Iranian Operational Art

by

MAJ Robert V. Miron
U.S. Army

MENS EST CLAVIS VICTORIAE

School of Advanced Military Studies
United States Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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14. ABSTRACT

Since 1979, the Islamic Revolution has established itself as a stable government with the strategic goal of weakening Western influence in the Middle East and exporting the Shia ideology globally. The *Iranian Constitution* speaks to an absolute aim with a global vision that synchronizes multiple organizations by way of a doctrinal belief in the guardianship of the Islamic jurisconsult identified as *Wilayat-al-Faqih*. *Wilayat-al-Faqih* instructs the Islamic masses to bear the banner of holy struggle (jihad) against foreign oppressors to liberate Jerusalem and spread social justice throughout the world.

Ironically, Iranian operational art uses the method of hybrid warfare to seek limited gains through limited means in an attempt to reach its absolute political aim. Iranian way of hybrid warfare flexes beyond international borders, treaties, or laws in inconsistent limited pursuits to achieve an absolute aim. This monograph seeks to explore evolving Iranian operational art through the method of hybrid warfare in pursuit of Iran's absolute political aim from 1979 to 2016. Particular attention is paid to the presence of conventional, unconventional, irregular, and paramilitary organizations actions under Iranian control in Syria. This work defines Iranian hybrid warfare as, a strategically patient political war connected by its flexible and varying means (most often deniable through mass media) synchronized in depth below the threshold for US intervention.

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Name of Candidate: MAJ Robert V. Miron

Monograph Title: Iranian Operational Art

Approved by:

_____, Monograph Director
G. Stephen Lauer, PhD

_____, Seminar Leader
Heiko Diehl, COL

_____, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies
Kirk C. Dorr, COL

Accepted this 23rd day of May 2019 by

_____, Director, Graduate Degree Programs
Robert F. Baumann. PhD

Abstract

Iranian Operational Art, by MAJ Robert V. Miron, US Army, 63 Pages.

Since 1979, the Islamic Revolution has established itself as a stable government with the strategic goal of weakening Western influence in the Middle East and exporting the Shia ideology globally. The *Iranian Constitution* speaks to an absolute aim with a global vision that synchronizes multiple organizations by way of a doctrinal belief in the guardianship of the Islamic jurisconsult identified as *Wilayat-al-Faqih*. *Wilayat-al-Faqih* instructs the Islamic masses to bear the banner of holy struggle (jihad) against foreign oppressors to liberate Jerusalem and spread social justice throughout the world.

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Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
BG	Brigadier General
DoD	Department of Defense
FM	Field Manual
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force
MG	Major General
NDF	National Defense Forces
PMF	Popular Mobilization Force
US	United States

Introduction

> Syria is our 35th province and is a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and seeks to take Syria or Khuzestan, our priority would be to keep Syria, because if we keep Syria, we can retake Khuzestan. But if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran.
> — Iranian Cleric Mehdi Taeb, *National Council of Resistance*, 15 February 2013

> Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran. As long as Iran has money, we have money.
> —Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah, *The New Yorker,* 13 December 2016

> Iran is our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication.
> — Al Qaeda Leader Osama Bin Laden, *The Washington Institute*, 2017

> The wave of the Islamic Revolution will soon reach the entire world.
> — Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *The Washington Institute,* 2017

Since 1979, the Islamic Revolution established itself as a stable government with the strategic goal of weakening western influence in the Middle East and exporting the Shi'a ideology globally.[1] The *Iranian Constitution's* preamble confirms this assertion stating, "in development of international relations, the Constitution will strive with other Islamic and popular movements to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community and to assure the continuation of the struggle for the liberation of all deprived and oppressed peoples in the world."[2] The constitution calls for, "a mission to realize the ideological objectives of the movement and to create conditions conducive to the development of man in accordance with the noble and universal values of Islam."[3] Iranian operational art uses the method of hybrid warfare to

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[1] Nicholas Hargreaves-Heald, "Proving Ground: Iran's Operational Strategy in Syria," *Small War Journals* (Summer 2018), accessed August 9, 2018, http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/proving-ground-irans-operational-strategy-syria.

[2] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution, Preamble* (Tehran, Iran: Assembly of Experts, 1979), accessed August 9, 2018, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en.

[3] Ibid.

seek limited gains through limited means in an attempt to reach its absolute political aim. The purpose of this study is to examine the operational art employed by the Iranian artist in conjunction with the political aim in Syria (reference figure 1). The method throughout is an examination of Iranian operational art through hybrid warfare, historically and especially in the current conflict in Syria.
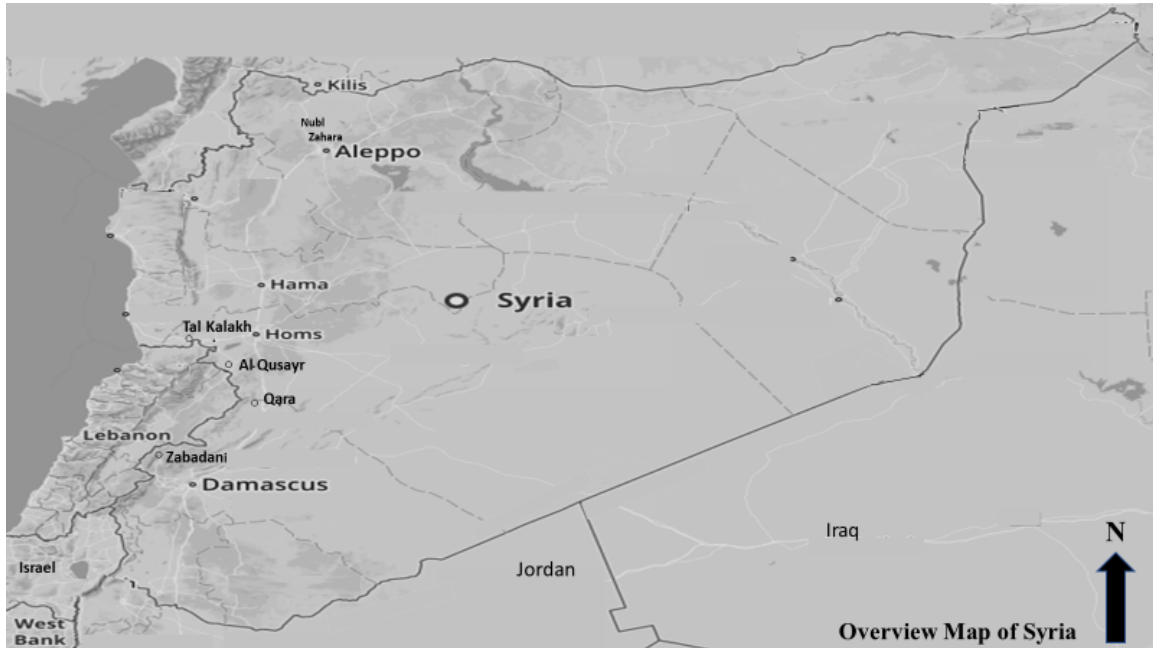

Figure 1.   Overview Map of Syria
Source: University of Texas Libraries, "Country Maps: Syria," accessed February 15, 2018, https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/map_sites/country_sites.html#syria.

In November 1964, Ayatollah Khomeini was arrested, imprisoned, and exiled for leading unsuccessful protests against Shah Pahlavi's pro-western Iranian government.[4] His student, the current Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was also arrested and tortured participating in the same protests.[5] In exile, Ayatollah Khomeini studied in Paris, France creating a draft constitution with

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[4] Baqer Moin, *Life of the Ayatollah* (New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000), 197.

[5] Sayyid Ali Khamenei, "Biography of the Life of his Eminence Ayatollah Khamenei, Leader of the Islamic Public of Iran," The Center for Preserving and Publishing the works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, December 27, 2017, accessed December 20, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20131112102337/http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=20.

his newly formed revolutionary council preparing the way for an overthrow of the Shah's government.[6] Ayatollah Khomeini showed strategic patience subverting the Shah's government by setting conditions through a network of clerics and system of messaging for over fifteen years.[7] On February 1, 1979, a popular movement catalyzed when the people emerged in angry protest until the Shah was removed from power crystallizing the Islamic Revolution. In the vacuum created by the Shah's removal, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile and seized power as the new Supreme Leader of Iran (reference figure 2). Ayatollah Khomeini proactively suppressed future threats by quickly bringing pro-western leaders to summary trials and executions to secure power.[8]

Figure 2.   Overview Map of Iran
Source: University of Texas at Austin, "Index of Maps/Middle East and Asia," accessed February 15, 2018, https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/middle_east_pol_2013.pdf.

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[6] Moin, *Life of the Ayatollah*, 197.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 207.

On December 2 and 3, 1979 the *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* was adopted by referendum establishing a new revolutionary framework for Iran.[9] The preamble to the *Iranian Constitution* mandates the exportation of the revolution through the implied character of hybrid warfare where it states, "Prepare against them whatever force you are able to muster, and strings of horses *(here used as proxy organizations)*, striking fear into the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them."[10] This line, from the *Iranian Constitution* Preamble, implies an operational approach that can anticipate, adapt, and emerge in infinite forms.[11] This line also signifies a vision to match strategy with capability varying its method dependent on the emerging circumstance or opportunity. Ironically, the establishment of hybrid warfare through a string of proxy organizations is a character subset of limited war within an Iranian constitutional mandate of absolute aim. An absolute war, fighting for the existence of the state, fought with the entirety of societal, industrial, and political intent to attain final peace by military force has a readily observable logic.[12] Carl von Clausewitz book *On War,* describes absolute war as "indivisible, and its component parts (the individual victories) are of value only in the relation to the whole." Clausewitz states, "only one result counts: final victory."[13] Iran, knowing they are outmatched, defers to limited war to preserve the state.[14] In limited war, Iran methodically defers to evolving proxy organizations who conduct logically inconsistent actions where the end appears to diverge

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[9] Mahmood T. Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group), 138.

[10] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution.*

[11] G. Stephen Lauer, "The Tao of Doctrine Contesting an Art of Operations," *Joint Force Quarterly* 82 (3rd Quarter 2016): 119.

[12] G. Stephen Lauer, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks: Politics, Policy, and the Military Operational Artist," The Strategy Bridge, February 20, 2018, accessed December 20, 2018, https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/2/20/blue-whales-and-tiger-sharks-politics-policy-and-the-military-operational-artist.

[13] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 582.

[14] Lauer, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks: Politics, Policy, and the Military Operational Artist."

from an absolute aim to a limited aim.[15] Clausewitz says limited war, "consists of separate

successes each unrelated to the next, as in a match consisting of several games. The earlier games

have no effect upon the later. All that counts is the total score, and each separate result makes its

contribution toward this total."[16] Given Clausewitz's consistent logic of absolute war and

modification to the inconsistent limited war, the *Iranian Constitution* still appears to flexibly

persist within its attempts to bridge the extension of politics from their constitutional absolute aim

to their limited way of war through what appears to be hybrid warfare.

According to a GAO Report 10-1036R titled, *Hybrid Warfare*, the Department of

Defense does not define the term "hybrid warfare" in its regulations.[17] The US Army's Unified

Land Operations doctrinal references use the word "hybrid" in concepts to help describe the

growing complexity of warfare in multiple domains.[18] United States (US) *Army Doctrine*

Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0 defines a hybrid threat as the use of a "diverse and dynamic

combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, or criminal elements unified to

achieve mutually benefiting threat effects."[19] Can a hybrid threat evolve into hybrid warfare?

What is hybrid warfare? This work fills the definition gap in current regulations by defining

Iranian hybrid warfare as, *a strategically patient political war connected by its flexible and

varying means (most often deniable through mass media) synchronized in depth below the

threshold of US intervention.* Iran's deniable narratives created through mass media indicate a

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[15] Lauer, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks: Politics, Policy, and the Military Operational Artist."

[16] Clausewitz, *On War*, 582.

[17] US Government Accountability Office, GAO Report 10-1036R, *Hybrid Warfare* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), 1.

[18] Cornelius Granai, "A Complex and Volatile Environment": The Doctrinal Evolution from Full Spectrum Operations to Unified Land Operations" (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS, May 2015), 1, accessed December 5, 2018, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext /u2/1001386.pdf.

[19] US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication* (*ADRP) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 1-15.

desire not to incite a war with the United States. The Iranians fear an existential US military response as that which occurred in the aftermath of the terror attack on the United States of September 11, 2001.

The Iranian Constitution's implied use of hybrid warfare to bridge from their absolute aim to limited war is a theoretical twist that can be rationalized through their strategic patience. Clausewitz clarifies the absolute aim stating, "the natural aim of military operations is the enemy's overthrow, and that strict adherence to the logic of the concept can admit . . . that military operations could not be suspended, that hostilities could not end until one or the other side were finally defeated."[20] Clausewitz's statement on natural aim coupled with the *Iranian Constitutional* mandate indicates Iranian operational art through hybrid war will persist in limited war over an extended period of time until the absolute aim is achieved.

The *US Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0* defines operational art for US Army forces as, "the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose."[21] Hybrid warfare links Iranian operational art to available means through a string of Iranian-backed proxy organizations led by an Iranian operational artist. In Syria, Iranian Major General (MG) Qasem Soleimani leads and influences organizations such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds (IRGC-QF), Basij Popular Mobilization Force (PMF), Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Badr Brigades, Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Liwa Fatemiyoun (Hezbollah Afghanistan), Liwa Zainabiyoun (Hezbollah Pakistan), Palestinian Liwa al-Quds, and the Syrian National Defense Force. Most notably, MG Soleimani flexibly synchronized the aforementioned organizations in a joint effort to destroy rebel forces at the battle of Aleppo in 2015. These organizations flexibly evolved over a forty-year time period

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[20] Clausewitz, *On War*, 579.

[21] US Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 2-2.

demonstrating Iran's strategic patience to build its organization within economic constraints in hopes of someday reaching its constitutionally mandated absolute aim.[22]

Published in December 2017, the US *National Security Strategy* states, "The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism and takes advantage of instability to expand its influence through partners, proxies, weapon proliferation, and funding."[23] The Iranian way of war is strategically patient in taking advantage of opportunities as they emerge. Published in May 2014, *Field Manual 3-24 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* states, "Opportunity refers to the emergence of significant gaps in the ability of the state or its local allies to control its territory and population. States must have the capacity to detect the early stages of insurgent organization and mobilization."[24] The Arab Spring exposed the Iranian way of war when Ayatollah Khamenei decided to deploy the Iranian Republican Guard and a string of proxies in response to the protests in Syria. Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's government and military collapse provided a circumstance and opportunity for Iran to exploit towards the Shi'a one world community objective. The Iranians also used the circumstance as an opportunity to create additional organizations augmenting the effort along the way. Most recently, Iranian MG Soliemani and Brigadier General (BG) Hossein Hamadani oversaw the creation and integration of the Syrian National Defense Force and Palestinian Liwa al-Quds to augment regime forces on the ground in Syria.[25]

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[22] Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, February 2015), accessed November 5, 2018, https://www.washington institute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects.

[23] President of the United States, *National Security Strategy 2017* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, 2017), 49.

[24] US Department of the Army, *Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), 4-11.

[25] Paul Bucala and Fredrick W. Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," Critical Threats, March 2016, 12, accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/irans-evolving-way-of-war-how-the-irgc-fights-in-syria; N. Mozes, "Iran Tightens its Grip on Syria using Syrian and Foreign Forces" (Research, The Middle East Research Institute, May 2014), accessed December 20, 2015, https://www.memri.org/reports/iran-tightens-its-grip-syria-using-syrian-and-foreign-forces#_ednref39.

This monograph employs a chronological case study methodology. Across time, two case studies discern Iranian hybrid warfare as operational art in the Syrian Civil War. Case study one reviews the battles from al-Qusayr in 2013 to the battle of Qara 2014. Case study two examines the battle of Aleppo from 2015 to 2016. The two case studies demonstrate successive battles that isolate and dislocate localized rebel groups under the uncoordinated umbrella called the Free Syrian Army.[26] In the two case studies, the Free Syrian Army is the object of Iranian hybrid warfare in support of President Assad. The criteria for the analysis of the context and conduct of Iranian operational art as hybrid warfare uses three tenets of the US Army's *ADP 3-0*. The tenets providing the framework used to evaluate are depth, flexibility, and synchronization, as these most clearly apply to the definition of hybrid warfare used in this monograph as, *a strategically patient political war connected by its flexible and varying means (most often deniable through mass media) synchronized in depth below the threshold of US intervention.*

Primary sources used to understand the theory of action and criteria to evaluate Iran's way of war through a US doctrinal lens are *ADRP 3-0, ADP 3-0, and FM 3-24.*[27] The term hybrid warfare is a doctrinal gap identified and confirmed in GAO Report 10-1036R, *Hybrid Warfare.*[28]

Primary sources for the interpretation of Iranian operational art include the *Iranian Constitution* which forms the basis of the argument, providing the ultimate expression of Iranian political aims.[29] A key primary reference is Hezbollah's open letter titled, *Downtrodden in*

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[26] Isabel Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo" (Report, Institute for the Study of War, January 2013), 11, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07886?seq=1# metadata_info_tab_contents.

[27] US Army, *ADRP 3-0*; US Army, *ADP 3-0*; US Army, *FM 3-24.*

[28] US Government Accountability Office, *Hybrid Warfare.*

[29] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution.*

Lebanon and in the World, synchronizing the organizations ideology within the jurisconsult of Iran's Ayatollah.[30]

Foremost among secondary sources Dr. G. Stephen Lauer's, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks: Politics, Policy, and the Military Operational Artist," sets the conditions to bridge the *Iranian Constitution* to Iranian Operational Art.[31] Equally useful is Dexter Filkins article written in the *New Yorker,* "The Shadow Commander," giving insight into Iran's operational artist, MG Soleimani, who flexibly synchronized multiple organizations in Syria.[32] Also in section two, many scholarly journals and news articles were researched online to ideologically synchronize the string of proxy organizations with the *Iranian Constitution.* The string of Iranian proxy connections to the *Iranian Constitution* are best illustrated in Hanin Ghaddir's journal article, *Iran's Foreign Legion,*[33] and Nicholas A. Heras, *Iraq's Fifth Column Iran's Proxy Network.*[34]

In regard to case study one, secondary sources such as Paul Bucala and Fredrick W. Kagan's "Iran's Evolving War of War,"[35] and Nicholas Blanford's "The Battle for Al-Quyasr,"[36] demonstrates Iran successfully matching capability to circumstances conducting siege's and battles with varying organizations in a verifiable sequence. Online articles best depicting Iran's

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[30] Karen Daniel, "The Hizballah Program: An Open Letter," International Institute for Counter Terrorism, January 1, 1988, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles /The%20Hizballah%20Program%20-%20An%20Open%20Letter.pdf.

[31] Lauer, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks: Politics, Policy, and the Military Operational Artist."

[32] Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander.

[33] Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Shiite Militias in Syria," The Washington Institute, June 2013, accessed November 2, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria.

[34] Nicholas A. Heras, *Iraq's Fifth Column Iran's Proxy Network,* Middle East Institute Counterterrorism Series (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, October 2017), accessed December 15, 2018, https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraqs-fifth-column-irans-proxy-network.

[35] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War."

[36] Nicholas Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance," *CTC Sentinel* (August 2013): accessed October 4, 2018, https://ctc.usma.edu/the-battle-for-qusayr-how-the-syrian-regime-and-hizb-allah-tipped-the-balance/.

evolving way of war from al-Quayasr to Qara is Nicholas Blanford, "Syria's Proxy Wars: In Lebanon's Bekaa Valley."[37]

In regard to case study two, secondary sources include Isabel Nassief's "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo,"[38] and Paul Bucala's, "Iran's New Way of War in Syria," give insight and understanding to Iran's method of hybrid warfare.[39] Online articles best depicting Iran's evolving way of war at the battle of Aleppo is Laila Bassam and Tom Perry's, "How Iranian General plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow."[40]

The monograph organization consists of five sections. Section two, following, establishes the historical and strategic context of evolving Iranian-backed organizations and their connection to the *Iranian Constitution* from the Islamic Revolution in 1979 up to the early developments of the Syrian Civil War in 2013. This includes a review of the impact of the Islamic revolution, particularly its role in establishing a string of hybrid organizations that today form the core of the projection of Iranian power in Syria, as well as the development of Iranian hybrid warfare, as their expression of what the US Army views as operational art below the threshold of US intervention, most notably proxy and paramilitary organizations and its connection to the *Iranian Constitution.* The historical events illustrate the dynamics of the Iranian alliances as well as the evolvement and flexibility of operational organizations that fall within the definition of hybrid warfare.

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[37] Nicholas Blanford, "Syria's Proxy Wars: In Lebanon's Bekaa Valley," *Time,* February 14, 2013, accessed September 3, 2018, world.time.com/2013/02/14/syrias-proxy-wars-in-lebanons-bekaa-valley-the-specter-of-conflict-looms/.

[38] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo."

[39] Paul Bucala, "Iran's New Way of War in Syria," The Institute for the Study of the War, February 2017, accessed September 10, 2018, https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Iran-New-Way-ofWar-in-Syria_Final.pdf.

[40] Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, December 16, 2016, accessed September 11, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006.

With the theater and its actors in place for the Syrian Civil War, sections three and four provide the presentation and analysis of the conduct of Iranian influence and action directly drawing on events, trends, and experiences that evolves Iranian hybrid warfare. Section three is a detailed examination of the battle of al-Quyasr in 2013 to the battle of Qara in 2014 focusing on how Iran handled competing priorities in trial to correctly match resource capacity with military operations in a complex environment. Section four examines the battle of Aleppo from 2015 to 2016 with the proxy organizations and conventional forces conducting joint operations in urban terrain synchronized against a hardened enemy for a limited gain. The battle of Aleppo serves as the end point confirming Iranian operational art as hybrid warfare.

The final section of the monograph concludes with examining potential opportunities for disrupting and exploiting Iranian hybrid warfare in its evolvement to mitigate the exportation of their political aim through the realm of Iran's time and space. The research and findings from this monograph may assist future operational planners to prepare for Iranian action in post-ISIS security operations in the Middle East.

Section 2: Evolving Organizations

Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini solidified power bringing together disjointed rebel groups and flexibly restructuring Iran's military organizations. The restructuring of the Iranian military reflected the objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[41] To this end, the Islamic Government formed multiple revolutionary organizations to include the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the Basij PMF, and IRGC-QF.[42]

On May 5, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini announced the establishment of the IRGC from a poorly funded, loose coalition of Shi'a guerilla factions that heavily influenced the Islamic

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[41] Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 32.

[42] Ibid.

revolution.[43] Through the authority of the revolutionary council, the Shi'a factions coercively

purged, arrested, and murdered members of the pro-western government for their associations.[44]

The factions making up the IRGC filled the vacuum created by the purge.[45] Across time, the

IRGC evolved into a formidable armed force with a national reach that maintains Iran's military

land, sea, and air capability.[46] The IRGC derives legitimization from the *Iranian Constitution*

where it states, "the IRGC . . . will be responsible . . . for guarding and preserving not only the

country but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is, extending the

sovereignty of God's law throughout the world."[47] The IRGC is tasked with internal security,

combating counter revolutionary elements, and supporting foreign liberation movements.[48] In the

early years of the revolution, the IRGC deployed 1,500 soldiers to Syria to help create, train, and

equip Hezbollah.[49] Over forty years later in the Syrian Civil War, the IRGC flexibly evolved its

effort to support an explosion of proxy organizations making up varying elements within the

definition of Iranian hybrid warfare.[50]

The Islamic Revolution has the continuing strategic goal of weakening western influence

in the Middle East. This came to light just prior to the establishment of the Basij PMF in late

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[43] Afhson P. Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power in Iran (1979-2009)" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 48.

[44] Ibid., 48-51.

[45] Ibid., 48.

[46] Matthew M. Frick, "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Corps an Open Source Analysis," *Joint Force Quarterly* (2nd Quarter 2008): 121-126.

[47] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution.*

[48] Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power in Iran (1979-2009)," 47.

[49] Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 24.

[50] Chris Kozak, "The Syrian Army, Paramilitaries and Asymmetric Capabilities," The Institute for the Study of War, April 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2015/05/the-regime-military-capabilities-part-1.html.

November 1979. On November 4, an organized mobilization of Iranian students (in its simplest

form below the threshold of war) planned a protest with the intent to storm the US Embassy and

capture American hostages in Tehran.[51] After successful execution, the Iranian Government

denied involvement, but exploited the opportunity announcing to the world over mass media that

sixty-six Americans were taken hostage.[52] The Iranian announcement embarrassed the US

government and the situation affected the next United States Presidential election.[53] The

exploitation of Americans through mass media and termination of the US embassy occurred with

little resistance.[54] The Islamic government effectively removed US influence from Iran by

exploiting an opportunity created by the Shah's failed government. Three weeks after the Iranian

students took over the US Embassy, Ayatollah Khomeini declared by decree the formation of the

Basij PMF on November 26, 1979.[55] Today, the former US Embassy is a symbolic base for the

Basij PMF.[56]

 Subordinate to the IRGC, the Basij PMF is a paramilitary civil defense organization with

a unit in each Iranian province to police communities and suppress protests.[57] The Basij PMF

derives its legitimization in Article 151 of the *Iranian Constitution* where it states, "the

government is responsible for providing for all the citizens a program of military training and its

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[51] Moin, *Life of the Ayatollah*, 226-227.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, 37.

[56] Thomas Erdbrink, "Former American Embassy in Iran Attracts Pride and Dust," *The New York Times,* October 31, 2013, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/01 /world/middleeast/former-american-embassy-in-iran-attracts-pride-and-dust.html.

[57] Afshin Molavi, *The Soul of Iran* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2005), 316-318.

facilities, in accordance with the criterion of Islam such that everyone will always be able to engage in the armed defense of the country and the order of the Islamic Republic of Iran."[58]

The Basij PMF historically augmented the IRGC at varying degrees and location when tensions have escalated.[59] During the Iran-Iraq War, the Basij PMF served as the primary assault force in order to preserve the IRGC.[60] During the Syrian Civil War, Iranian MG Soleimani and BG Hamdani used the Basij PMF model when creating the Syrian NDF.[61] The Syrian NDF, a paramilitary organization, installed a unit in each of the controlled governates within Syria.[62] Together, the Basij PMF and Syrian NDF served as the primary assault force during the Syrian Civil War demonstrating Iran's ability to flexibly create and synchronize paramilitary organizations in depth.[63]

In 1980, Ayatollah Khomenei created the IRGC-QF, Iran's elite special forces, during the Iran-Iraq War to export the Islamic revolution through unconventional operations beyond the boundaries of Iranian territory.[64] From its inception, the IRGC-QF flexibly created, trained, equipped, funded, controlled, and influenced varying proxy organizations that are in ideological synchronization within the depths of other countries.[65] The Iranian operational artist behind these

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[58] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution*.

[59] Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, 37.

[60] Moin, *Life of the Ayatollah*, 249.

[61] Kozak, "The Syrian Army, Paramilitaries and Asymmetric Capabilities."

[62] Ibid.

[63] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[64] Ben Smith, "The Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard" (Research Briefing, International Affairs and Defense Section, October 2007), accessed December 10, 2018, researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04494/SN04494.pdf; Udit Banerjea, "Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the IRGC," *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 93-106, accessed November 16, 2018, https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1449&context=jss.

[65] Smith, "The Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard."

operations, MG Soleimani, has led the organization since 1997.[66] MG Soleimani's control and

influence extended, but was not limited to, organizations within countries and territories like

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Gaza Strip, and Lebanon. For MG Soleimani, Syria

was a vital geopolitical link to control and influence proxy groups against Israel.[67] The proxies

Iran supported against Israel included Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as Hamas and the

Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.[68] These proxies had weak economies

and relied on the IRGC-QF for support.[69] During the Arab Spring, the collapse of the Syrian

government threatened the IRGC-QF lines of communications to these proxies.[70] After the Arab

Spring, Hezbollah, the Syrian National Defense, Liwa Fatemiyoun, Liwa Zainabiyoun, and

Palestinian Liwa al-Quds organizations augmented the IRGC-QF's military operations and helped

regain control of the corridors in Syria.[71]

     After 1980, Syria and Iran were each other's most important ally. The Syrian and Iranian

relationship was important because of the geopolitical alliance struck between former Syrian

President Hafez Al-Assad and the Islamic Republic in the early years of the Islamic Revolution.[72]

President Hafez Al-Assad, from the Alawite minority, ideologically aligned within the Shi'a

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[66] Smith, "The Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard."

[67] Heras, *Iraq's Fifth Column Iran's Proxy Network*, 8.

[68] Boaz Ganor, "Israel and Hamas: Is War Imminent?" *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (Winter 2013), 2-4, accessed December 12. 2018, https://www.fpri.org/docs/media/On_Israel_and_Hamas.pdf.

[69] Anshel Pfeffer, "Iran Spends Billions on Proxy Wars Throughout the Mideast. Here's where Its Money is Going," *Haaretz Israel News,* January 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran-spends-billions-on-proxy-wars-here-s-where-its-money-is-going-1.563008.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Jackson Doering, *Washington's Militia Problem in Syria Is an Iran Problem* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, February 2018), accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.washington institute.org/policy-analysis/view/washingtons-militia-problem-in-syria-is-an-iran-problem.

[72] Fabrice Balanche, "From the Iranian Corridor to the Shi'a Crescent" (Hoover Institution Essay, Stanford University, August 2018), 3, accessed October 3, 2018, https://www.hoover.org/research/iranian-corridor-shia-crescent.

community, basing their relationship on survival with common strategic concerns against the western "hegemonist superpower" (Israel, the United States, and their allies).[73] Considering terrain, Syria was a strategic layer of depth. Syria held vital ground lines of communication spanning a large part of the eleven hundred miles between Tehran and Beirut.[74] The Iranian Lebanon connection through Syria went back centuries sharing cultural, religious, and educational ties.[75] Since the revolution, Iran used this corridor to transport manpower, equipment, and funding to their proxies (reference figure 3). The Iran-Syria relationship solidified during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988.[76] Syria supported Iran shutting down the Iraqi oil pipeline running through Syria. In turn, Iran supported Syria with free oil for the remainder of the war.[77] In 1982, Israel invaded south Lebanon hardening the Iran-Syria nexus and helped spur the creation of Hezbollah from fractured Shi'a factions in Lebanon.[78] The Iran-Syria-Hezbollah connection known today as the "Axis of Resistance" gave strategic geopolitical depth to Iran's political aim.

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[73] Mariam Karouny, "Syrian Forces Capture Final Rebel Stronghold in Qusair Region," *Reuters,* June 8, 2013, accessed October 5, 2018, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis/syrian-forces-capture-final-rebel-stronghold-in-qusair-region-idUKBRE9560TN20130608; Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution*.

[74] Balanche, "From the Iranian Corridor to the Shi'a Crescent," 1.

[75] H. E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations* (New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

[76] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, 26.

[77] Barak Barfi, "The Real Reason Why Iran Backs Syria," *The National Interest*, January 2016, accessed October 8, 2016, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-reason-why-iran-backs-syria-14999.

[78] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, 26.

Figure 3.   Overview Map of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran
Source: University of Texas at Austin, "Index of Maps/Middle East and Asia," accessed February 15, 2018, https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/middle_east_pol_2013.pdf.

A number of events catalyzed the emergence of Hezbollah.[79] Lebanon's Shi'a activist and Amal movement leader Musa al-Sadr's disappearance in 1978, the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, and Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon in 1982 left Shi'a groups in Lebanon fractured but inspired, creating an opportunity in crisis for Iran's government.[80] Ayatollah Khomeini initially deployed conventional forces to Syria in response to the Israeli invasion, but realized he was outmatched and refocused his effort on establishing proxies to preserve his conventional force.[81] In Lebanon, militants within the Shia groups of Amal, Supreme Islamic Shi'ite Council, and Dawah party gravitated to Ayatollah Khomeini's call for jihad against Israel and coordination

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[79] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah,* 26.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Farzin Nadimi, *Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies in Syria and Beyond* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, August 2016), accessed November 1, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-afghan-and-pakistani-proxies-in-syria-and-beyond.

evolved.[82] At the end of 1982, the *Iranian Constitution's* call to, "strive with other . . . popular movements . . . for the liberation of all . . . oppressed people" was realized in the Beqaa Valley of Syria.[83] With the Beqaa Valley holding key corridors linking Syria to Lebanon, the President of Syria gave the Iranians a forward base in Zabadani fifty miles north east of Damascus on the Syrian Lebanon border.[84] Ayatollah Khomeini deployed 1,500 IRGC soldiers to help evolve Hezbollah in preparation for future attacks.[85] For Iran and Syria, Hezbollah provided the means to indirectly and deniably attack the western hegemon and spread influence.

In the Beqaa Valley of Syria, a Hezbollah unit commanded by Imad Moughiyeh planned and prepared a truck bombing on a US embassy in Lebanon.[86] On April 19, 1983, the truck traveled through Syrian road blocks to Beirut executing an attack and killing sixty-three people.[87] On October 23, 1983, Hezbollah again planned and executed another limited attack when a truck loaded with explosives slammed into a US Marine barracks near an airport in Beirut killing two hundred and forty-one Marines, Sailors, and Soldiers.[88] President Ronald Reagan later withdrew the American presence from Lebanon without a military response beyond air and naval fire missions.[89] For Syria, the Israel and US regional threat made supporting Hezbollah and Iran practical.[90]

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[82] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah,* 24.

[83] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution.*

[84] Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran* (New York, NY: Free Press 2008), 59.

[85] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, 26.

[86] Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran,* 71.

[87] Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 59; Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*, 71.

[88] Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 58.

[89] Micah Zenko, "When Regan Cut and Run," *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2014, accessed December 20, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/07/when-reagan-cut-and-run/.

[90] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, 81.

For Iran, the creation of Hezbollah was the first pivotal realization of the Islamic

revolution's constitutional objective of reducing western influence and exporting the Shi'a

ideology achieving a limited gain.[91] On February 16, 1985, Iran and Hezbollah confirmed their

ideological synchronization in the release of an open letter titled, *Downtrodden in Lebanon and in

the World*.[92] The open letter synchronized the two organizations by way of a doctrinal belief in

the guardianship of the Islamic jurisconsult (the conflation between civilian governance and

judicial Islamic law) identified as *Wilayat-al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist). *Wilayat-

al-Faqih* instructs the Islamic masses to bear social justice.[93] For Hezbollah, the Muslim's

primary mission is not only the worship of God but also the establishing of an Islamic order as an

expression of God's just society.[94] The open letter is a proclamation of loyalty to Iran's

constitutional mandate and *Wilayat-al-Faqih* where it says,

> We are often asked: Who are we, the Hizballah, and what is our identity? We are the sons
> of the *Umma* (Muslim community) the party of God (*Hizb Allah*) the vanguard of which
> was made victorious by God in Iran. There the vanguard succeeded to lay down the bases
> of a Muslim state, which plays a central role in the world. We obey the orders of one
> leader, wise and just, that our tutor and *Faqih* [jurist] who fulfills all the necessary
> conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini.[95]

During the rest of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s Hezbollah perpetrated airplane hijackings,

kidnappings, assassinations, car bombings, and small unit attacks with the expressed intent to

reduce western influence in the Middle East and spread the Shi'a ideology, all in confirmation of

Clausewitz' idea of the lack of apparent logical consistency in limited war.[96] The Iranian forward

base in Zabadani, Syria enabled Iran to bring together fractured Shi'a groups under the umbrella

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[91] Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 23.

[92] Daniel, "The Hizballah Program: An Open Letter."

[93] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, 17.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Daniel, "The Hizballah Program: An Open Letter."

[96] Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, 72; Clausewitz, *On War*, 582.

of Hezbollah and the *Iranian Constitution*. Hezbollah's open letter specifically affirmed adherence to the *Iranian Constitution* demonstrating the first organization within Iran's flexible and synchronized control in depth beyond Iranian borders.

Iran also demonstrated the ability to raise organizations like Hezbollah simultaneously in more than one country. In November 1982, Iran established the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, through the Badr Brigades.[97] The organization's objective was to protect and spread the Islamic revolution.[98] Originally based in Iran, Saddam's heavy hand toward the Shiites presented an opportunity to organize displaced Shi'a exiles, refugees, and defectors.[99] Iran synchronized this makeshift group into battle by inserting Iranian officers much like they do today in Syria. Their current leader, Hadi Ameri, fought alongside the Iranians during the Iran-Iraq War and is a member of the current parliament in Iraq.[100] Hadi Ameri recently affirmed *Wilayat-al-Faqih* when he said, "The majority of us believe that . . . Khamenei has all the qualification as an Islamic leader. He is the leader not only for Iranians but the Islamic nation."[101] Most recently, the Badr Brigades have deployed 1,500 soldiers to Syria under the command of MG Soliemani.[102] With Hezbollah and the Badr Brigades, the Iranians flexibly created and synchronized two organizations in depth creating an opportunistic trend evolving towards hybrid warfare.

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[97] James N. Watts, "Iranian Influence in Iraqi Shi'a Groups" (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, June 2012), 27, accessed December 5, 2018, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a563454.pdf.

[98] Ibid., 1.

[99] Ibid., 29.

[100] Ned Parker, Babak Dehghanpisheh, and Isabel Coles, "How Iran's Military Chiefs Operate in Iraq," *Reuters,* February 24, 2015, accessed September 15, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-committee-specialrepor/special-report-how-irans-military-chiefs-operate-in-iraq-idUSKBN0LS0VD20150224.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Committee of Foreign Affairs House of Representative, *Terrorist Groups in Syria*, Serial No. 113-95 (Washington, DC: US House of Representatives, 2013), 21.

In 1990, Iran formed the Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly organization promoting the Iranian revolutionary vision and serving as a front for the IRGC-QF.[103] Iran historically formed organizations like Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly to help unite foreign Muslim clerics who affirmed *Wilayat al-Faqih* with the Tehran government.[104] These organizations recruited, organized, and educated Shi'a youth to support religious seminaries abroad in many countries that included Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq in hope the graduates served as change agents in their home countries.[105] Hezbollah was a permanent member of the governing council.[106] The World Assembly helped establish the Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainabiyoun. Hezbollah recruited the members of the Liwa Fatemiyoun from refugees who fled Afghanistan during the Soviet Afghan war.[107] The Liwa Zainbiyoun, a Shi'a Pakistani brigade, grew when the United Arab Emirates expelled twelve thousand Shi'a workers.[108] During the Syrian Civil War, so-called "recruiting" methods of Afghanistan and Pakistan refugees, included the tactics of unfair jailing and coercive measures for religious crimes, convincing young men to serve in the ethnically based organizations in Syria, rather than serve considerable extended time in Iranian jails.[109] Other recruits received paths to citizenship through military service.[110] Regardless of the

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[103] Omer Carmi, *Deconstructing and Countering Iran's Threat Network* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, 2017), 4, accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org /uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote42-Carmi.pdf.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Nadimi, *Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies in Syria and Beyond.*

[107] Ali M. Latifi, "How Iran Recruited Afghan Refugees to Fight Assad's War," *NY Times,* June 30, 2017, accessed November 1, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/opinion/sunday/iran-afghanistan-refugees-assad-syria.html.

[108] Nadimi, *Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies in Syria and Beyond.*

[109] Human Rights Watch, "Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria," *Human Rights Watch,* January 29, 2016, accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/29/iran-sending-thousands-afghans-fight-syria#.

[110] Nadimi, *Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies in Syria and Beyond*.

method, recruits of these organizations traveled to Mashhad and Varamin, Iran, for weapons training before traveling to Syria.[111] Afghanistan and Pakistan refugees, without documentation, traveled from their countries to Iran and Syria without passports.[112] In Syria, the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah inserted officers into each organization to synchronize efforts.[113] The Iranian institution Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly demonstrated a mechanism within the Iranian constitutional mandate that flexibly created, trained, and deployed operational organizations as opportunities arose evolving towards hybrid warfare.

Beginning in 2004, Iran's IRGC-QF requested Hezbollah's services to help increase Iran's influence in Iraq. To this limited end, Hezbollah's flexibly created Unit 3800 to support Iraqi militant groups who subsequently conducted over six thousand attacks on coalition forces.[114] Multiple Shia militias evolved in the complex environment to include Asa'ib ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah.[115] In 2006, Asa'ib ahl al-Haq emerged after a disagreement with a cease fire in Iraq with the coalition and splintered from the Mahdi Army.[116] In March 2007, British forces captured Asa'ib ahl al-Haq leader Qais Khazali.[117] During interrogation, Qais Khazali admitted many groups (not just Shi'a) received funds from the IRGC-QF to reduce western influence in the

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[111] Nadimi, *Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies in Syria and Beyond.*

[112] Fariba Sahraei, "Syria War: The Afghans Sent by Iran to Fight for Assad," *BBC News,* April 15, 2016, accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36035095.

[113] Nadimi, *Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies in Syria and Beyond.*

[114] Brad Power, *Hezbollah in Syria* (North Charleston, SC: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 2; Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq," Institute for the Study of War, December 2012, accessed October 18, 2018, https://www.jstor.org/stable /resrep07923?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[115] Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Shiite Militias in Syria."

[116] Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq."

[117] American Enterprise Institute, "The Qayis al-Khazali Papers," accessed December 14, 2018, http://www.aei.org/spotlight/qayis-al-khazali-papers/.

Middle East.[118] In 2007, Kata'ib Hezbollah emerged from several Shi'a militias who splintered from Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi.[119] In 2013, Kata'ib Hezbollah leader Wathiq al-Battat affirmed *Wilayat-al-Faqih* stating that he did not see, "any contradiction between my being an Iraqi national, and my religious identification with the Islamic Republic of Iran, based on my adherence to the guidance of the faqih."[120] Iranian MG Soleimani created, controlled, and influenced these proxies in Iraq and then deployed them to Syria.[121] During the ongoing Syrian Civil War, several Iraqi Shi'a militias traveled to Tehran for training, before flying to Damascus, Syria.[122] MG Soleimani requested these organizations and concentrated them under the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas.[123] In Syria, the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah inserted trained officers to counter the inexperience and lack of cohesion continuing the evolvement of Iranian hybrid warfare.[124]

In 2011, the Arab Spring created revolutionary democratic movements that successfully overthrew the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan Governments. Bahrain, Jordan, and Yemen also faced Arab Spring protests, but kept control by making political and policy revisions.[125] In Syria, President Bashar Al-Assad also faced the Arab Spring with local protests demanding his regime step down from power. Although no single ideology was behind these events, the protestors

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[118] American Enterprise Institute, "The Qayis al-Khazali Papers."

[119] Janes by IHS Markit, "Kataib Hizbullah," *Janes World Insurgency and Terrorism*, February 25, 2014, 1, accessed 3 November 2018, https://my.ihs.com/Janes?th=JANES&callingurl =https://janes.ihs.com.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battles in Syria on Both Sides," *The New York Times,* October 28, 2012, accessed December 14, 2018, https://www.post-gazette.com/news /world/2012/10/28/Iraqi-Sects-Join-Battle-in-Syria-on-Both-Sides/stories/201210280157.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[125] Joakim Carbonnier, "The Arab Spring and Its Different Outcomes," Lund University, 2014, 26, accessed December 10, 2018, http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=download File&recordOId=4001341&fileOId=4001344.

found commonality with concerns in unemployment, political repression, and corrupt governments. Demands across these countries were strikingly similar: human rights, jobs, and an accountable government.[126] The surviving governments responded to the protests by attempting to address the issues raised in the protests.[127]

        The Syrian President responded militarily, escalating the protests against his own people. Shortly thereafter, the Syrian Arab Army fell apart as officers joined the rebel factions. Syria deteriorated into a chaotic crisis. In 2012, rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) captured Syrian bases, arsenals, and border crossings giving teeth to their uncoordinated effort.[128] In particular, the FSA took control of the Shi'a towns of Nubl and Zahara north of Aleppo and besieged the Minnegh air base to the northwest.[129] The northern rural area of Aleppo provided a key smuggling area to Turkey known as the Killis corridor. The FSA besieged area at Minnegh air base controlled a line of communication east to Raqqa. The FSA control of the Killis corridor enabled a future attack on Aleppo.[130] To the South, the FSA also cut off the M5 highway forcing the Assad regime to use a longer alternative route to Aleppo. To Damascus, the Assad regime lost control of al-Qusayr, Homs, Qaras and the surrounding towns.[131] This area also connects key lines of communication from Lebanon to the critical M5 highway. As Syria deteriorated in civil war, Iran entered the war and steadily increased its support of the Assad regime.

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[126] Shahram Chubin, "Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated," GRC Gulf Papers, September 2012, 15, accessed December 3, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Iran_and_Arab_Spring_2873.pdf.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 17.

[129] Reuters, "Timeline: The Battle for Aleppo," *Reuters*, December 14, 2016, accessed October 20, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-timeline/timeline-the-battle-for-aleppo-idUSKBN1430PJ.

[130] Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 128.

[131] Ibid.

At the end of 2012, IRGC-QF commander MG Soleimani took control of the military situation for all of Syria.[132] MG Soleimani reconstituted the Syrian Arab Army in Damascus establishing a base of operations at the capitol to reorganize the broken army.[133] Iranian military aircraft began flying into Damascus carrying weapons, ammunition, and manpower.[134] Iran rotated troops from across the IRGC to expose its force to their coming hybrid effort.[135] In August, FSA captured forty-eight officers of the IRGC-QF.[136] The officers were released in exchange for 2,000 FSA rebels proving Iranian support in Syria during this period.[137] The IRGC-QF coordinated attacks, trained militias, and set up systems to monitor rebel communications.[138] The deputy, BG Hamadani, created, recruited, organized, and trained the Syrian NDF from local Alawite communities to offset the loss of Syrian Arab Army strength.[139] BG Hamadani's experience of suppressing protests ranged the entire reign of the Islamic Revolution. BG Hamadani referred to the Syrian NDF as Iran's second Hezbollah forming units within fourteen Syrian governates.[140] Unlike the Iranians who speak Farsi, Hezbollah soldiers speak Arabic and assisted the NDF inserting officers into their units for command and control.[141] The Syrian NDF

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[132] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[133] Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 150.

[134] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[135] Ibid.

[136] Power, *Hezbollah in Syria*.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[139] Aram Nerguizian, *The Military Balance in a Shattered Levant* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2015), 113, accessed October 5, 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-balance-shattered-levant.

[140] Phillip Smyth, "How Iran is Building its Syrian Hezbollah," *The Washington Institute*, March 2018, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah.

[141] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

decentralized paramilitary framework closely mirrored the Basij PMF in Iran.[142] During this period Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Majhid Takht, denied any IRGC presence stating, "Iran had a diplomatic presence there (Syria). There is no unusual presence. We have no need to arm the Syrian government."[143] Iran denying their military efforts in Syria demonstrates a narrative focused on operating below the threshold of US intervention.

From 2012 to 2013, the Palestinian Liwa Al-Quds formed out of the al-Nayrab refugee camp south of Aleppo.[144] The Palestinian Liwa Al-Quds commander Mohammed al Saeed shared direct ties with MG Soleimani who organized the Liwa Al-Quds under his command.[145] Although Sunni, the Iranians needed Palestinian manpower and considered cooperating organizations outside of their ideology as a proselytizing (religious conversion) effort.[146] The Palestinian Liwa Al-Quds served in a crucial role assisting the hybrid effort at the battle of Aleppo.[147] During the battle of Aleppo, the Palestinian Liwa al Quds integrated efforts with operatives from the IRGC-QF, Hezbollah, Syrian NDF, and Asa'ib ahl al-Haq earning recognition as an organization within Iran's regional militant network.[148] Iran's IGRC-QF ability to flexibly seek opportunities to

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[142] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 12.

[143] Simon Tisdall, "Iran and Assad Have Won Syria," *The Guardian,* May 12, 2014, accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/11/syria-crisis-iran-assad-won-war-tehran.

[144] Nicholas A. Heras, "Assad Regime Uses Palestinian Militia Leader Muhammad Al-Sa'eed in Bid to Recapture Aleppo," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 5, no. 10 (October 2014), accessed December 20, 2018, https://jamestown.org/brief/october-2014-briefs/.

[145] Mozes, "Iran Tightens its Grip on Syria using Syrian and Foreign Forces."

[146] Carol O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "Shiite Proselytizing in North Eastern Syria will Destabilize a Post-Assad Syria," *Terrorism Monitor* 9, no. 35 (September 2011), accessed December 20, 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/shiite-proselytizing-in-northeastern-syria-will-destabilize-a-post-assad-syria/.

[147] Amir Toumaj, "Russian Influence Evident in Palestinian Militia in Syria," *FDD's Long War Journals*, October 14, 2016, accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/russian-influence-evident-in-palestinian-militia-in-syria.php.

[148] Heras, "Assad Regime Uses Palestinian Militia Leader Muhammad Al-Sa'eed in Bid to Recapture Aleppo."

recruit, train, control, fund, and ideologically synchronize proxy organizations in depth demonstrated the continuing evolvement of Iranian operational art through the method of hybrid warfare for over 40 years.

Section 3: Iran's Evolving Campaign in the Bekaa Valley

From the start of protests in Syria, the Syrian government lost varying degrees of control in al-Qusayr, Talkalakh, Homs, and Qara.[149] Under the broad term of FSA, rebels formed independent local militias whose organization varied within the local towns and cities of Syria. The FSA operational reach also varied from local towns to close by cities, and coordination between independent militias lacked synchronization hindering decisive efforts.[150]

Between 2011 and 2012, the al Haqq Brigade, Farouq Battalion, Liwa al-Islam, and other unidentified militias under the FSA captured al-Qusayr and Talkalakh.[151] Located about one hundred miles North of Damascus, al-Qusayr and Talkalakh were strategically important because of the proximity to Homs and the cross-border supply route from Lebanon to the M5 highway.[152] For the Assad regime and poorly coordinated FSA militias, control of al-Qusayr and Talkalakh were critical to prevent culmination and enhance operational reach into Homs. With the corridor closed, Hezbollah was operationally constrained losing key lines of communication to central Syria.[153] Iran and Syria relied on Hezbollah to shape environments, constrain enemy actions, and increase influence.[154] From Lebanon, Hezbollah fighters held advantages to include command

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[149] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 13.

[150] Ibid., 12.

[151] Ibid., 13.

[152] Ibid., 12.

[153] Filkins. "The Shadow Commander."

[154] Melissa Dalton, "Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2017), 3, accessed September 4, 2018, https://www.csis.org /analysis/iranian-backed-militias-destabilizing-middle-east.

and control from secure base areas, opportunities for cross border operations, and extensive logistical support.[155] In October 2012, Ali Nassif, a top Hezbollah commander, was killed by an improvised explosive device south of al-Quyasr and Talkalakh causing Hezbollah to adjust their approach from a train-assist-advisory role to direct combat.[156] This event not only proved Hezbollah was operating in Syria, but also demonstrated Hezbollah's flexibility to adjust operations in a complex environment.

The FSA's al Haqq Brigade and Farouq Battalion used the al-Qusayr corridor to resupply operations from Sunni villages in north east Lebanon.[157] FSA control of the corridor sustained their fighting in Homs.[158] In Homs, the FSA maintained control of the Khaldiyeh, Bab Houd, and Hamidiya districts as well as the M5 highway to the north.[159] After a year of siege warfare against the FSA, the Assad regime struggled to take control of Homs. In March 2013, the Assad regime launched an offensive attack in northern Homs. The FSA halted the Assad regimes advance with a surprise raid on Baba Amr.[160] The failed attack left the FSA in control of 20 percent of the city.[161] From Lebanon, the FSA's supply corridors enabled forces to hold ground and project combat power. In order to re-establish control of Homs, the Assad regime prioritized al-Qusayr as the primary objective.[162] For the Assad regime, control of al-Qusayr interdicted FSA access to a

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[155] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 13.

[156] Power, *Hezbollah in Syria*; Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr."

[157] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 15.

[158] Ibid., 18.

[159] Ibid., 15.

[160] Agence Presse, "Syria Rebels Launch Surprise Dawn Assault in Homs," *The Daily Star*, March 10, 2013, accessed October 4, 2018, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/MiddleEast/2013/Mar-10/209489-syria-rebels-launch-new-assault-onkey-homs-district-activists.ashx.

[161] Allison Tahmizian Meuse, "One Year Trapped and Under Siege in Homs," *Syria Deeply*, June 10, 2013, accessed November 5, 2018, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2013/06/10/one-year-trapped-and-under-siege-in-homs.

[162] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 13.

major supply line and allowed Hezbollah to augment future operations.[163] The Assad regime's decision to change priorities from Homs to al-Qusayr demonstrated a limited capacity to defeat an enemy simultaneously on two fronts, but also demonstrated flexibility in operations to reduce enemy advantages in depth.[164]

In early April 2013, the Lebanese Army cut a supply line through the Lebanese town of Arsal into western Syria. The FSA was forced to use a route near a Hezbollah strong hold further north.[165] On April 4, the Assad regime launched a campaign to seize the village.[166] Iranian MG Soleimani displayed a three phased operation which entailed isolation and air attacks, before the advance of irregular forces, and then followed by armor divisions for control.[167] The Assad regime forces composed a hybrid combination of Syria's 3rd and 4th Armored Divisions, Hezbollah, Syrian NDF, and the Syrian Air Force.[168] On April 17, Syria's 3rd and 4th Armored Divisions interdicted FSA movement between Homs and al-Qusayr.[169] With support from Syrian aircraft, Hezbollah synchronized movements from Lebanon towards al-Qusayr capturing surrounding villages.[170] On April 18, the FSA's Farouq Battalion and Liwa al-Islam seized the Dabaa military airbase from the Assad regime.[171] Although tactically successful, the FSA

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[163] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 14.

[164] Ibid., 1.

[165] Blanford, "Syria's Proxy Wars: In Lebanon's Bekaa Valley."

[166] Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr," 18.

[167] Elizabeth O'Bagy, "The Fall of Al-Quyasr," Institute for the Study of War, June 6, 2013, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/SyriaQusayrUpdate.pdf.

[168] Jeffrey White, *The Qusayr Rules: The Syrian Regime's Changing Way of War* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, May 2013), accessed September 5, 2018, https://www.washington institute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-qusayr-rules-the-syrian-regimes-changing-way-of-war.

[169] Agence Presse, "Syria Troops Seize Strategic Homs Village," *Naharnet Newsdesk*, April 18, 2013, accessed September 5, 2018, http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/79959.

[170] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 16.

[171] Ibid., 17.

maneuver did not achieve its operational objective as the isolation phase of al-Qusayr continued.[172] By the middle of May, the Assad regime successfully isolated the FSA preventing resupply, reinforcement, and freedom of movement.[173] The Assad regime's ability to flexibly synchronize multiple organizations to isolate the FSA in depth indicated the early evolvements of Iranian operational art through hybrid warfare.

On May 19, 2013, the al-Qusayr offensive began with air, artillery, and sniper attacks. To retake the city, MG Soleimani called on Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, to send in more than 2,000 fighters.[174] Hezbollah's northern advance cleared districts block by block from the south, east, and west.[175] Hezbollah's battle plans included splitting the town into sixteen operational sectors and assigning code numbers to different objectives and locations.[176] Designating code numbers was standard Hezbollah practice in which fighters adopted a verbal code system for use over unencrypted radio communications.[177] Hezbollah split its forces into seventeen units of a hundred men each.[178] During combat operations, the units broke down into typical fighting squads of three to five men.[179] Hezbollah expected a swift victory. The FSA countered the assault, growing the battle into a seventeen-day protracted effort. The FSA was eventually overwhelmed because of the isolation and poor coordination of various rebel factions.[180] On June 5, the Assad regime launched a heavy artillery and air attack on the last FSA-

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[172] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 16..

[173] Ibid., 17.

[174] Filkins. "The Shadow Commander."

[175] Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr," 18.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Ibid.

[178] Ibid.

[179] Ibid.

[180] Karouny, "Syrian Forces Capture Final Rebel Stronghold in Qusair."

held position in al-Qusayr concluding the battle.[181] Some escaping FSA moved twenty miles north to the town of Talkalakh along another key smuggling route from Lebanon.[182] At the battle of al-Qusayr, dozens of Hezbollah fighters were killed along with eight Iranian officers in urban warfare fighting proving and demonstrating the synchronized joint effort in depth.[183]

The al-Qusayr lessons helped develop future mission planning.[184] MG Soleimani's decision to designate al-Qusayr as the main effort pointed to strategic and operational intent to secure Hezbollah's increased involvement in the war.[185] Hezbollah exercised almost complete tactical control of the operation to the extent of issuing orders to Syrian officers.[186] The coordination of conventional and unconventional chains of commands with the insertion of Iranian officers in the execution of combined arms operations and tactics against the FSA demonstrated the first realization of Iranian operational art as hybrid warfare.[187]

After the fall of al-Quyasr, the Assad regime surprisingly decided to move forces from Homs to Aleppo without consolidating gains. With Hezbollah's decisive entry into the war, the regime chose to simultaneously pursue operational objectives on two fronts. The Assad regime was not successful in this effort. The FSA countered with protracted operations at Homs and Aleppo. The Assad regime demonstrated its limited capacity to simultaneously fight on two fronts when it was forced to return forces from Aleppo to Homs in late June.[188] MG Soleimani

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[181] Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr," 18.

[182] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 18.

[183] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[184] White, *The Qusayr Rules: The Syrian Regime's Changing Way of War*.

[185] Patrick Cockburn, "Talkalakh: Syria's Rebel Town that Forged Its Own Peace Deal," *Independent,* June 25, 2013, accessed September 5, 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news /world/middle-east/tal-kalakh-syrias-rebel-town-that-forged-its-own-peace-deal-8673695.html.

[186] Ibid., 16-18.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Ibid.

consolidated forces and started to iteratively execute the lessons from al-Qusayr adding cognitive effects.[189] *ADRP 3-0* describes cognitive effects as disrupting enemy decision making by affecting the mind and depriving the enemy of the will to fight.[190] Graffiti written on walls around future sieged cities read, "kneel or starve," in a cognitive attempt to defeat the FSA's will.[191]

For two years, the FSA held Talkalakh and its cross-border supply line into northern Lebanon.[192] The FSA resupply from Talkalakh enabled continued control of various districts in Homs around the M5 highway limiting the Assad regime's operational reach and tempo. On June 13, 2013, the Assad regime's offensive continued in Talkalakh and Homs.[193] The Assad regime isolated the FSA and cut off their supply line.[194] Following initial clashes, thirty-nine local FSA leaders agreed to surrender.[195] After the destruction seen in al-Qusayr, the leaders opted to negotiate a deal laying down their arms rather than suffer further damage to the town.[196] Clearly, the leaders decision to surrender the town before destruction was cognitively effected when Assad regime isolated the town. After gaining control of Talkalakh, the Assad regime created a continuing demographic advantage by repopulating the town with Alawite civilians.[197] The Assad regime's decision to isolate the town and negotiate rather than destroy Talkalakh demonstrated their limited capacity and need to preserve operational forces.[198] At Talkalakh, the Assad regime

[189] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[190] US Army. *ADRP 3-0*, 2-13.

[191] The Economist, "The Ultimate Barbarity," *The Economist*, September 3, 2016, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/09/03/the-ultimate-barbarity.

[192] Cockburn, "Talkalakh: Syria's Rebel Town that Forged Its Own Peace Deal."

[193] Ibid.

[194] Ibid.

[195] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 23.

[196] Cockburn, "Talkalakh: Syria's Rebel Town that Forged Its Own Peace Deal."

[197] Nassief. "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo, 25.

[198] Ibid.

successfully synchronized the isolation of the town and flexibly used cognitive effects to get the FSA to surrender in depth.

After the battles of al-Qusayr and Talkalakh, the Assad regime's objective was to take Khaldiyeh in order to regain control of the M5 highway at the north entrance of Homs.[199] On June 30, the Assad regime reinitiated the siege of Homs with heavy air and artillery attacks followed by a ground force assault.[200] From the lessons of al-Qusayr, the Assad regime changed tactics and decided to follow the artillery and air attacks with the Syrian NDF.[201] The Syrian NDF, a paramilitary organized locally within each of the Syrian Governates, now served as the main infantry force after Iranian MG Soliemani recruited 50,000 Alawites.[202] The Assad regime depended on demographic factors to neutralize rebel support in predominantly Alawite neighborhoods.[203] A change in tactics was initiated to preserve the Assad regimes experienced forces.[204] Based from Iranian military leadership and experience, the utilization of the Syrian NDF as the initial advance aligns with how the Iranians used the Basij PMF during the Iran-Iraq War. MG Soliemani, in attempting to enhance the Syrian NDF, inserted experienced Iranian and Hezbollah leaders for command and control purposes.[205] On July 5, the Syrian NDF advanced from the east into Hamadaniya to isolate Khaldiyeh with support from the Syrian Air Force.[206]

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[199] Nassief. "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo, 24.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Kheder Khaddour, "Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience" (Research, Carnegie Middle East Center, March 14, 2016), accessed December 20, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ACMR_Khaddour.pdf.

[202] Power, *Hezbollah in Syria*.

[203] Nassief. "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo, 25.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Power, *Hezbollah in Syria*, 3.

[206] Nassief. "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 25.

Advancing shortly thereafter, the Syrian NDF took control of the Khalid Ibn Al-Walid Mosque.[207]

By the end of July, the Assad regime regained control of Khaldiyeh and the M5 highway to

Aleppo.[208] The Assad regime's ability to effectively install Iranian and Hezbollah leadership into

the Syrian NDF paramilitary organization demonstrated an ability to flexibly synchronize an

expanding string of hybrid organizations in pursuit of limited objectives.[209]

On November 15, 2013, the Assad regime initiated the Qalamoun offensive in continued

pursuit to cut FSA supply lines a short distance from Lebanon.[210] In subsequent battles, the Assad

regime focused on the towns of Qara, Deir Attiyeh, an-Nabek, and Yabroud along the M5

highway from Damascus to Homs. At Qara, Hezbollah massed troops across the border and

synchronized efforts with the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas, and Liwa Fatemiyoun. All three

organizations synchronized efforts to encircle the city as the Assad regime concentrated air

attacks. Shortly thereafter, all three organizations advanced into the town dislocating FSA

forces.[211] After Qara, the Assad regime moved onto Deir Attiyeh, an-Nabek, and Yabroud in the

same manner.[212] Although Hezbollah had limited capacity conducting one battle at a time,

Hezbollah was ideal to pursue the Assad regime's objectives conducting cross border operations

from secure bases in Lebanon (reference figure 4).[213] Hezbollah's ability to control operations

with the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Liwa Fatemiyoun along the Lebanon-Syrian border also

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[207] Nassief. "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 25.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

[210] Nassief. "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 38.

[211] Bassem Mroue and Dia Hadid, "Syrian Army Launches Offensive Near Lebanon Border," *HeraldNet,* November 16, 2013, accessed November 5, 2018, https://www.heraldnet.com/news/syrian-army-launches-offensive-near-lebanon-border/.

[212] Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects.*

[213] Mroue and Hadid, "Syrian Army Launches Offensive Near Lebanon Border."

demonstrated Iran's ability to synchronize flexible organizations to isolate and dislocate an
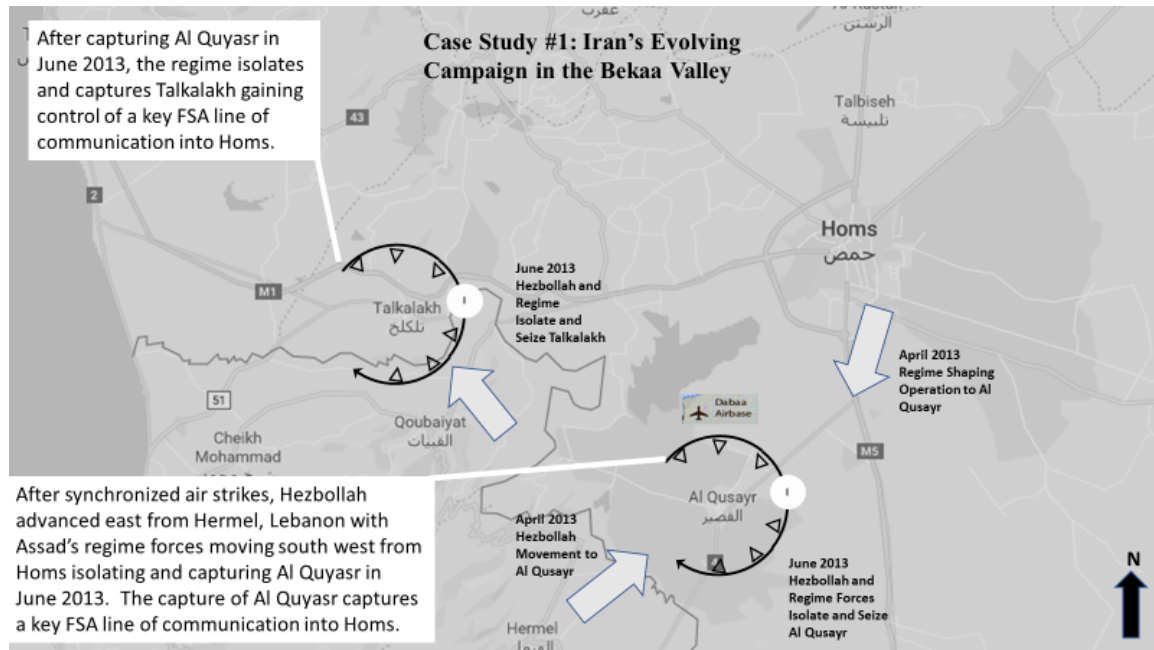
enemy in depth.

Figure 4.   Battle of Al-Qusayr and Talkalakh Map
Source: Isabel Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo" (Report, Institute for the Study of War, January 2013), 15, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.jstor.org /stable/resrep07886?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

After the Assad regime seized each objective, heavy displacement took place to include

2,000 civilians at Qara.[214] The Assad regime adopted a demographic displacement policy as a

way to create a continuing advantage and favorable manufactured peace.[215] Most importantly, the

displacement policy aligned with Iran's constitutional absolute aim to create a one world order

under the Shi'a ideology through hybrid warfare.[216]

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[214] Samya Kullab, "2,200 Syrian Families Entered Arsal in Past 5 Days: U.N.," *Daily Star*, November 20, 2013, accessed November 10, 2018, http://www1.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2013/Nov-20/238434-2200-syrian-families-entered-arsal-in-past-5-days-un.ashx.

[215] Jasmina Rupp, *The Battle for Aleppo and the Fate of Syria* (Vienna: Austrian National Defense Academy, November 2016), 2, accessed September 3, 2018, www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool /publikationen/ifk_monitor_int_37_rupp_november_16_web.pdf.

[216] Ibid.

In the Bekaa Valley, the Assad regime's control of each town along the M5 highway was critical to reduce friction, extend operational reach, and control tempo into Homs and Aleppo. Fighting between the FSA and Assad regime actually closed the highway for varying periods of time limiting Assad's operational movements into Aleppo.[217] Without control of the corridors, the Assad regime demonstrated an inability to conduct simultaneous operations. However, Iranian MG Soleimani's decision to change priorities from Homs to al-Qusayr, and Aleppo back to Homs, did demonstrate the flexibility and synchronization of operations to reduce enemy advantages in depth and properly set the conditions for the battle of Aleppo.

Section 4: Battle of Aleppo

In the first half of 2015, a series of FSA advances put the government under pressure in Aleppo.[218] The Syrian Army strength was down to 70,000 from defections, desertions, and attrition.[219] Up to this point in the Syrian Civil War, Iranian military planners deployed 70,000 soldiers to set conditions for the battle of Aleppo and convinced Russia to support the effort.[220] Against international travel ban restrictions, MG Soleimani visited Moscow for a meeting with Vladimir Putin in July.[221] During the meeting, MG Soleimani explained the Syrian theater map and convinced Putin to intervene deploying Russian warplanes to Lakatia, Syria.[222] As Iranian hybrid warfare escalated, Russian support was key to deter US intervention against Iran.

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[217] Mroue and Hadid, "Syrian Army Launches Offensive Near Lebanon Border."

[218] National Council of Resistance of Iran, *How Iran Fuels Syria War: Details of the IRGC Command HQ and Key Officers in Syria* (Washington, DC: National Council of Resistance of Iran-US Representative Office, July 2016).

[219] Nerguizian, *The Military Balance in a Shattered Levant*, 113.

[220] Bucala, "Iran's New Way of War in Syria," 5-6.

[221] Linda Kelly and Parisa Hafezi, "Iran's Soleimani in Russia for Talks on Syria, Missiles: Sources," *Reuters*, July 15, 2016, accessed September 11, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-iran-soleimani-idUSKCN0XC0TR.

[222] Bassam and Perry, "How Iranian General plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow."

At this time in Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah augmented Iranian and Syrian conventional forces with 10,000 soldiers. The Liwa Fatemiyoun added 15,000 soldiers. The Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas added 20,000 soldiers. The Liwa Zainabiyoun and Palestinian Liwa al-Quds added 7,000 soldiers.[223] The Syrian Arab Army contributed 10,000 soldiers to include the elite Tiger Force.[224] MG Soleimani organized the Assad regime, an explosion of proxy forces, that included the IRGC, IRGC-QF, Basij, Hezbollah, Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas, Liwa Fatemiyoun, Liwa Zainabiyoun, Palestinian Liwa al-Quds, and Syrian NDF.[225] MG Soleimani's coalition was also supported by Russian advisors who coordinated air and naval strikes on the ground.[226] Synchronizing operations of this scale with a variety of conventional and unconventional forces across cultural barriers in depth was extremely difficult but still produced a flexible effect.[227] MG Soleimani's diplomacy effort came together operationally for his toughest task, the battle of Aleppo.

On September 30, 2015, Russia initiated air strikes opening the first phase at Aleppo.[228] In the middle of October, the Assad regime offensive launched south of Aleppo while simultaneously attacking northeast to relieve the besieged Kuweires air base.[229] FSA forces

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[223] Majid Rafizadeh, "Iran's Forces Outnumber Assad's in Syria," Gatestone Institute International Policy Council, November 24, 2016, accessed November 3, 2018, https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org /9406/iran-soldiers-syria.

[224] Amir Toumaj, "Array of Pro-Syrian Government Forces Advances in Aleppo," *FDD's Long Wars Journal*, December 9, 2016, accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org/ archives/2016/12/array-of-pro-syrian-government-forces-advance-in-aleppo.php.

[225] Chris Kozak, "Regime and Iranian Forces Launch Multiple Offensive in Aleppo," Institute for the Study of War, October 2015, accessed October 15, 2018, http://www.understandingwar.org /backgrounder/regime-and-iranian-forces-launch-multi-pronged-offensive-aleppo.

[226] Ibid.

[227] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 1.

[228] Andrew Osborn and Phil Stewart, "Russia Begins Syria Air Strikes in Its Biggest Mideast Intervention in Decades," *Reuters*, November 30, 2015, accessed September 30, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-idUSKCN0RU0MG20151001.

[229] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 14.

counterattacked toward Safira in an attempt to disrupt the Assad regime's operation. The Assad regime repelled the attack and continued their advance maintaining tempo.[230]

On November 1, 2015, the Syrian Arab Army's 4th Mechanized Division in coordination with Russian air power, Hezbollah, Syrian NDF, Liwa Fatemiyoun, Liwa Zainabiyoun, and Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas continued their large-scale offensive south of Aleppo isolating and advancing on villages around the strategic town of Al Hadner.[231] Iranian ground troops boosted the capacity and enabled the Assad regime to seize and hold key terrain.[232] The Assad regime's tempo was slow isolating villages and towns cutting off their vital lines of communication methodically. The lethal combination of Russian air power and Iranian organized ground forces severely eroded FSA defenses around Aleppo.[233] Over the three weeks, the Assad regime captured seven villages before destroying the rebel siege around Kuweires on November 10th.[234] The IRGC took heavy casualties. In December, the IRGC reported casualties in the 7th Valiye Asr, 14th Imam Hossein, and 25th Karbala divisions, proving the Iranian conventional effort in Syria.[235] The IRGC also lost four high ranking Generals including MG Soleimani's deputy BG Hamadani (the former Basij Commander and founder of the Syrian NDF) establishing undeniable symbolic proof Iran's operational leadership was conducting a hybrid effort in Syria.[236] The

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[230] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 14. .

[231] Lieth Aboufadel, "Syrian Army and Hezbollah Make Huge Gains in Southern Aleppo: Military Operations Begin in Al-Hader," *Almasdar News,* November 2, 2015, accessed September 30, 2018, https://www.almasdarnews.com.

[232] Bucala, "Iran's New Way of War in Syria," 1.

[233] Genevieve Casagrande, Christopher Kozak, and Jennifer Cafarella, *Syria 90-Day Forecast: The Assad Regime and Allies in Northern Syria* (Institute for the Study of War, February 24, 2016), 2, accessed October 16, 2018, http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/196188.

[234] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 14.

[235] Ibid., 16.

[236] Robin Wright, "Iran's Generals Are Dying in Syria," *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2015, accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/irans-generals-are-dying-in-syria.

Assad regime's ability to flexibly synchronize multiple organizations in depth to defeat the FSA

in the vicinity of Aleppo demonstrated the continued evolvement of Iranian operational art as

hybrid warfare.

On February 1, 2016, the Assad regime initiated a major offensive to break the FSA siege

of Nubl and Zahra north of Aleppo to severe the Killis corridor to Aleppo.[237] The Killis corridor

is a vital ground line of communication for weapons, ammunition, food, and humanitarian

supplies from Turkey.[238]Again, the Assad regime coordinated Russian air attacks with the

advance on the ground to capture surrounding villages and relieved the two Shi'a towns on

February 3.[239] The capture of Nubl and Zahara successfully severed the Killis corridor. Over the

next two weeks, the Assad regime continued to take control of small towns north of Aleppo

completing the northern part of the Aleppo encirclement. During these two weeks the IRGC took

fourteen casualties during operations.[240] From February 14th to the 19th, IRGC deaths dropped,

while deaths among the Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainabiyoun picked up reporting seventeen

casualties.[241] The shift in deaths from Iranian forces to Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainabiyoun

highlights Iran's preference to rely on foreign proxies in order to preserve its own force.[242] Iran's

foreign ministry refused to recognize the Afghan and Pakistani deaths in an official capacity

creating a deniable narrative that identified these fighters as "volunteers" fighting independently

on their own terms.[243] Considering Iran recruited Afghanistan and Pakistan refugees through

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[237] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 17.

[238] Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," 16-18.

[239] Laila Bassam, "Syrian Army and Allies Breaks Rebel Siege of Shiite Towns," *Reuters,* February 3, 2016, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo/syrian-army-and-allies-breaks-rebel-siege-of-shiite-towns-army-idUSKCN0VC1VQ.

[240] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 19.

[241] Ibid.

[242] Ibid.

[243] Sahraei, "Syria War: The Afghans Sent by Iran to Fight for Assad."

various methods, trained them in Iran, and transported them without passports, the Iranians

denying narrative demonstrated a strong desire to stay below the threshold of US intervention.

The continued buildup of forces around Aleppo occurred between March and July 2016.

The Assad regimes objective was to complete the encirclement of Aleppo. The Iranian plan

isolated eastern Aleppo to cut off reinforcements and resupply from Idlib province.[244] In March,

Khamenei ordered Iran's regular Army's 65th Airborne Division (Special Operations) to be

deployed around Aleppo.[245] The IRGC task was to support militant efforts and prevent FSA

forces from breaking the siege from the southwest.[246]

On April 4, 2016, the Syrian NDF and Hezbollah captured the strategic industrial area of

al-Zahra.[247] The next "stated goal" was to separate the FSA fighters from the bulk of the

population allowing civilians to evacuate through humanitarian corridors, while the FSA was

given safe passage to Idlib. The goal fell short as the FSA continued their offensives along the

southern front of Aleppo.[248] In April, many casualties from the IRGC, Hezbollah, Syrian NDF,

and Liwa Fatemiyoun were reported, again demonstrating the continued nature of Iranian hybrid

operations.[249] In June, the FSA temporarily broke into a pocket attacking the Mallah Farms area,

but the advance was repelled by the Palestinian Liwa al-Quds who secured the area.[250] Thereafter,

the Palestinian Liwa al-Quds captured the Handarat Palestinian Refugee Camp and Kindi

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[244] Tim Ripley, *Operation Aleppo* (Lancaster, UK: Telic-Herrick Publications, 2018), 100.

[245] Rafizadeh, "Iran's Forces Outnumber Assad's in Syria."

[246] Ripley, *Operation Aleppo*, 101.

[247] Leith Aboufadel, "Breaking: NDF and Hezbollah Capture Industrial Area in Norther Aleppo," *Almasdar News,* April 17, 2015, accessed November 3, 2018, https://www.almasdarnews.com.

[248] Ripley, *Operation Aleppo,* 100.

[249] Rafizadeh, "Iran's Forces Outnumber Assad's in Syria."

[250] Southern Front, "Palestinain Liwa al-Quds Pro Government Palestinian Militia Operating in *Aleppo*," Southern Front, April 25, 2017, accessed December 20, 2018, https://southfront.org/liwa-al-quds-powerful-pro-government-palestinian-militia-operating-in-aleppo/.

Hospital.[251] The Palestinian Liwa al-Quds also kept open the Khanasser Highway, a key supply route enabling a front from the north into Aleppo.[252] In the middle of June, artillery and air strikes focused on FSA positions in the Castello Road corridor with advances on the ground thereafter.[253] On July 27, the Assad regime successfully captured the area around northern and western Aleppo and linked the encirclement to Castello Road in the South.[254] The IRGC confirmed five fatalities over this time while the Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainabiyoun confirmed forty-two casualties.[255]

In early August 2016, the FSA claimed to have broken through the defensive positions capturing Ramousah Road in the Southwest. Russian airstrikes prevented the FSA from consolidating gains with constant shelling.[256] At the end of August, the Assad regime launched a campaign to retake Ramousah Road.[257] On September 4, the assault succeeded permanently cutting off Aleppo.[258] The Assad regime used all of their capabilities to disrupt the most

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[251] Toumaj, "Russian influence evident in Palestinian Militia."

[252] Southern Front, "Palestinain Liwa al-Quds Pro Government Palestinian Militia Operating in Aleppo."

[253] Ripley, *Operation Aleppo*, 101.

[254] Reuters, "Syrian Army Says Cut Off All Supply Routes into East Aleppo," *Reuters*, July 27, 2016, accessed November 3, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo/syrian-army-says-cut-off-all-supply-routes-into-east-aleppo-idUSKCN1071FE.

[255] Amir Toumaj, "Iranian Military Involvement in the Battle of Aleppo," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 3, 2016, accessed November 3, 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org /archives/2016/08/iranian-military-involvement-in-the-battle-for-aleppo.php.

[256] Maks Czuperski, Faysal Itani, Ben Nimmo, Eliot Higgins, and Emma Beals, *Breaking Aleppo* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 2017), 15, accessed November 3, 2018, www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid., 15.

important supply routes of the FSA.[259] On September 6, MG Soleimani made a secret trip to discuss the large-scale offensive with Assad regime forces in southern Aleppo.[260]

The final offensive to break Aleppo began in late September 2016. The assault force was led by the elite Syrian Tiger Force with larger contingents of militia fighters from the Syrian NDF, Palestinian Liwa al-Quds, Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas, Liwa Fatemiyoun, Liwa Zainabiyoun, and Hezbollah holding ground behind the offensive.[261] The IRGC chief of staff, MG Mohammad Bagheri, admitted to supporting the effort with drone strikes stating, "these UAV's are being used to hit terrorist targets in Syria."[262] Utilizing the UAV capability, the Assad regime quickly took back 20 percent of the rebel-held part of the city.[263] After weeks of intense bombardment, the Assad regime declared a pause in the campaign urging FSA rebels and civilians to surrender east Aleppo.[264] In late October, a last FSA offensive aimed at breaking the siege began.[265] In the middle of November, intense air strikes resumed against east Aleppo. At the end of November, the Assad regime advanced, taking the northern and eastern part of the FSA sector.[266] On December 7, the Assad regime brought three-fourths of Aleppo under government control after advancing on the old city and al-Shaar district.[267] By December 13, after a series of

[259] Rupp, *The Battle for Aleppo and the Fate of Syria*.

[260] Aboufadel, "Breaking: NDF and Hezbollah Capture Industrial Area in Norther Aleppo"; Lieth Aboufadel, "Iranian, Syrian Commanders Meet to Discuss Upcoming Aleppo Offensive," *Almas Dar News*, September 7, 2016, accessed November 3, 2018, https://www.almasdarnews.com.

[261] Ripley, *Operation Aleppo*, 100.

[262] Albin Szakola, "Iran admits using Drone Strikes in Syria," *Now News,* September 26, 2016, accessed December 24, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/iran-drone-strikes-syria-2016-9.

[263] Czuperski et al., *Breaking Aleppo*, 47.

[264] Ellen Francis and Angus McDowall, "Air Strikes Pound Rebel-Held East Aleppo After Weeks-Long Pause," *Reuters,* November 15, 2016, accessed November 3, 2018, https://www.reuters.com /article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKBN13A16O.

[265] Reuters, "Timeline: The Battle for Syria's Aleppo City."

[266] Czuperski et al., *Breaking Aleppo*, 47.

[267] Ibid., 48.

advances just 5 percent of East Aleppo was still in opposition hands.[268] The rapid advance by the

Assad regime through Aleppo was helped with UAV imagery giving the Assad regime

confidence to advance boldly on the poorly coordinated FSA.[269] On December 22, the Syrian

government declared all of Aleppo was back under its control (reference figure 5).[270] In 2016, a

breakdown of announced Assad regime fighters killed in Syria identified 1,100 Lebanese, 650

Afghans, 488 Iranians, 144 Pakistanis, and 94 Iraqis.[271]

Figure 5.   Battle of Aleppo Map
Source: University of Texas at Austin, "Country Maps, Syria," accessed February 15, 2018,
https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/map_sites/country_sites.html#syria.

With control of the corridors and M5 highway through Homs, the Assad regime

demonstrated an ability to conduct simultaneous operations. Iranian MG Soleimani's decision to

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[268] Czuperski et al., *Breaking Aleppo*, 5.

[269] Ripley, *Operation Aleppo*, 100.

[270] Czuperski et al., *Breaking Aleppo*, 6.

[271] Hanin Ghaddir, ed., *Iran's Foreign Legion* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, February 2018), 3, accessed September 3, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-impact-of-shia-militias-on-u.s.-foreign-policy.

change priorities from Homs to al-Qusayr, and Aleppo back to Homs, set the conditions for the successful operation at Aleppo. For Iran, the battle of Aleppo was the complete realization of Iranian operational art through the method of hybrid warfare using the lens and tenets of *ADP 3-0* in evaluation of Iran's way of war. Iran's ability to flexibly escalate its force while synchronizing an explosion of proxy organizations across cultural barriers in depth to isolate, dislocate, and destroy the FSA confirms Iranian operational art through the method of hybrid warfare below the threshold of US intervention.

Section 5: Conclusion

The *Iranian Constitution* sets the political aim seeking limited gains through limited means over a long period of time in an attempt to reach its absolute political desires. The framework of Iranian operational art is limited war expressed as hybrid warfare. Through the method of hybrid warfare with their affiliated proxy organizations noted in the preceding sections, and the case studies of their involvement in the Syrian Civil War, the evidence indicates the viability of this definition of Iranian operational art: *Iranian hybrid warfare is a strategically patient political war connected by its flexible and varying means (most often deniable through mass media) synchronized in depth below the threshold of US intervention.*

The preamble to the *Iranian Constitution* mandates the exportation of the revolution through this implied character of hybrid warfare where it states, "Prepare against them whatever force you are able to muster, and strings of horses *(here used as proxy organizations)*, striking fear into the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them."[272] The Iranian constitutional mandate is a one world government under Sharia law through the jurisconsult *Wilayat al-Faqih*. The *Iranian Constitution's* preamble confirms this assertion stating, "in development of international relations, the Constitution will strive with other Islamic and popular

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[272] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution.*

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movements to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community and to assure the continuation of the struggle for the liberation of all deprived and oppressed peoples in the world."[273] The leaders of Iran derived their policies and way of war as an expression of the mandate inherent in the constitution.

Over the last forty years, the Iranians have demonstrated their persistent commitment to this cause in hybrid warfare, utilizing a string of proxies across borders to exploit opportunities and expand influence. Proxy groups splintered from stable organizations, creating independent factions who weakened government stability and exploited opportunities. In the utility of circumstance and opportunity, Iran persisted patiently in limited war towards its absolute aim. The persistence goes on even today. Iran, knowing they are outmatched, defers to limited war to preserve the state. As Clausewitz noted of the characteristic of limited war, the Iranian leadership acts, then evaluates, adjusting its political aims to the possible in each new circumstance, and then acting again, always through proxies, and always with the flexibility necessary to prevent an opportunity for the US to intervene.[274] Clausewitz says limited war, "consists of separate successes each unrelated to the next, as in a match consisting of several games. The earlier games have no effect upon the later. All that counts is the total score, and each separate result makes its contribution toward this total."[275] In a theoretical twist, Iranian operational art bridged Clausewitz's theory of inconsistent limited war to their constitutional absolute aim through the method of hybrid warfare.

The consistency with Clausewitz' idea is that Iran's proxies provide deniability, changing their tactical, operational, and political approach that is consistent with a view towards flexibility, synchronization, and depth over a strategic long period of time. The Iranian way of hybrid

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[273] Members of Assembly of Experts, *Iranian Constitution, Preamble*.

[274] Lauer, "Blue Whales and Tiger Sharks: Politics, Policy, and the Military Operational Artist."

[275] Clausewitz, *On War*, 582.

warfare flexes beyond international borders, treaties, laws, and alliances to work within the limitations imposed by the logic of limited war.[276] The *Iranian Constitution* Preamble, implies an operational approach that can anticipate, adapt, and emerge in infinite forms through "a string of horses" whoever and wherever they may be.[277] As identified in GAO Report 10-1036R titled, *Hybrid Warfare*, the Department of Defense does not recognize this form of war, struggling in a misguided attempt to fight a symptomatic "war on terror," and underestimating the idea a hybrid threat could evolve into hybrid warfare.

As the operational artist in Syria, MG Soleimani led and influenced the IRGC-QF, Basij PMF, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Badr Brigades, Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Liwa Fatemiyoun, Liwa Zainabiyoun, Palestinian Liwa al-Quds, and the Syrian National Defense Force. MG Soleimani flexibly synchronized the organizations in joint efforts to defeat rebel forces at varying degrees evolving from the battle of al-Qusayr in 2013 to the battel of Aleppo in 2016 with a capability beyond previous understanding. Iranian MG Soleimani's decision to change priorities from Homs to al-Qusayr, and Aleppo back to Homs, set the conditions for the successful operation at Aleppo. For Iran, the battle of Aleppo was the complete realization of Iranian operational art through the method of hybrid warfare using the tenets (flexibility, synchronization, and depth) of *ADP 3-0* in evaluation of Iran's way of war. Evaluating Iran's way of war through the US doctrinal lens confirms Iranian operational art through the method of hybrid warfare. Regardless of Iran's evolved way of war, the consistency in the logic in Iran's future operations rests in the *Iranian Constitutional* implied mandate defined here as hybrid warfare-proxies as through "a string of horses."

After the Syrian Civil War, the United States faces significant new challenges in the Middle East. Iran assumes that they can make patient gains towards their constitutionally

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[276] Clausewitz, *On War*, 582.

[277] Lauer, "The Tao of Doctrine Contesting an Art of Operations," 119.

mandated political aim by operating (within its denial narrative) below the threshold of US intervention. It is important in the context that US strategic and operational planners take note of the manner in which the Iranian government and its military are the planners, leaders, creators, and embedded soldiers of their deniable hybrid network. Iran's continued evolution of its hybrid model of warfare in Syria strengthens its capacity to project combat power against Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the rest of the Middle East. Iran's effort is a patient global effort. Moving forward, Iran's hybrid method cannot be underestimated. Most importantly, Iran's strategic objectives to spread the ideology and reduce US influence in the region is concretely described, mandated, and derived from the *Iranian Constitution*.

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