective arms to Liwa Ali al-Akbar and all Shia groups fighting ISIS—even those that are not religiously or ideologically aligned to Tehran. While the PMU is commanded by elements with close links to the IRGC, its status as an umbrella group means that it includes components loyal to Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that reject



Though Liwa Ali al-Akbar, the Shia militia to which Abu Tahseen belongs, does not share Iran's ideology nor all of its objectives, images of the sniper and his Iranian rifle help advance the narrative of Iran as a protector of the region's Shia. Source: Facebook

49 "Abu tahseen al saalahi...istura al qanaaseen al 'araaqiin," *Ashnona*, February 2017, <http://www.ashnona.net/iraq/228209.html>; Sam Webb, "ISIS: Meet the Veteran 62-Year-Old Sniper who has Killed 173 Islamic State Terrorists in Iraq," *Daily Mirror*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/veteran-62-year-old-sniper-7571829>; Jon Lockett, "Meet the Grey-Bearded 63-Year-Old Iraqi Volunteer Sniper who has Just Claimed his 321st ISIS Victim," *Sun*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2946730/meet-the-grey-bearded-63-year-old-iraqi-volunteer-sniper-who-has-just-claimed-his-321st-isis-victim/>.

50 "Liwa Ali al-Akbar (ali al salaam) al qua al dhaaraba alati ijhadhat Daesh janub gharb Mosul," *Holy Fatwa*, January 14, 2017, <http://holyyfatwa.com/news/read/2007>.

51 Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Sistani is against Iraqi Shia militants participating in the war in Syria. Initially, the cleric was silent on Shia recruits joining the battle; later, it was claimed he issued orders forbidding travel to Syria by potential Shia recruits. Mehdi Khalaji, "Shiite Clergy's Silence toward Syrian Crisis," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 5, 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shiite-clergys-silence-toward-syrian-crisis>; Suad al-Salhy, "Syria War Widens Rift Between Shi'ite Clergy in Iraq, Iran," *Reuters*, July 20, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-politics-syria-idUSBRE96J04120130720>; "Marjie kabir bi-al-najf: al-adhin yadhhaboun li-liqat fi Suria yaesoun 'awamirana," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 21, 2003, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=12654&article=737005&feature=#.WWTpIIYuUn>.

**REVOLUTION UNVEILED:
A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East**



Hasnain Hadi al-Zaydi posing with the AM50 rifle before he was killed in combat. Images like the above, including with the AM50, were shared on social media as “martyrdom” posts.
Source: Facebook

Wilayat al-Faqih.⁵²⁵³ Similarly, Muqtada al-Sadr, the radical Iraqi Shia cleric, promoter of Iraqi nationalist messages, and leader of Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Companies), maintains a complex, and at times difficult, relationship with the Islamic Republic.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Sadr’s militia has used Iranian-made and supplied weaponry, with one promotional video of Saraya al-Salam’s sniper units prominently featuring the AM50 rifle.⁵⁵⁵⁶ Propaganda from these less-directly affiliated groups complements that from ideologically loyal militias like Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, which have also created online content depicting the AM50 picking off ISIS combatants.⁵⁷ The Islamic Republic recognizes that arming a diverse array of actors demonstrates its indispensable support to all of Iraq’s armed Shia, and visually links the prowess of Iranian-produced weapons like the AM50 with the heroic elimination of ISIS fighters.

Appearances of the rifle have proliferated on social media, and highlight the spread of shipments throughout Iraq and the wider region. The AM50’s addition to arms stocks is easily discovered on Facebook. In one instance, a fighter from Liwa 51 (Fifty-first Brigade) within the PMU posted pictures of himself unboxing a newly shipped AM50 in August 2016. “Martyrdom” posts celebrating Shia militiamen killed in combat have also become prime vehicles for prominently displaying the

52 Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, second in command in the PMU, is an IRGC commander. See: US Department of the Treasury, press release, “Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq,” July 2, 2009, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>.

53 Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, “Mumthil al-marjeyat al-diyaniat al-eiliya yaqum bi-taghyiir taktikiin fi qiadat liwa’ eali al-akbar aistiedadaan li-lmarhalat al-qadima,” November 2015, <http://imamhussain.org/arabic/news-1/14096>.

54 Phillip Smyth, “Beware of Muqtada al-Sadr,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 19, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beware-of-muqtada-al-sadr>; Nicholas Krohley, “Moqtada al-Sadr’s Difficult Relationship with Iran,” Hurst Publishers, August 7, 2014, <http://www.hurstpublishers.com/moqtada-al-sadrs-difficult-relationship-with-iran/>.

55 Yaser Alyasiri, “‘Ali al-dalafi an-natiq al-rasmi ‘iihda’a ‘iila saraya al-salaam,” YouTube video, 00:00:18, July 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSM9PLGIbb0>.

56 Iraqi Media Channel Nour, “Qunas saraya al-salaam Yusid al-Dawaeish,” YouTube video, 00:08:47, March 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsqPoxhvMRQ>.

57 Kataib Hezbollah Media Movement, “Banadiq qanasina la taerif al-mazah wahid al-muqawamat al-islamiyat harakat alnujaba’ wahid,” YouTube video, 00:00:55, August 26, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opzp3ctzPb0>.

REVOLUTION UNVEILED: A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East



added 2 new photos — with and 9 others.

August 21, 2016 ·

اليوم بفضل الله تم استلام الاسلحة الساندة ومن ضمنها القناص اشتاير
لواء 51 فوج الفتحه



Share

A fighter from Liwa 51 (Fifty-first Brigade), one of the groups in the Iraqi PMU, shows off his newly arrived Iranian AM50 rifle.
Source: Facebook

AM50. Hasnain Hadi al-Zaydi, a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old sniper and member of the US-registered terrorist group Kata'ib Hezbollah, was killed on August 10, 2015. In several released photos, the young fighter is pictured holding his rifle near the Iraqi city of Bayji.⁵⁸ As early as 2013, the rifle had also made appearances with forces belonging to Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.⁵⁹ Both groups have extensive links to

Tehran, and have received Iranian support in the past.⁶⁰ Palestinian Islamic Jihad even uses the rifle in promotional images about sniper attacks against Israeli forces.⁶¹

58 "Karar al-Maliki," Facebook page, August 12, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1619863244954994&set=basw.AbrLWrgGskLksjhrTSY3ZGgyCMYfGVLmf41vTnEHHiFfbkUCMGz8-avSuz7COiJT-ConaBr48Da-uosz-SvGT_nOjXNJ1soO_myUI7LYNgW-8bTh2sobxVeOIKtdxB6cJFzcS1281toKvKTh_hYVFCYa98IxT31wcmvXj-uwycGJ3FWFiQFE32ZFf4tj5gQloOS4BBIvozfX7-OAOXes7SNIE4hKP7T4TciO-M9jfDOAoIZ-QYD5NHbicYuAtcbqp37MOSJkK1t83JdRkrd0147WzDpoM-mm9tpzP-

59 N.R. Jenzen-Jones, "Markings Abraded on Iranian Rifles in Gaza," Rogue Adventurer (blog), December 29, 2013, <https://rogueadventurer.com/2013/12/29/markings-abraded-on-iranian-rifles-in-gaza/>.

60 Maayan Groisman, "Iran to Renew Financial Support for Islamic Jihad after Two-Year Hiatus," Jerusalem Post, May 25, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Reembracing-Islamic-Jihad-Iran-to-renew-financial-aid-for-Palestinian-terror-group-454968>; Con Coughlin, "Iran Rekindles Relations With Hamas," *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-rekindles-relations-with-hamas-1429658562>.

61 The Military Wing of Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, "Fi methl hadha al-yawm... 'ard a-tifam tatahawal li-haqi rimayat li-qanasat al-saraya," August 3, 2015, <https://saraya.ps/post/42664/%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%84-%D9%87%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7>

In Syria, the AM50 has appeared in the hands of forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and other Iranian proxies, and captured versions have even found their way into rebel and Sunni jihadist stocks. The rifle has appeared in Syrian combat footage and propaganda films, but some of the earliest appearances of the rifle were found in online martyrdom posts following Lebanese Hezbollah's public acknowledgment of its intervention in Syria.⁶² The Badr Organization, a loyal Iranian proxy, provides another example. On April 18 2014, Syrian rebel forces killed Abu Ghazi al-Tamimi, a commander within the group, near the town of Rankous.⁶³ An important figure, for whom a regiment of the Badr Organization's Fourth Brigade was named, al-Tamimi frequently posed alongside his AM50 rifle in the many pictures that were circulated before and after his death.⁶⁴ Iran has used the AM50 to highlight the developing capabilities of its proxies. In the case of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, an October 2014 production by the group's Al-Ahad TV claimed that the rifle being shown on air—which seemed to be the Iranian AM50—was actually created by “manufacturing engineers” within the group itself.⁶⁵ Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has been a core Iranian proxy organization since the US occupation of Iraq. Presenting a narrative that the group

has the in-house skill, expertise, and means to manufacture its own weapons system shows organizational strength and independence. The likely hope is that by demonstrating to an Iraqi audience that the group is strong, it can attract and consolidate the support of new members. It can then expose them to the core ideological beliefs, expectations, and goals supported by Tehran—to the ultimate benefit of both group and patron.

62 Phillip Smyth, “Hizballah Cavalcade: Khamenei's Cannon: .50 Caliber Anti-Material Rifles & Shia Fighters in Syria,” *Jihadology*, December 24, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/24/hizballah-cavalcade-khameneis-cannon-50-caliber-anti-material-rifles-shia-fighters-in-syria/>.

63 *Orient News*, “Rif Damashq maqatl qa'id faylaq badr fi rinkous wa khasa'ir li-Inizam fi 'adnaan wa a-l-maliha,” YouTube video, 00:02:20, April 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRKUrvy7Xno>.

64 “Al-maktab al'ielami li-lshaykh 'iyad al-kanean al-tamimi,” Facebook page, October 22, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1693156781002721&id=1662985354019864&match=2KfZhNi02YfZitivNin2KjZiCDYutin2LLZiiDYp9mE2KrZhdmK2YXZig%3D%3D&qsefr=1;Fawj-al-shahid-abu-ghazi-al-tamimi,” Facebook page, July 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/%D9%81%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A-1142021385850759/>.

65 “Li-wa' al-i'mamin al'esकारीiin a-arabi badr al-janah al-'easkari,” Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/1505586783060850/photos/a.1505587086394153.1073741827.1505586783060850/1523855201234008/?type=1&theater>.

66 Al 'Ahad TV, “Al-Qnas Saqar: Tasniya' muhandisou al-muqawamat li-lesne'at al-'askriat 'asaeb ahl al-haq,” YouTube video, 00:03:59, October 1, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Cf_RSBhqq.



BAHRAIN: PROLIFERATING PROXY NETWORKS

METHOD: EMPLOYING PROXIES AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

The small Kingdom of Bahrain has historically found itself the target of Tehran's interest. Following attempts by the Shah to annex the island before the Islamic Revolution, Iran tried to overthrow the monarchy in the early 1980s, through an IRGC-backed Bahraini militant proxy. Today, IRGC-backed militants and proxies continue to plot and carry out serious, and potentially deadly, attacks against government targets.

But, while the IRGC's covert support for militant proxies has remained resolute, social-media evidence suggests that Iran is exploiting recent regional insecurity to further destabilize Bahrain. Beyond Tehran's already-dangerous proxy sponsorship for Bahraini groups, some militant groups, like Saraya al-Mukhtar, are reaching out to a wider Iran-affiliated network. Members of Saraya al-Mukhtar have traveled to Iraq to develop connections with their counterparts. Brazen social-media postings of meetings, ceremonies, and symbols representing solidarity highlight Bahraini militants' access to the experience and materiel available through Iran's transnational proxy network. When taken in conjunction with threats from covert groups like Saraya al-Ashtar, the security situation in Bahrain begins to appear highly combustible.

Protesters gather at the Pearl Roundabout in Manama in 2011.
Photo credit: Bahrain Viewbook/Wikimedia.

EVIDENCE AND CASE ANALYSIS

Iranian leaders past and present, including hardliners in the current regime, have held the belief that Bahrain is Iran's rightful "fourteenth province."⁶⁷ Yet, legal and diplomatic battles waged by Iranian diplomats over the years to claim control of Bahrain have failed. The issue of Bahrain's legal status was finally put to rest in 1971, following the United Nations plebiscite in the kingdom and the crushing majority of the Bahraini people declaring the Arab identity and independence of their country from Iran.

Bahrain became a prime target for Tehran after the Islamic Revolution, when the country's new leadership sought to export its Shia Islamist ideals and theocracy to Bahraini coreligionists,

⁶⁷ Adrian Blomfield, "Bahrain Hints at Iranian Involvement in Plot to Overthrow Government," *Telegraph*, September 6, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/bahrain/7983095/Bahrain-hints-at-Iranian-involvement-in-plot-to-overthrow-government.html>.

Militant Groups in Bahrain

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq



Bahraini Hezbollah



Kata'ib Hezbollah



Saraya al-Ashtar



Saraya al-Karar



Saraya al-Mukhtar



The logos of various Bahraini militant groups with links to Iran. Note the intentional similarities in iconography to the IRGC and Hezbollah logos, including a clenched fist grasping an assault rifle. Images courtesy of Hizballah Cavalcade.

and to topple the Sunni al-Khalifa monarchy. In the early 1980s, Iran tried to overthrow the Bahraini government through a militant proxy called al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya Li Tahrir al-Bahrain (the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain), but the operation failed. “This modus operandi—working clandestinely through Bahraini operatives with the support of the IRGC—has not changed, and it underscores how Iran was forced over the years to adjust its expectations vis-à-vis Bahrain.”⁶⁸

Iranian interference in Bahrain escalated during and after the 2011 popular uprising in the kingdom, and continues to this day. Actors inspired or actively supported by the IRGC have posed a heightened security risk to Bahrain over the past six years, and fall into two categories. The first category includes clandestine militant groups under IRGC supervision, which have committed acts of terrorism against Bahraini government targets, including Saraya al-Mukhtar, Saraya al-Ashtar, Bahrain Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Saraya al-Karar. The second category includes members of the “Coalition of February 14 Youth.” Though it operates overtly, its membership is

an anonymous, wide network of indoctrinated individuals disenchanted by the Bahraini opposition's performance and the prospects for open political dialogue.⁶⁹

Saraya al-Mukhtar, a Bahraini militant group founded around 2012-2013, has been the most open in its support for Iranian proxies, and has advertised its links to them.⁷⁰ The group issued early praise for Jaysh al-Muwamalat, an Iranian-backed splinter from Muqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam in Iraq, which was formed in the summer of 2016. In late 2016, members of the group claimed to have met with several organizations in Iraq. In October, via Facebook and its Telegram messaging account, Saraya al-Mukhtar announced links to the Iranian-controlled Iraqi Shia Islamist group, Kata'ib Jund al-Imam. Kata'ib Jund al-Imam's secretary general is also the official spokesman for the Iraqi PMU. That same month, Saraya al-Mukhtar posted photos depicting some of its members presenting the Iraqi Shia Islamist militia Saraya

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Hizballah Cavalcade: Saraya al-Mukhtar: A Bahraini Militant Group with Regional Goals,” Jihadology, March 6, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/06/hizballah-cavalcade-saraya-al-mukhtar-a-bahraini-militant-group-with-regional-goals/>.

⁶⁸ Bilal Y. Saab, *Iran's Long Game in Bahrain* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2017). Forthcoming.

**REVOLUTION UNVEILED:
A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East**



سرايا المختار 2
July 22, 2016 · 🌐

تبارك المقاومة الإسلامية البحرانية "سرايا المختار" تأسيس "جيش المؤمل" في العراق بقيادة أمينها العام الحاج "سعد سوار"
أملين من الله ان يجعلهم على خطى ابي الاحرار "الإمام الحسين" عليه السلام ارواحنا لتراب مقدمه الفداء ويجعلنا واياهم من جند صاحب العصر والزمان "عجل الله تعالى فرجه الشريف" والمستشهدين بين يده



The Bahraini group Saraya al-Mukhtar praises the establishment of the Iraqi group Jaysh al-Muwamal in a Facebook post from 2016. Source: Facebook

al-Khurasani with a plaque commemorating the death of one of its commanders. This meeting was attended by the secretary and deputy secretary generals of Saraya al-Khurasani, which has close links to—and even appears to model its own logo on that of—the IRGC.⁷¹² Bahraini Saraya al-Mukhtar's links to its Iraqi counterpart highlight the Bahraini group's access to Iran's regional proxy network.

Saraya al-Ashtar is another group with distinct ties to Iran, and in March 2017, the US government listed the group's two Bahraini founders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists. The US State Department noted that the group "receives funding and support from the Government of Iran." Saraya al-Ashtar has carried out a number of deadly bombings and other attacks throughout the island from 2013 to the present, and one of its commanders, Ahmed Hasan Yusuf (aka Abu Maryam), had reportedly taken refuge in Iran.⁷³⁷⁴ Even though Saraya al-Ashtar has yet to announce ideological affinity for Wilayat al-Faqih, the evidence suggests that links between Iran and the group—as well as others like it—may go even deeper than the US government acknowledges.

71 Saraya al-Mukhtar 2, Facebook page, July 11, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/sarayaa.almokhtar/photos/pcb.873374352800221/873373636133626/?type=3&theater>.

72 IRGC-Quds Force Commander Hamid Taghavi was killed fighting alongside Saraya al-Khurasani in Iraq in 2014, and is still commemorated by the group. Amir Toumaj, "Iraq Monument Underscores Iranian Commander's Role in Quds Force," *Long War Journal*, February 24, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/iraq-monument-underscores-iranian-commanders-role-in-quds-force.php>.

73 Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Saraya al-Ashtar: Bahrain's Illusive Bomb Throwers," *Jihadology*, March 4, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/04/hizballah-cavalcade-saraya-al-ashtar-bahrain-illusive-bomb-throwers/>; "Hojoum mesleh ali dawriya 'askriya fi bini jamreh," *BIRQ News Agency*, January 14, 2017, <http://b14.co/%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A9/>.

74 US Department of State, press release, "State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi," March 17, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/268504.htm>.

**REVOLUTION UNVEILED:
A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East**



Top: Bahrain's Saraya al-Mukhtar presents a plaque bearing its logo to the son of a "martyred" fighter from one of Iraq's Shia militias, Kata'ib Jund al-Imam. Saraya al-Mukhtar announced its connection to the Iraqi group on Facebook and Telegram in October 2016. *Source: Facebook*

Bottom: Leaders of Iraqi militia Saraya al-Khurasani accept a plaque from Bahrain's Saraya al-Mukhtar beneath a photo of former Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. *Source: Facebook.*



YEMEN: INVESTING IN CHAOS

METHOD: ARMS PROVISION

Iran's influence across the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen has risen sharply since late 2014, corresponding directly with the country's Houthi uprising and subsequent civil war. The reason: Iran's supply of arms to the Zaidi Houthis, a Shia minority from northern Yemen. While the extent of Iran's support for the Houthis at the beginning of the conflict was unclear, new evidence points strongly toward Tehran's embrace of the Houthis as a means of inflicting pain on its rival in Riyadh. Although it is transferring weapons and knowledge to the Houthis, it is not clear that Iran hopes to cultivate the group as a Hezbollah-like proxy. Rather, by helping the Houthis to use low-cost systems against the Saudi-led coalition's high-cost assets, Iran has made it harder for the kingdom and its partners to counter its influence elsewhere.

EVIDENCE AND CASE ANALYSIS

The current phase of the conflict in Yemen started in March 2015, when a Saudi-led coalition began an air campaign against the Houthis and forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. There were several stated objectives: bolster the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who had been expelled from the capital, Sana'a; roll back a Houthi advance that was making its way toward Yemen's

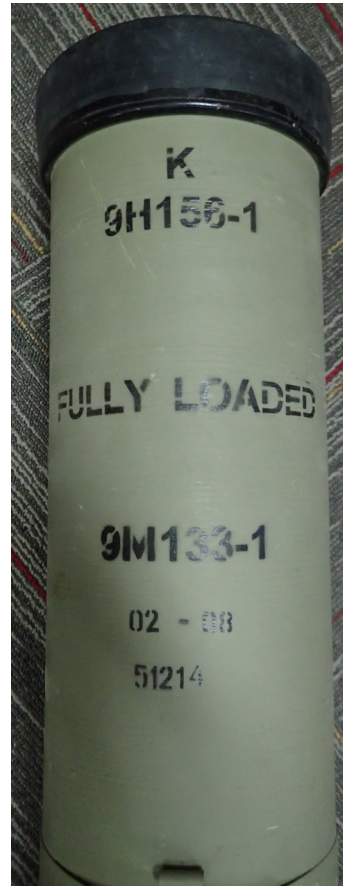
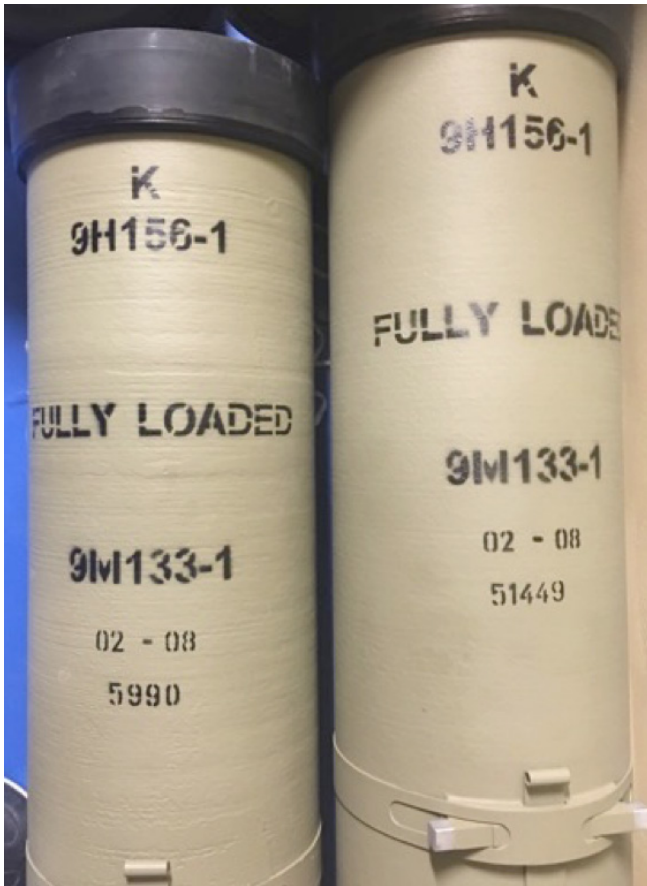
The guided-missile destroyer USS Kidd (DDG 100) responds to a distress call from the master of an Iranian-flagged fishing dhow.
Photo credit: US Navy.

"second city," Aden, in the south; and counter the terrorist group al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) under the leadership of United Arab Emirates (UAE) forces.

However, from a strategic perspective, the campaign's ostensible primary objectives appeared to be countering Iranian influence. The coalition partners believed that the Islamic Republic was providing materiel support to the Houthis, with the goal of developing a Hezbollah-type proxy on Saudi Arabia's southern border.

The Houthis have been variously described as Iranian backed, Iranian supported, or Iranian influenced. Until recently, the "evidence" for this connection was limited to statements from officials serving in Hadi's government, or Western analysts quoting one another. There have been indications of intermittent support from Iran, in the form of unusually high civilian air traffic between Tehran and Sana'a, and several maritime interdictions of dhows (traditional fishing and transport vessels) carrying weapons suspected to be destined

**REVOLUTION UNVEILED:
A Closer Look at Iran's Presence and Influence in the Middle East**



Left: Russian-manufactured Kornet ATGWs seized by the *FS Provence*.
Source: Conflict Armament Research

Right: Kornet seized from Houthi forces in Yemen. Source: Conflict Armament Research

for Yemen.⁷⁵ Some of these claims remain unsubstantiated, due to reluctance on the part of US officials to allow third-party verification. However, recent analysis by Conflict Armament Research, an independent organization that works in conflict-affected countries to document and trace illicit weapons and associated ammunition, has drawn linkages between materiel used by the Houthis and Iranian national stockpiles.⁷⁶

The interdicted dhows contained small arms and light weapons ostensibly shipped from Iran, including thousands of new-condition,

Iranian-manufactured AK-pattern assault rifles and Russian-manufactured Kornet antitank guided weapons. Much of the materiel on board the dhows bore sequential serial numbers, a clear indication that it derived from a national stockpile. A Kornet seized from Houthi fighters by an Emirati task force provided an even clearer link to the Yemeni conflict; it bore a lot number that matched those of five Kornets seized from a dhow by the crew of the *FS Provence*, a French warship. The Kornet's serial number also falls within the same sequence. It is reasonable to assume that the dhows originated in Iran, and that the materiel on board was ultimately destined for Yemen.

The presence of Iranian-manufactured materiel on the dhows, clearly derived from Iran's national stockpile, either demonstrates the regime's complicity in supplying weapons into Yemen or reveals high-level corruption within the Iranian military by individuals with the ability to pillage large quantities of materiel from national stocks. It is unlikely that Tehran would be willing to admit to either possibility.

75 "Iran Sending Troops, Ammunition to Syria and Yemen Battlefields via Civilian Flights," *World Tribune*, March 12, 2017, <http://www.worldtribune.com/iran-sending-troops-ammunition-to-syria-and-yemen-battlefields-via-civilian-flights/>; Sam LaGrone, "U.S. Navy Seizes Suspected Iranian Arms Shipment Bound for Yemen," *USNI News*, October 4, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/04/04/u-s-navy-seizes-suspected-iranian-arms-shipment-bound-for-yemen>.

76 *Maritime Interdictions of Weapon Supplies to Somalia and Yemen: Deciphering a Link to Iran* (London: Conflict Armament Research, 2016), www.conflictarm.com/download-file/?report_id=2444&file_id=2445.

**REVOLUTION UNVEILED:
A Closer Look at Iran’s Presence and Influence in the Middle East**

**Lot and serial numbers of
Russian-manufactured Kornet ATGWs**

Lot Number	Serial Number	Location/Seizure
02-08	51035	FS Provence
02-08	51174	FS Provence
02-08	51214	UAE/Yemen
02-08	51397	FS Provence
02-08	51426	FS Provence
02-08	51449	FS Provence

The lot and serial numbers of Kornet antitank guided weapons, one seized by an Emirati task force on the ground in Yemen and the others by the French warship FS Provence from a dhow likely bound for Yemen from Iran. Note that the Kornets seized by the Emiratis and the French bear the same lot number, suggesting a common place of origin.

The use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by the Houthis provides further evidence of their collaboration with Iran. In October and November 2016, Houthi forces used several UAVs to crash into and disable the radar antennas of coalition Patriot missile-defense systems in Yemen. They followed up with volleys of missile fire targeted at coalition assets, which the damaged Patriot systems were unable to intercept.⁷⁷ The UAV in question, named the Qasef-1, is claimed by the Houthis to be indigenously designed and manufactured.⁷⁸ However, the Qasef-1 is strikingly similar to an Iranian UAV variant called the Ababil-CH. The Qasef-1 is slightly smaller than the Ababil-CH,

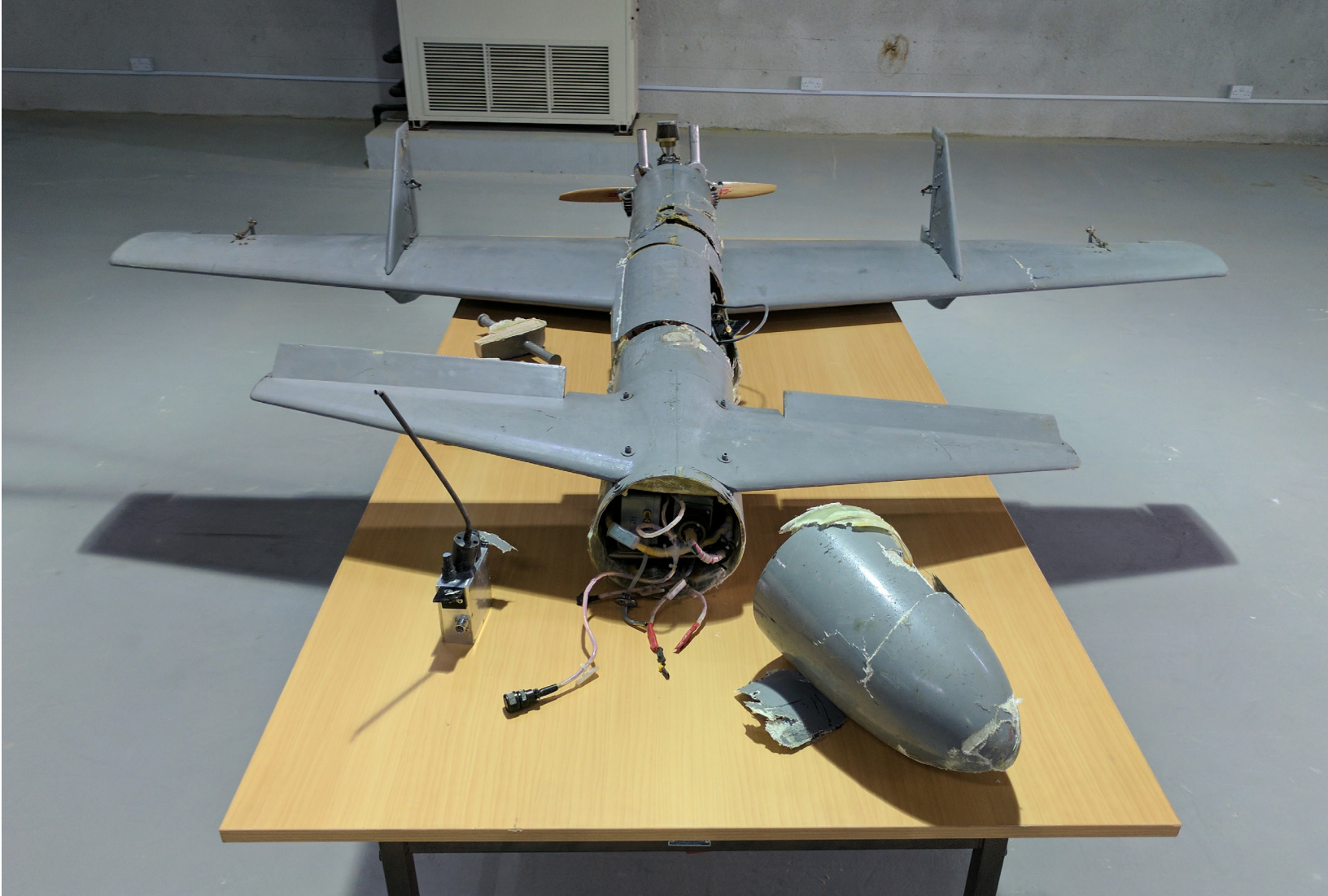
but this could be because of the requirement to smuggle them into Yemen, a possibility that was realized in one late-2016 incident. Six partially assembled Qasef-1s were discovered on a truck that was stopped in Marib Governorate after reportedly transiting Oman—a route alleged to be used by Iran to smuggle weapons into Yemen. If true, this would undermine Houthi claims to have designed and manufactured the Qasef-1 domestically.⁷⁹

The most telling indication of Iranian support to Houthi and Saleh-aligned forces is not material in nature (material support is relatively minimal, from what is known), but the employment of sophisticated, low-cost systems against the coalition’s high-cost assets. This reveals a growing level of sophistication in asymmetric

77 Frontline Perspective: Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen (London: Conflict Armament Research, 2017), www.conflictarm.com/download-file/?report_id=2465&file_id=2467.

78 Paul Antonopoulos, “Photos: Houthis Reveal New Types of Surveillance, Attack Drones,” *Al Masdar News*, February 26, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/photos-houthis-reveal-new-types-surveillance-attack-drones/>.

79 Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, “Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Supply to Yemen’s Houthis via Oman—Officials,” *Reuters*, October 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12KOCX>.



tactics never before seen in Yemen. This knowledge transfer fits the idea that Iran's ultimate objective in Yemen is not to establish a Yemeni Hezbollah, but to distract coalition members from supporting antiregime forces in Syria, and to divert Saudi resources. If that's correct, Iran has already won.

A Qasf-1 UAV, used by Yemen's Houthi rebels to attack and disable Saudi Patriot missile defense systems, leaving Saudi assets vulnerable to missile fire. The Qasf-1 bears a strikingly similar design to the Iranian-made Ababil-CH UAV.
Source: Conflict Armament Research.



CONCLUSION

Competition for influence in the Middle East is a jump ball, but, at present, Iran stands taller than its rivals. Its careful cultivation of local actors and transnational groups willing to undertake its bidding gives the Islamic Republic a major advantage as it tries to achieve its political, economic, and security aims. Even though Iran has verifiably curbed its nuclear program under the JCPOA to date, its troubling policies in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, and beyond have continued apace. Between its naval provocations in the Persian Gulf and continuing ballistic-missile tests, Iran appears even more emboldened in recent months. One should expect more of these activities too, now that Iran has gained relief from onerous sanctions.

But, despite its continuing challenges for US policy and interests, Iranian success is not inevitable. The Islamic Republic operates opportunistically, and is not the imperial power

Former US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif meet at the Palais Coburg Hotel in Vienna, Austria, in 2016.
Photo credit: US Department of State/Flickr.

that some of its Sunni Arab rivals portray it to be. It has not formulated a strategy for stabilizing its gains and long-term position, and has no clear plan for escaping the insecurity spirals in which it is locked with its regional rivals. By adopting an expansionist agenda and aggressive posture, the clerical and security elites who run Iranian foreign policy have committed Iran to open-ended struggles against local populations and regional rivals within the Muslim world, in parallel with hostilities with the United States and Israel.

The Trump administration came to power vowing to push back against Iran in the region. The necessity of doing so is manifest. Yet, the strategy to achieve an objective centered on making Tehran unable to sustain—much less expand—its operations against US interests and partners in the region must be carefully thought through. The Islamic Republic, like ISIS, seeks to fill legitimacy-free vacuums in governance, whether in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or Lebanon. Working hard to end the region's wars and building legitimacy from below are essential. The United States and its partners should work together to make any Iranian attempt at sustained power projection in the Arab world prohibitively expensive.

Currently, Iran is bolstering its conventional military capabilities. This will require security-assistance policies in the region to focus very sharply on addressing vulnerabilities. Yet, the United States also needs to avoid rigid predictability in its responses to asymmetric Iranian military challenges. Tehran has come to regard Washington as entirely predictable in its response to provocations, and feels free to operate with impunity below what it assumes are thresholds mandating a kinetic response. Although the United States need not seek armed confrontation with Iran—especially considering force-protection challenges in Iraq—it can best arrest a slow drift toward conflict with Tehran by fuzzing the threshold, and giving Iranian leaders reason to think carefully about the advisability of engaging in risky, potentially destabilizing provocations.

Regardless of the relative strengths and proportions of the various factors motivating Iranian behavior, that behavior is objectionable and worth countering effectively. This will likely remain the case if Iran and its extraordinarily talented, and largely pro-American, population remain governed by Islamists whose core political beliefs and interests all but dictate behavior that Americans and others will find dangerously offensive.

In this paper's sister report, *US Strategy Options for Iran's Regional Challenge*, authors Bilal Y. Saab and Kenneth M. Pollack present multiple strategic approaches that the United States could pursue to limit Iran's destabilizing activities. Weighing carefully the many pros and cons of each option, they conclude that

the most effective US course of action would be *Pushback*—an approach that would seek to measurably weaken Iran's regional influence, and eliminate its meddling in key states. *Pushback* would involve bolstering US partners under pressure from Iran—like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia—which could create the political space needed to end the region's civil wars, and would allow regional governments to introduce necessary political and economic reforms. The strategy would likely entail taking a more active role in the civil wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, to ensure that Iran's allies do not prevail and, hopefully, to engineer a stable end to these conflicts that would allow each country to rebuild.

GLOSSARY

IRAN

AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI

Second and current Supreme Leader of Iran. Khamenei ascended to Iran's highest-ranking political and religious authority upon Khomeini's death. He is the face of Iran's conservative religious establishment.

AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI

Founder and first Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. An outspoken critic of the Pahlavi monarchy, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in France for the Islamic Revolution that overturned the Shah's regime in 1979, becoming Iran's highest political and religious authority. Khomeini spearheaded Iran's transformation from secular monarchy to Shia theocratic state until his death in 1989.

HEZBOLLAH (LEBANON)

Iranian proxy and Shia Islamist group with military and political wings, founded with Iranian support in the early 1980s. Now an active participant in Lebanon's parliament and political process, Hezbollah is a designated terrorist organization by the United States that operates cells across Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Under current Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, Lebanese Hezbollah has served as inspiration for other Iranian proxies, and has played a critical role supporting the Syrian regime in that country's civil war, both for its own security and to preserve its strategic and geographic links to Iran.

ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS (IRGC)

Iran's primary internal and external security force. The IRGC has land, air, and sea forces, as well as the elite Quds Force, which leads its asymmetric operations and cultivates relationships with many of Iran's foreign proxies. The Basij volunteer militia is also under the IRGC's control. The IRGC, which is most closely aligned politically with the Supreme Leader, has led Iran's activities in Iraq and Syria since 2003, and also dominates sectors of Iran's economy.

WILAYAT AL-FAQIH (VILAYET-E FAQIH)

Shia religious concept meaning "guardianship of the jurist." Khomeini expanded the traditional concept, which typically involved clerics (or jurists) caring for vulnerable elements of society like orphans or the infirm, to a political and religious guardianship of the state under a Supreme Leader. The Islamic Republic's interpretation of Wilayat al-Faqih holds that the Supreme Leader guards the religious and political authority of Twelver Shia's Hidden Imam, and should therefore be obeyed by the population. The concept is not widely accepted in Shia Islam, and acceptance of Iran's interpretation by foreign political or military groups typically indicates a strong affiliation with or proxy status to Iran.

IRAQ AND SYRIA

ABU TAHSEEN

A Shia militia fighter whose prowess killing Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) militants with the Iranian-made AM50 rifle has earned him widespread recognition on social media. Though Liwa Ali al-Akbar, the militia he belongs to, does not share Iran's ideology or all of its objectives, images of the sniper and his Iranian rifle help advance the narrative of Iran as a protector of the region's Shia.

AM50 SAYYAD RIFLE

Iranian-produced, single-shot antimateriel rifle employed for long-range sniper operations, including those targeting lightly armored vehicles. Based on an Austrian rifle produced by Steyr Mannlicher, the AM50 has become a popular symbol of Iran's protection of the region's Shia in the fight against Sunni extremism, especially against ISIS.

ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ (AAH)

An Iranian-backed Shia militia group in Iraq founded in January 2006 by Qais al-Khazali. The US military refers to AAH as a Special Group, a term that came into use during the Iraq War to denote paramilitary groups funded by Iran. AAH receives training and monetary support from the IRGC and the Quds Force in particular, and acts as a proxy for the group in Iraq.

BADR ORGANIZATION (BADR BRIGADES)

A political party that is known as the oldest Iranian Shia militia proxy group in Iraq. The group was founded in 1983 as the armed wing of the largest Shia political party in Iraq. The Badr Organization became independent from the party in 2012, and remains a major player in Iraqi politics. The group has been very active in the fight against ISIS in Iraq.

HARAKAT HEZBOLLAH AL-IRAQ

Political wing of the Iraqi armed group Jaysh al-Mukhtar. Both the military and political wings are headed by Secretary General Sayyid Wathiq al-Battat. Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq was formed as an anti-Saddam group by now-parliamentarian Hassan al-Sari in 1993. Battat asserts that the group is a part of Lebanese Hezbollah, though it is not clear that the group reports to Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, and the two groups are not said to have had a connection at Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq's founding.

JAYSH AL-MUKHTAR

The military wing of Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq, also led by Wathiq al-Battat. Jaysh al-Mukhtar has carried out attacks against targets considered enemies or rivals of Iran, including Saudi Arabia and the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), though Tehran has tried to play down its ties to the group to maintain plausible deniability in such attacks.

GLOSSARY

KATA'IB HEZBOLLAH

Iranian-backed Shia paramilitary group in Iraq. Kata'ib Hezbollah's leadership shares ties with the Badr Organization, the IRGC, and Lebanese Hezbollah, and the group is believed to act as an Iraqi proxy for Iran in exchange for training and financial aid from the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah. Kata'ib Hezbollah fought lethally against the US coalition in Iraq from 2007 to 2011, and was designated a terrorist organization by the US government in 2009. The group's forces have fought alongside the Assad regime in Syria and against ISIS in Iraq.

MOJAHEDIN-E KHALQ (MEK)

An exiled Iranian dissident group with both political and militant components. The group was founded in 1965 and played an active role in the Islamic Revolution in 1979, although it quickly lost favor with the new Iranian political establishment and later sided with Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War. It advocates for the overthrow of the Iranian regime, and has clashed with the Iraqi Shia militia Jaysh al-Mukhtar.

MUQTADA AL-SADR

Shia cleric who is one of Iraq's most influential political figures. He leads the Sadrist Movement, a religious and populist political party, and Saraya al-Salam, a Shia militia that is a reorganization of the Mahdi Army, which led the first major Shia confrontation against the US coalition in Iraq in 2004. Sadr's rhetoric is notably anti-American, but he maintains a complicated relationship with Iran, at times accepting support and refuge but maintaining Iraqi nationalist goals.

POPULAR MOBILIZATION UNITS (PMU)

Also referred to as al-Hashd al-Sha'abi. The PMU is the government umbrella organization for Iraq's militias, founded in November 2016 and intended to incorporate unofficial militia groups into a force under the control of the Iraqi prime minister. Iranian-backed Shia groups play a dominant role in the PMU, and it is unclear in what form the organization will carry on after the defeat of ISIS.

WATHIQ AL-BATTAT

Leader of Harakat Hezbollah al-Iraq and its military wing, Jaysh al-Mukhtar. Battat has claimed that his group is affiliated with Lebanese Hezbollah and carried out attacks on behalf of Iran, despite attempts by Tehran and Iraqi Shia militias to distance themselves from his actions.

BAHRAIN

SARAYA AL-ASHTAR

Bahraini militant group with ties to Iran, noted for carrying out several deadly bombings and attacks since 2013. The US State Department has noted that the group receives funding from the government of Iran, and the US government has listed the group's two Bahraini founders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

SARAYA AL-MUKHTAR

Bahraini militant group established in 2012-2013 that uses social media to openly express its praise and support for Iranian proxies beyond Bahrain's borders, highlighting the connections between groups within Iran's transnational proxy network. In addition to announcing its connections to foreign groups online, Saraya al-Mukhtar has posted photos depicting its members meeting with other militant groups in Iraq.

YEMEN

ABDRABBUH MANSOUR HADI

Yemeni politician who has served as the second president of Yemen since the ouster of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012. In early 2015, Hadi was pushed out of the capital city of Sana'a and forced to resign by Houthi rebels, although he later rescinded his resignation and returned to the southern port city of Aden with the protection of the Saudi-led military coalition. Hadi had formerly served as Saleh's vice president since 1994.

ALI ABDULLAH SALEH

Served as the first president of Yemen from the unification of its northern and southern halves in 1990 until 2011, when he stepped down following the country's Arab Spring protests. He previously served a twelve-year term as president of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen). Saleh has since aligned himself with the Houthi rebels, and in 2016 announced an allied political council with the Houthis to administer the fight against the Saudi-led coalition and to run the country from Sana'a.

DHOW

Traditional Arab sailing ship, common along the coasts of Yemen and East Africa, in the Persian Gulf, and in the Indian Ocean. Traditionally used as trading vessels given their carrying capacity, the US Navy and its partners have raided several dhows in the Arabian Sea carrying weapons that match those used by Houthi rebels in Yemen, suggesting a maritime-based arms route from Iran to the Houthis.

GLOSSARY

HOUTHIS

Zaidi Shia group in Yemen that have been in various states of rebellion against the central government since 2004. Their insurgency greatly intensified in 2014, when the Houthis took the capital of Sana'a and forced President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi into exile, sparking civil war and prompting the intervention of an Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The Houthis, working alongside former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, have enjoyed materiel support from Iran. The degree and nature of Iranian support is disputed, but has frustrated the Saudi-led coalition and arguably prolonged the conflict.

KORNET ANTITANK GUIDED WEAPON (ATGW)

Russian-made antitank guided weapons used by the Houthis in Yemen. Lot and serial numbers of Kornets seized by an Emirati task force on the ground matched other Kornets, seized alongside Iranian-manufactured materiel, by a French warship from a dhow bound for Yemen. The lot numbers suggest a common place of origin, most likely a national stockpile originating in Iran.

QASEF-1

An unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) used by the Houthi rebels to attack Saudi Patriot missile-defense systems. The Qasef-1, which the Houthis claim to manufacture themselves, bears similar design features to the Iranian Ababil-CH UAV, and are possibly being smuggled into Yemen by Iran.

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