



The Iran Threat Network (ITN)

Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships

Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser

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The authors focus on the Iran Threat Network (ITN), a loose network of non-Iranian, nonstate groups supported by Tehran that sits at the intersection of two threats—Iran and nonstate actors—highlighted in recent U.S. policy as a priority for the U.S. government to counter. The authors explore Iran's relationship with its nonstate network to better enable the U.S. government to counter Iranian subversion in the region via the ITN.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are Iran's political and military objectives?
- How does the ITN factor into Iran's strategy?
- What objectives does Tehran pursue via the ITN?
- How does the regime think about and categorize different ITN members?



KEY FINDINGS

The Iran Threat Network is a formidable force of tens of thousands of fighters

- Authors categorized the four classes of groups within the ITN that emerged from their analysis of Iran's nonstate client network by the objectives pursued by Tehran: Targeters, Deterrers, Stabilizers, and Influencers.
- Targeters are designed to raise the costs of maintaining U.S. forward presence. The primary objective pursued by Iran in supporting these groups lies in leveraging them to deter and harass U.S. forces in the region.
- Deterrers are groups that Tehran cultivates primarily to deter and impose costs on regional rivals.

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These rivals include Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

- Stabilizers are groups employed to stabilize Iran's allies, such as Syria.
- Influencers are groups that allow Tehran to expand influence within states.

The ITN is Tehran's most potent deterrent at its disposal against the United States

- The ITN is presently—and likely to remain well into the future—Tehran's primary means of power projection and preferred instrument of influence in the Middle East.
- ITN members—not Tehran—are most likely to launch attacks against U.S. and other targets.
- The ITN poses a broader dilemma for the United States, because rising U.S.-Iran tensions have required the United States to increase its posture in the Middle East and decrease its resources for other U.S. defense priorities.
- It is important that the U.S. government adopt a multidimensional approach to counter Iran's use of the ITN to undermine U.S. interests or potentially harm U.S. military and civilian personnel.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. government and U.S. Army should formulate specific responses to each category within the ITN rather than a general counter-ITN approach, recognizing their different weaknesses, levers of influence, and relations with Iran to better counter the ITN.
- Because the Targeters are designed to counter U.S. presence—and, by extension, U.S. influence—in the Middle East, it poses the greatest threat from the ITN to the United States. These groups have evolved into hybrid groups now incorporated into the Iraqi political system and security forces. The U.S. Army should be careful to avoid inadvertent security cooperation activities with these groups.
- The Deterrers do not pose direct threats to the U.S. homeland and the U.S. Army, but do pose a threat to regional partners. Therefore, U.S. Army efforts to build partner capacity to enable U.S. regional partners to be responsible for their own security are essential.
- Some members of the Stabilizers are likely to challenge U.S. presence in the region as they seek to stabilize Iranian allies. Therefore, the U.S. Army should identify critical signals when these groups might seek to take action against U.S. equities to enhance force protection.
- The Influencers are likely to continue pursuing violent activities in the Middle East and South Asia to undermine stability and strengthen their influence in their respective countries. To dampen their ambitions, the U.S. Army should continue to strengthen military-to-military relations with key partners in the region to send a deterrent message and build partner capacity to counter the ITN.

