Houthis protest against airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition on Sana'a in September 2015, carrying placards with the movement's slogans as well as the flag of Yemen. Photo by Henry Ridgwell/Voice of America/Public Domain.

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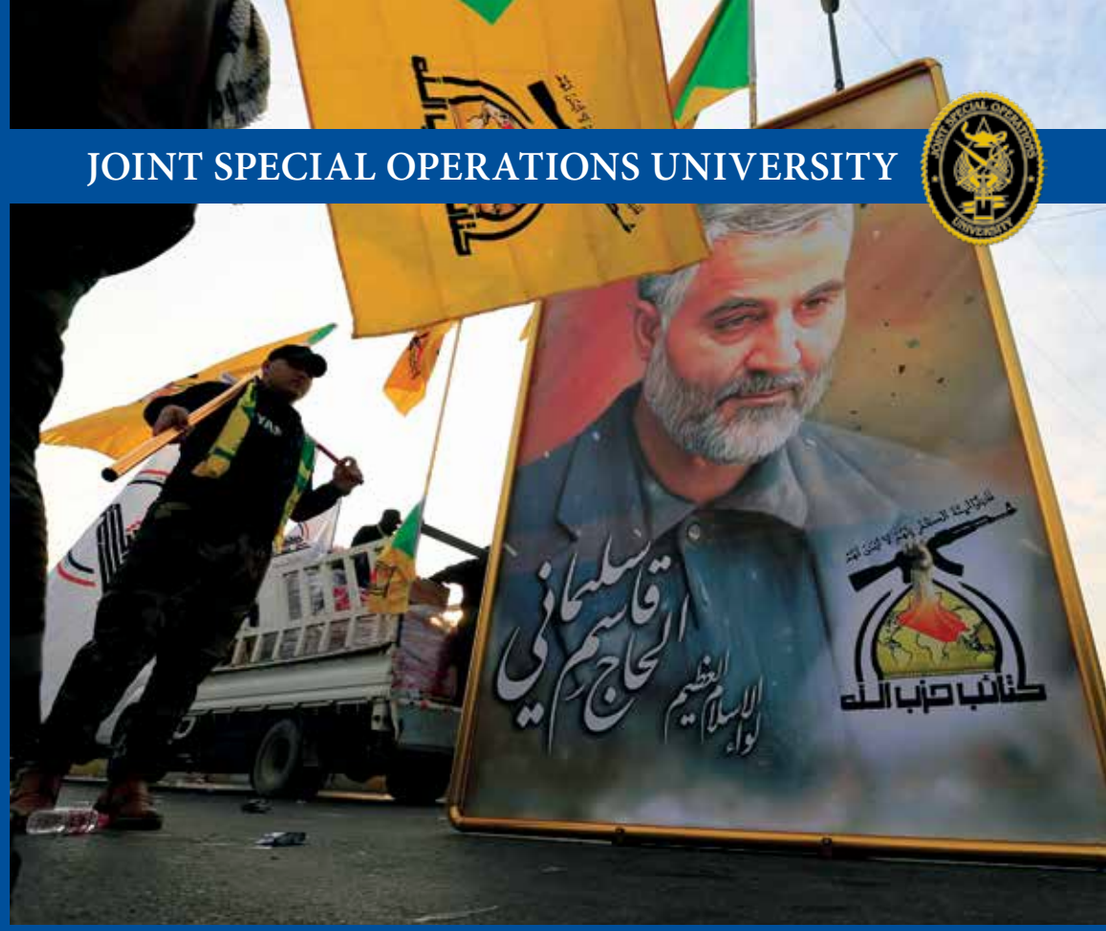

Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis

Diane M. Zorri, Houman A. Sadri, and David C. Ellis

JSOU Report 20-5

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Back cover. Houthis protest against airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition on Sana'a in September 2015, carrying placards with the movement's slogans as well as the flag of Yemen. Photo by Henry Ridgwell/Voice of America/Public Domain

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Foreword

The current U.S. Department of Defense is pursuing a maximum pressure campaign that is designed to alter the course of Iran's foreign and security policies. A 2019 RAND report that was published in *Foreign Policy* states the "overarching objective [of U.S. policy] is to deny Tehran the financial resources required to maintain nuclear and missile programs and a network of proxies including Lebanese Hezbollah, various Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and a growing network of foreign fighters in Syria recruited by Iran from Afghanistan and Pakistan."[1] This volume provides a unique look at the problem of states using proxy forces to advance their foreign policy objectives. Zorri, Sadri, and Ellis provide the reader with a comprehensive look at the composition of militia forces working in concert with Iran and its policies throughout Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

The unique analysis is what sets this study apart from other assessments of Iran and its proxy forces. The authors comparatively analyze Iranian proxy groups using the Principal-Agent theory. Those unfamiliar with this theory should not be daunted. The theory is simple: the principal (Iran)—uses whatever actions are available to provide incentives for some other actor—the agent (Proxy)—to make decisions that the principal most prefers. Of course, the authors outline the problems that can occur in such a dynamic relationship. Agents do not always follow the direction of the Principal. This volume uses this fact to underscore the importance for the special operations community. There are opportunities for intervention to drive a wedge between Iran and its proxies. In addition, this Principal-Agent theory (and its problems) apply to the U.S. and its proxies.

The three main chapters outline the different groups and factors that influence Iranian military and political strategy for Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. For each case, the authors describe the proxy/ host country relationship and analyze how the Iranian proxy is acting within the country. Each chapter concludes with an assessment of vulnerabilities that could be exploited by the U.S., and specifically by special operations. This is the real value of such analysis. While Iran will continue to use their proxy network to frustrate U.S. Middle East strategy, the U.S. is not without appropriate responses. This volume provides sage advice in that terrorism, counterterrorism, and proxy

conflict are inherently political phenomena and cannot and should not be addressed with a kinetic solution alone. Instead, the U.S. (and special operations) should focus on getting the local politics correct to help neutralize and blunt Iranian activities conducted through proxies.

This volume covers a very important topic that members of the special operations community should find interesting and informative. Understanding how and why Iran uses proxy forces throughout the Middle East is vitally important for policymakers, military strategists, and operators. The lessons in this volume are not isolated to U.S. approaches toward Iranian use of proxies but has broader implications in great power competition. Russia and China have their own versions of proxies that also seek to compete with the U.S. short of armed conflict. Zorri, Sadri, and Ellis have provided the special operations community with a roadmap to responding to such activities when so many are struggling to find a solution.

Peter McCabe, Ph.D.
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Dr. Diane M. Zorri is an assistant professor of security studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and serves as a subject matter expert to Joint Special Operations University (JSOU). She writes and researches issues that involve security and governance in the Middle East, U.S. defense policy, and national security. Prior to her work in academia, Dr. Zorri served as an officer in the U.S. Air Force and worked in the defense industry. Upon leaving the Air Force, she worked for an Italian-U.S. defense company managing projects in foreign military sales and proposal development, executing large international communications and physical security projects for military customers. During the Iraq war, she worked for Multi-National Force–Iraq in Baghdad, managing over 400 bilingual, bicultural advisors to the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Department of Defense. She has also freelanced in business consulting for European, South American, and Middle Eastern clients interested in security and defense procurement.

Dr. Zorri has published several works and has appeared in online and scholarly mediums, including: The Digest of Middle East Studies; *Special Operations Journal*; *The Journal of Strategic Security*; *The Journal of Terrorism Research*; *The National Interest*; Radio Algeria; *The Strategy Bridge*; *Business Insider*; *Small Wars Journal*; and the *New York Daily News*. She is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, George Mason University, and completed coursework in Italian at the Universita per Stranieri in Perugia, Italy.

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Introduction

> Governments go to war directly or by proxy without declaring war. Force, or threat of force, are constantly used to dominate other countries. – Sean MacBride[2]

The regional hegemonic aspirations of the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter labeled Iran) are changing the balance of power across the Middle East, especially in gray zone conflicts—"activities by a state that are harmful to another state and are sometimes considered to be acts of war, but are not legally acts of war."[3,4] Despite U.S.-led sanctions, recent regional trends have favored Iran, posing a significant threat to U.S. interests. Using proxy groups, Iran's leaders in Tehran actively seek to keep regional conflicts in the gray zone thereby prolonging hostilities and giving Tehran the strategic advantage by making itself indispensable to subnational actors vying for local power and influence. While proxy-based strategies provide many benefits, they are also fraught with strategic pitfalls that can be exploited if proxy dynamics and local political conditions are well understood by adversaries.

Tehran's use of proxies is not new, but the sheer number of proxies it now has at its disposal is. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the regime in Tehran has pursued policy paths that often counter U.S. policy objectives across the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf region.[5] Beyond regime survival, Tehran has succeeded in improving its strategic position from one of a peripheral power—scarcely surviving the end of the 8-year Iran-Iraq war—to one of near regional hegemony.[6] The demise of the Baath Party in Iraq in 2003 created a regional power vacuum gradually filled by Iranian proxies. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Tehran's leaders took advantage of Baghdad's weak position and put many Iraqi centers of power under their influence using a variety of soft to hard power instruments. After the withdrawal of coalition forces from the region in 2011 and through the proxy networks it had established, Tehran gained a solid foothold in Iraq and Syria under the guise of helping Baghdad and Damascus fight the Islamic State (IS). In Yemen, Iranian proxy groups began backing Houthi rebels to fight a regime that depends on neighboring Saudi Arabia for survival. Through

its effective proxy strategy, Iran's actions have not only antagonized much of the West, but many regimes across the Middle East.

This monograph offers a novel perspective on the study of Iranian proxy organizations in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The research employs a comparative analysis of Iranian proxy groups through the prism of Principal-Agent Theory, which has both intrinsic and instrumental values for educating the U.S. military on how to understand and counter Iranian decision-making. Yet, the impact of the research seeks to go beyond the present tension with Iran. In academic terms, this research seeks to offer new insights as to how the foreign policies of revisionist regimes seek ultimately to shift relations amongst regional powers and allies. The authors hope this approach can be applied beyond the case of Iran and serve as a productive model of political analysis for fully comprehending the mechanics involved in developing, employing, and sustaining proxy organizations.

The Promise and Peril of Proxy Conflict

The notion of proxy conflict is not a new phenomenon, and indeed some scholars view today's proxy wars as the modern version of mercenary-based politics that only diminished after the rise of national, professional armies during the 1800s.[7] Despite the prevalence of proxy conflict, there is relatively little academic literature on the nature of how states use proxy groups to implement their foreign policy objectives and why proxies can sustain their influence in a host country.[8] For the purposes of this analysis, the terms "proxy" or "proxy forces" are defined as the litany of Iranian-financed, trained, organized or ideologically aligned armed groups operating in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The authors adopt this definition due to the absence of a common or predominant one in the literature, but it retains the features frequently mentioned.

Though the term "proxy" is widely used and intrinsically understandable, a key theme of this text is that there is no clear line a group crosses at which point it ceases being a fully independent actor and becomes a fully dependent one. In other words, the "proxy-ness" of an actor is in many ways a subjective assessment about which reasonable people can disagree. A proxy is by definition a representative acting on someone or something's behalf, which inherently implies a hierarchical relationship—a sponsor and a sponsored. However, in the foreign policy and military contexts, both the sponsor and

the sponsored must mutually agree to enter into a relationship, though they might have different objectives for working together. Analytically, then, there are differentials in power, objectives, and interests between the sponsor and the sponsored that can, and do, change over time. The idea that the proxy relationship is a dynamic one is a relatively recent addition to the literature, but a crucial insight for combatting this type of warfare.

Most scholarly treatments of proxy conflict focus on Cold War conflicts where the U.S. or Soviet Union fought against regimes supported by the other. During this era, the majority of the research viewed proxies as "little more than third-party tools of statecraft without any agency, intent, or, indeed, interests visibly separable from those of a well-resourced state sponsor."[9] While terrorist proxies were initially viewed in the same way after 9/11, recent scholarship has sought to demonstrate the fact that proxies do, in fact, have agency, choice, and differing interests with their state sponsors. Jeffrey M. Bale, for instance, argues powerfully that the relationship between the state sponsor and proxy, even terrorist proxies, is based on mutual—and likely temporary—needs. He writes:

> This does not mean, of course, that terrorists never collaborate with states that do not share their own ideologies. They have often done so, albeit usually on the realist grounds that 'the enemy of my (principal) enemy is my (temporary) friend.' … It does mean, however, that they are likely to be very suspicious and wary of the states that offer them support, since such support invariably comes with certain strings attached, and that they will assiduously strive to maintain their own autonomy, all the more so if the regimes in question do not share their particular worldviews or long-term goals. For their part, states are willing to collaborate with violence-prone extremists for a multiplicity of reasons, ranging from ideological solidarity to supporting coreligionists or co-ethnics to geopolitical realpolitik, although in this context ideological factors are arguably less important to states than to extremist groups.[10]

Michael A. Innes concludes that rather than seeing proxies as a symptom of an eroding Westphalian order, it is more fruitful to interpret the sponsor-sponsored proxy relationship as part of a "fundamental symbiosis between state and non-state actors" that enables states a degree of flexibility in a world order where conflict between states has become increasingly rare.[11]

A growing chorus of scholars now view proxy conflict as intrinsic to twenty-first century warfare where states seek to offload the burdens of conflict to others.[12] The benefits of a state acting through proxies are fourfold:

- it redirects the physical and financial burdens of war away from the sponsor's population,
- it creates plausible deniability for the sponsor when action is taken by the proxy,
- it reduces the political costs associated with a conflict, and
- it creates policy options below the level of international politics albeit with greater risk.[13]

Zeev Moaz and Belgin San-Akca, for example, suggest that states dissatisfied with the status quo, but which are relatively weak versus competitors, are more likely to work with proxies to try to change it.[14] A cursory review of Iran's employment of proxies over the past 40 years suggest their insights have merit. Working through proxies, sponsor states can achieve three types of policy objectives: coerce a competitor for favorable negotiations, disrupt the competitor internally to weaken its military capacity, and transform the nature of the competitor's regime or territorial integrity.[15]

Although state sponsors need proxies to project influence and power at low cost, the peril lies in the Principal-Agent Dilemma, which refers to, as Bale notes, the agency of sponsored proxies to act against the interests of their state sponsors (principals).[16] Diverging interests can be found in:

- the reasons and motivation for joining the fight,
- the commitment to the cause,
- the sense of urgency,
- the willingness to suffer the fortunes of war, and
- ethics in the field.[17]

In short, there is a "trade-off between the principal's interests and the agent's behavior, which the principal lacks complete knowledge of."[18] Two problems can arise in Principal-Agent relationships: the first, adverse selection, occurs when principals have insufficient knowledge about its agent's (sponsored proxy's) capability or commitment, while the second, agency slack, relates to the reality that agents can take actions inconsistent with the principal's preferences.[19] Adverse selection is a consequence of having too few choices or too little time to vet proxies, while agency slack is an intrinsic cost of choosing to cede command and control to others. While agents

might view principals as necessary for establishing their capabilities, they also know that sponsorship is based on the principal's calculations of self-interest, not their own. Principals have a history of abandoning proxies due to domestic and geopolitical factors, which causes agents to seek alternate means of support and independence from their principals.[20] When the situation invites the interests of multiple potential state sponsors, agents have the ability to assert their independence through principal shopping.[21] These are the underlying dynamics that make the proxy relationship dynamic and that create the opportunity for intervention, often in a special warfare approach.

The degree to which a state sponsor can influence a sponsored proxy is in part determined by whether the proxy has strong domestic agency irrespective of the sponsor's support. Under circumstances when the sponsored proxy has a high degree of indigenous resources, a state sponsor engages in what is termed an "intervention" in order to influence the conflict's outcome. High sponsored proxy agency allows it to push back against some of the sponsoring principal's interests and objectives, so while there might be a hierarchical relationship, the degree of "proxy-ness" is lower than in other cases. In other circumstances, the sponsored proxy is heavily dependent on the state sponsor for creating the structure of the proxy and giving it agency through personnel and material support. In essence, the state sponsor has a preexisting foreign policy objective that causes it to engage in "delegation" of its interests to other actors through the exploitation of active grievances. In this case, the state sponsor can assert significant influence over the proxy, at least until the sponsored proxy can generate indigenous support and assert its interests autonomously.[22] The value of Principal-Agent analysis in proxy conflict is that it critically investigates the nature of the power relationships to identify the strengths and weaknesses as they evolve.

Starting in 1979, Iran employed a delegation strategy of proxies in Iraq through the Dawa Party and later the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and its early intervention in Lebanon in the 1980s mirrored this strategy with the creation of Lebanese Hezbollah. It is arguable, however, that by the late-2000s, Iran's relationship with these organizations receded to an "intervention" level of influence as each gained and solidified domestic support. Similarly, until approximately 2014, Iran's strategy in Syria and Yemen followed what appeared to be an intervention strategy, though there seems to have been an inflection point after the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) during which it became more vital to its proxies and

took on a delegation strategy as it asserted itself regionally for geostrategic advantage against state competitors. Idean Salehyah notes that intervention and delegation "can be difficult to distinguish in practice as an intervening state may start to behave like a principal in exchange for its support. Over time, the rebel force may come to depend on foreign aid, and external states can start to assume greater control over the insurgency."[23] The authors assess that Iran's fortunes across the three cases have followed this dynamic pattern, which means analysts must constantly assess how changes in the operating environment impact its approach to proxies in a given context.

Research Questions

This study's primary research question is: How does Iran develop, employ, and sustain proxy organizations in targeted states? The objective is to analyze the role of Iranian influence over its proxy organizations as it navigates distinct sociopolitical environments. Interestingly, there is little attention paid to the actual *development*, *employment*, and *sustainment* of Iranian proxy groups in the scholarly literature.[24] Because the reach of Iran's political influence through its proxy organizations has proliferated over the past five years, most of the literature on Iran does not address the nature, scope, and impact of the proxy groups or the implications their actions have for U.S. policymakers. There are several works about the foreign policy decision-making of the U.S. and the widening Saudi-Iranian divide.[25] However, little attention is given to how Iran actually develops its proxy groups or how and why they have thrived with respect to the central governments of the host countries in the region. Furthermore, there is a startling lack of scholarly research on the actual employment and sustainment of their proxy organizations, which is unusual considering that Iran has been a key concern in U.S. foreign policy debates over the past four decades.

Because the reach of Iran's political influence through its proxy organizations has proliferated over the past five years, most of the literature on Iran does not address the nature, scope, and impact of the proxy groups or the implications their actions have for U.S. policymakers.

Second, it seeks to address the question of why Iran's proxies thrive in the context of the host country's domestic political structures. To answer

this, the project evaluates the proxy-host country relationships through the method of comparative case study. The project's secondary research question is consequently: Why do Iran's proxies thrive over host domestic governmental structures and institutions? Implicit in this question is the perspective that every organization has strengths and weaknesses. The Principal-Agent Dilemma identified above indicates that every proxy relationship comes with overlapping interests and vulnerabilities to coherent action, but the trick is correctly determining them. The analysis that follows provides policy- and operations-relevant insight on both aspects of the challenge.

In order to assess the dynamics of Iran's proxy strategy in the Middle East, three cases were selected based on their distinctly separate environmental and sociopolitical factors. Thus, the monograph employs Mill's empirical method of logic, whereby:

> if an instance in which the phenomenon under investigation occurs, and an instance in which it does not occur, have every circumstance save one in common, that one occurring only in the former; the circumstance in which alone the two instances differ, is the effect or cause, or necessary part of the cause of the phenomenon.[26]

In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is the strategy Iran adopts in developing and employing proxy organizations to usurp local governing structures. It uses the cases of Iranian proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. However, the general framework put forward here could be applied to other contexts and with different Principal-Agent and proxy-host country combinations. For instance, the return to "Great Power Competition" could result in expanded proxy conflicts across the developing world similar to the "bush wars" common during the Cold War era. Do other sponsors employ the same strategy in developing proxies or different ones? At a minimum, the strategy assessed here provides a starting point for evaluation.

The Balance of Threat Theory of Proxy Conflict

The theory of proxy conflict introduced in this monograph is informed by the Neorealist school of thought in international relations. Neorealists do not distinctly address the nature of proxy-host country relationships because they are overtly concerned with how the structure of the international system across states—not politics within them—contribute to balance of power

dynamics and a security dilemma between them.[27] However, their concern with the distribution of power across units of varying size and capability speaks directly to the issue of the perception of insecurity and mechanisms to compensate for weaknesses.[28] As a result, there is a great body of Neorealist, structural-level literature on alliances across states.[29]

The main feature of the system is anarchy, which means there is no authority above the level of the state to protect state sovereignty—that is, a population, its territory, and right to self-determination. The security dilemma arises from the fact that states must protect themselves, but lack complete information about the capabilities and intentions of others and, therefore, must engage in self-regarding, power-seeking behavior, which in turn threatens others.[30] The Neorealist school of thought suggests alliances form based on factors inherent in the system given structural differences in power among states (the system's units), but considers the internal workings of states as "black boxes," meaning from an analytical perspective, states "differ chiefly in size, not in composition."[31] As Parent and Rosato summarize, military capabilities are crucial because, "without a central authority to protect them, knowing that others have the ability to hurt them, but unsure about others' intentions, great powers conclude that they must procure the means to defend themselves. More simply, they understand that they operate in a self-help world."[32] While Neorealist theory is oriented toward states, Kenneth Waltz, the godfather of Neorealism, concludes that, "the logic of anarchy obtains whether the system is composed of tribes, nations, oligopolistic firms, or street gangs,"[33] meaning the level of structural analysis depends on the frame the analyst chooses.

Over the past two decades there has been a growing body of literature extending the concept of anarchy to weak, collapsing, and failed states with the application of structural analysis to internal armed groups.[34] For example, Anthony Vinci argues that "in cases of collapsed and fragmented states, the hierarchic system breaks down and 'domestic anarchy' ensues."[35] While scholars of ethnic conflict in the 1990s applied the concept of security dilemma and the spiral of fear to internal conflicts, Vinci asserts that scholars treated domestic anarchy as separate or divorced from the international anarchy.[36] For Vinci, when states lose the ability to govern people and territory, the influence of "autonomous armed groups" (the system's units) is likely to rise, and they will act in their own interests instead of the state's, even in the decision to engage in conflict.[37] As actors with agency, they seek

their own survival through control over local resources and people, but willingly ally with others domestically and internationally to ensure their survival against local rivals in their immediate system.[38] In fact, Vinci notes,

> Armed groups clearly treat fragmented and collapsed states as an open anarchic system, which is intimately connected with the international system. They do not respect the authority of the state and treat it as a rival, not as the uppermost authority in a hierarchical system.[39]

It is this openness that enables internal, autonomous groups—the system's units, both armed and political—to seek the support of sponsor states, resulting in the Principal-Agent relationship. This openness also explains why states might seek to proactively influence situations in areas outside their sovereign borders, especially when there is high potential for spillover into their own domestic affairs.[40]

To conceptualize how Iran engages and utilizes its proxies in states where a security dilemma prevails, it is useful to draw on two scholars who offer thoughts germane to this topic. The first is Stephen Walt whose seminal Neorealist work, *The Origins of Alliances*, challenges the realist balance of power theory in favor of a theory of balance of threat. States, he notes, sometimes create alliances with stronger ones despite the fact their power, proximity, and reach could objectively be regarded as a greater threat than a more distant power. Walt explores the calculations states adopt in choosing to "balance"—seeking assistance from others to resist the imposing power—or to "bandwagon"—allying with the imposing power—in their management of perceived threats. He thus examines how and why states choose alliance partners. After a close examination of alliance structures in the Middle East, Walt argues that a "balance of threat" thesis provides a better grasp on alliance formation than variables of ideology, foreign aid, and political penetration. Furthermore, Walt shows that factors such as geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions can be just as important elements in alliance politics. Walt also claims that aggregate power (including population, individual and military capabilities, technical prowess, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggregate intentions) affects the level of threat. Walt posits that balancing is more common than bandwagoning, but weak states are more likely to bandwagon with rising powers.[41]

The second can be found in Fotini Christia's work on alliance formation among autonomous armed groups in civil conflict. Christia's research suggests that relative power distribution is the driving force behind alliance formation among actors under conditions of domestic anarchy.[42] This could hold true for proxy interventions as well; as autonomous actors with agency, proxies seek the support of external sponsors to improve their relative power position vis-à-vis domestic rivals, but could realign based on a sense of changing power distribution and the (dis)advantages that come with the proxy relationships. Further, she finds that issues of identity have less salience than balance of power calculations—today's ally or sponsor could become very quickly tomorrow's threat to balance against.

The comparative analysis that follows corresponds with Christia's conclusions. Viewing Iran's relationship with its proxies solely through the lens of Shi'a identity is a mistake. Instead, it is far better, as Christia's analysis indicates, to assume that proxies' interests change with internal balance of threat dynamics, which could make the sponsor a potential barrier to adapting interests over time. Determining interests outside of the Shi'a identity layer, or, perhaps more importantly, conflicting variations within the Shi'a identity layer, could erode Iranian influence and exacerbate the Principal-Agent Dilemma it faces.

Viewing Iran's relationship with its proxies solely through the lens of Shi'a identity is a mistake.

Iran's Divide-Empower-Control Strategy

The comparative case study approach revealed an important pattern in how Iran employs its proxy strategy. Throughout the Middle East, Iran has followed an efficient and cost-effective "Divide-Empower-Control" model of integrating itself into the local governing apparatus through its proxies. In general terms, the model has four stages.

- First, Iranian agents integrate themselves as political and military advisors and trainers to host country Shi'a political and military units.
- Next, they sow dissent amongst the leadership inside the host country's Shi'a factions or exploit pre-existing cleavages inside newly formed units.
- Then, they serve as arbitrators and embolden a highly tractable, second-tier leader.

- Finally, they exploit cleavages within the group by supporting the tractable leader thereby creating another discrete proxy which divides military units, creates splinter factions from those units, and empowers the most reverential frontrunners.

When client units become too powerful, Iranian agents sow dissent once again.[43] This strategy attempts to keep the proxies from ever gaining full autonomy and mitigates some of the problems associated with agency slack. Yet, Iran's influence seems to perpetually grow through the creation of new factions and organically grown, malleable leaders. Once leaders and factions become strong, new cleavages and new leaders are once again empowered, creating a continuous cycle of dependence and control. Therefore, these armed groups do not let the presence of a domestic government or state-like authority stop them from interacting with other actors in the international system, which would in essence constitute an existential threat to the proxy.[44]

As with all Principal-Agent relationships, Iran's strategy comes with a price and two crucial problems arise from this arrangement. First, while the strategy mitigates the challenges with adverse selection and agency slack, it also dilutes the absolute power of any single proxy. Subdividing the proxies requires intensive negotiation amongst competing proxies to generate coherent action. A charismatic personality, such as Iran's Major General Qasem Soleimani, navigated the proxy politics very effectively, but doubts linger about whether his replacements can achieve a similar degree of effectiveness.[45] Over the medium- to long-term, proxy interests could change leading to defections from Iran's sponsorship. Second, proxies beholden to Iran's interests could over time fail to meet the needs of the populations they claim to serve resulting in blowback against Iran's sponsorship. There are indications that both dynamics are at play in Iraq and Syria, though Iran's proxy relationship with the Houthis in Yemen does not yet appear to have the same level of engagement.

Methodology

Methodologically this project utilizes a qualitative approach by drawing upon scholarly research and reputable news agencies. For each case, it utilizes primary and open source data to create a typological analysis of Iranian proxies acting within the country. It then analyzes how the proxy-host relationships fare against key variables (discussed below). The study concludes

with an assessment of the vulnerabilities faced by Iran and offers a set of policy options for decision-makers.

Each of the cases that follow are assessed in terms of the major variables affecting the proxy's initial acceptance in the host country and variables that have affected the longevity of the proxy-host country relationships.[46] The authors assessed five variables to be the most salient based on the comparative analysis. They are in order of assessed importance:

1. a high balance of threat among proxies,
2. the degree of active conflict,
3. the strength of the host country government relative to other domestic actors/militias,
4. the type of Shi'a identity, and
5. the degree of similarity in religious interpretation of Shi'a theology.

Importantly, the degree of active conflict is correlated to the balance of threat perception because the former contributes significantly to the latter. In other words, lowering the degree of active conflict creates space for new interests and coalitions to arise since the fear of existential threat loses its salience. The authors recognize that a key assumption of this analysis rests on observing Iranian proxies and the host countries as isolated components of a much wider relational system of states and competing actors. Because of the very nature of the international system, dyadic analysis is extremely limited in developing explanatory, causal, or predictive models of analysis. While the focus is on Iranian influence, a range of political, economic, technological, and natural phenomena certainly impact the case studies. Nevertheless, most researchers agree this approach is sufficient for generalizing for how these relationships are sustained over time.

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Chapter Overview

To gain an appreciation of the strategy of how Iran develops and employs its proxies, it is first necessary to gain an appreciation why it should want or need to work with proxies in the first place. This monograph begins in chapter 1 with a discussion of Iran's strategic environment, the value of proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and clarifies the differences between the various sects within the Shi'a Islamic community. Chapter 2 turns to Iran's proxies in Iraq since 2014 to show how it gained leverage in Iraqi politics. Although Iran had active proxies working in Iraq through the 1980s-2000s, there was a quantitative and qualitative expansion in the number of proxies it could claim after 2014 despite enjoying a significant number of operational proxies from 2004-2013. Chapter 3 investigates Iranian proxies in Syria and how Syria's ongoing civil war provided an opportunity for Iranian intervention and an expansion of influence beyond what the indigenous Shi'a population could offer. In this case, Iran's ability to leverage indigenous Shi'a was minimal due to demographic realities, so Iran adopted a policy of importing Shi'a proxies—and implanting them as residents along strategic corridors from Iraq to Lebanon. The sociopolitical effects of this strategy are yet to be realized. Chapter 4 addresses the array of issues facing Yemen and how Iran's proxy, the Houthi Movement (officially named Ansar Allah), has gained the advantage in the political landscape. The monograph concludes with an analysis of the strengths and vulnerabilities in Iran's proxy strategy and the implications for U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).

Chapter 1. Iran's Strategic Environment

A Revisionist Shi'a Islamist Regime

To grasp the logic of Iran's proxy strategy, it is first necessary to understand the Iranian regime's political situation, its foreign policy objectives, and the organization of its expeditionary military forces.[47] The current conflict between the U.S. and Iran dates back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution—after the fall of the Western-backed Shah—or even back to 1953 when the U.S. restored the Shah to power from the nationalist and socialist-leaning Mohammad Mosaddegh.[48] Some historians refer to World War I as a turning point in the relations between the two countries. For the purposes of this monograph, and from the standpoint of most U.S. foreign policy narratives, the fall of the shah and subsequent hostage crisis were the fulcrums upon which American perceptions of the regime in Tehran pivoted from benevolence to malfeasance. The perceptions mounted after 9/11, when U.S. policymakers found it increasingly difficult to cooperate with the regime because it actively supported terrorist factions. Hence, the Iranian regime was designated as part of the "axis of evil."[49]

During the 1950s and 1960s, Iran's Muslim clerics and traditional religious leaders believed the Western-backed shah was encroaching on their traditional power base. Iran's most prominent thinkers honed a unique blend of traditional Islamic teaching and revolutionary rhetoric to topple the Westernized regime.[50] Theocratic philosophers advocated a sociopolitical order centered upon traditional Shi'ite religious dogma, believing "all the liberation movements of the Third World were struggling against the same colonialist and neocolonialist oppressors."[51] The philosophy of Islamic revolution gained popular support with Iranian university students during the early 1970s, and Ayatollah Khomeini's movement embraced the message. By 1979, dissident groups overthrew the Shah. Once in power, Khomeini rejected the tenets of the Shah's monarchy and created a Platonic social order where clerics ruled as the guardians of the community. In doing this, Khomeini believed that the rule of the cleric would also protect Shi'a Islam.[52] Khomeini's government fused religion and politics together.[53]

In Iran, Shi'a religious leaders retain control of the population through a revolutionary ideology of theocracy and power against affluent and contemptible external regimes. Behind Shi'a fundamentalist religious rhetoric lies the ambition for political power outside the state. The revolutionary movement is an Islamist movement with a Shi'a base, not solely an Iranian or Persian movement. It sees itself as a long-term, expansionary insurgency and expands its reach through a variety of affiliates. After the fall of the Shah, Tehran began giving financial and military assistance to now-designated terrorist organizations like Lebanese Hezbollah, the Islamic Resistance Movement Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah (Hamas), and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).[54] Established in southern Lebanon in the early 1980s, Hezbollah (Party of God) established itself as an effective force within Lebanese politics and acts as the model proxy for Iranian interests in the Levant while pushing an anti-Israel agenda more broadly.

There have been just a few instances of direct, conventional engagement with U.S. forces, and most engagements have occurred through proxies that give Iran plausible deniability while presenting the appearance of local, authentic resistance. The only known instances of direct engagement with the United States in the last decade occurred where the Strait of Hormuz meets the Persian Gulf.[55] As an Islamist social movement, the regime in Tehran seeks to create a moral sociopolitical order and has benefitted from the regional affiliations its leaders formed in the decades preceding the 1979 revolution. Nearly all of Iran's offensive operations against U.S. interests are executed in collaboration with a sponsored proxy. Typically, Iran aids this process by providing equipment and training.[56] Indeed, Iran fits the profile of a state most likely to engage in proxy conflict according to Moaz and San-Akca because it is revisionist in orientation but seeks to avoid direct confrontation with its rivals.

Though Iraq under Saddam Hussein became a pariah state in the international order after its invasion of Kuwait, it did serve as an important balancer in regional politics. As an unintended consequence of the invasion in 2003, the U.S. and its coalition upended the balance of political power in the Middle East. There are now three regional competitors for hegemony in the Middle East: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and Iraq's population, for instance, is directly linked to each politically and socioculturally. Each competitor has foreign policy objectives, partners, client states, organizations, and interests that challenge the others. For instance, Turkey gained

considerable influence in Iraq's northern Kurdish provinces, which in turn instigated the ethno-separatist Kurdistan Worker's Party and rival political groups. Iraq's formerly exiled and long-standing Shi'a political parties have largely represented Iranian interests. Likewise, in the absence of Iraqi control over its borders, Iranian smugglers have had more freedom to traffic narcotics, arms, organs, and other illegal merchandise through Iraq and Syria to proxies in Lebanon where they have access to the Mediterranean.[57] Meanwhile, the Jordanians, Lebanese, and Europeans became host to ever-increasing numbers of asylum candidates seeking refuge from the upheaval in Syria.

Iran's ability to improve its geopolitical position in the midst of this upheaval could not and still cannot occur through direct engagement; rather, it requires the regimes controlling its neighboring states to adopt its preferred positions. As a revisionist state, it seized the opportunity to affect the internal politics of strategically important states—in the case of Iraq it did so with the unwitting assistance of the United States itself. In other words, Iran's ability to exert geostrategic influence depends upon the degree to which its proxy organizations in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen generate sufficient autonomy with respect to the state government's power to compel the regimes to bow to Iranian interests. Nevertheless, the Principal-Agent Dilemma can potentially impede Iran's objectives if fully aware of where the areas of interests align and diverge.

Iranian Objectives

Arguably, Tehran is employing a revolutionary or "revisionist" approach in a foreign policy slated to improve its position in the Middle East and the international system more broadly.[58] Its stated foreign policy objectives are multifold but can be arranged into four broad categories, including:

- exporting the Islamic revolution,
- projecting economic and military influence across the region,
- protecting adherents to Shi'a Islam, and
- strengthening its conventional force.[59]

Like all governments, the Iranian regime seeks to survive at any cost. This includes leveraging power among groups that help the regime fulfill its objectives whether they are ideologically aligned or not. For instance, after the Iran-Iraq War and Gulf War, the Hussein regime turned a blind eye to

Iraq's Anbar province Sunnis, who used tribal connections in order to create smuggling routes for goods that were hard to access under the sanctions. Once U.S. forces left the country in 2011, Iran used sponsored proxies and other militia groups to eventually co-opt the Sunni tribal supply routes, gaining unfettered access to ports on the Mediterranean, and thereby creating a solid land bridge from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, where it could project its power against Israel in defense of Iranian allies like Lebanon and Syria.[60] Similarly, Iran has supported the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan against U.S. and allied forces after Operation Enduring Freedom even though they were previously in conflict with one another. So long as the local actor seeks to negatively affect its rivals and create the political space to advance its objectives, Iran is open to supporting social movements and insurgent groups regardless of the ideology.

Iran's Conventional Arms Limitations and the Value of Proxies

Prior to the fall of the Shah, Iran imported military equipment from the West, but imports ceased once the Islamic Republic was formed. Iran's domestic arms industry was created as a result of requirements stemming from the Iran-Iraq War, when Tehran's dependency on foreign arms purchases negatively impacted the performance of the Iranian military to defend the country against Iraq's forces during the 1980's.[61] Today, most Iranian military equipment and technology falls into one of three categories: pre-1979 American weaponry (i.e., F-14 and F-5 fighters, M16 rifles, etc.); post-1979 Soviet-era or Chinese weaponry; or domestically produced AK-47 and M16-style platforms. While much of Iran's military arsenal consists of outdated equipment and substandard or obsolete technology, the country enjoys a highly educated and modern technical workforce, much of which consists of graduates of the best Western—including U.S.—universities. This workforce is the backbone of the growing, but still nascent, Iranian domestic arms industry.[62] They have provided Tehran with a sense of technological independence and an edge over its Arab neighbors who are totally dependent on foreign arms technology, purchases, and training agreements.[63] Likewise, the last decade has seen a surge in Iran's ability to reverse engineer both old and new American technologies and create its own pirated equipment. For instance, in 2018, the *National Interest* reported Iran is now mass-producing the Fakour 90, which is a reverse-engineered American AIM-54 Phoenix

missile.[64] Despite the Phoenix having been retired in 2004, it is still an effective and proven counter-air missile platform. Iran's reverse-engineering capabilities are certainly not limited to Cold War era technology, and their capabilities are not to be underestimated.

Despite Iran's ambitious attempts to create a viable domestic arms industry, the country has major limitations when it comes to actually engaging in a conventional conflict. First, a conventional conflict with the U.S. or North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces would require a substantial portion of Iran's budget. More importantly however, the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988 severely wounded the psyche of the Iranian people. The casualty rates and nature of the conflict were so severe that many Iranians prefer to avoid conventional conflict.

Due to these limitations and its relative weakness with respect to its main rivals, especially the United States, Iran has chosen to assert its foreign policy objectives through a substitution strategy. The first element of the strategy is to avoid conflict with major powers by employing proxy forces.[65] This gives the Iranians plausible deniability and keeps conflicts in the "gray zone." The success of Lebanese Hezbollah shows how well this strategy can serve Iranian interests. The second element is the implicit reinforcement and expansion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is an ideologically driven military organization and manages a major portion of the Iranian domestic arms design and manufacturing.[66] Having the IRGC embedded within the defense industry apparatus gives industry officials direct contact with the most urgent tactical issues and insight on how to best prioritize arms manufacturing. For instance, the IRGC-Quds Forces is widely credited for providing armor-piercing Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs) to Iraqi dissidents during the U.S.-coalition presence in the country.[67] The strength of Iran's proxies and the IRGC have enabled the Iranians to overcome the limitations of their conventional military forces to achieve strategic political effect.

Forward Deterrence

In the face of this substantial gap in conventional capabilities, Iran adopted in 1992 a doctrine of "forward deterrence."[68] Hassan Ahmedian and Payam Mohseni assert that Iran's proxy strategy is dedicated to establishing new leverage points for this deterrence strategy.[69] They describe Iran's "forward deterrence" concept as

> the deployment or possession of deterrent capacity beyond one's own national borders that abut on the adversary's frontier. Iran's forward deterrence strategy has not historically involved direct forward deployment of armed forces, since its deterrence capacity is largely provided by partners and allies that are not under formal Iranian control. In other words, while Iran has a conventional deterrence strategy—as evidenced by its ballistic missile programme—in parallel, it also has a forward deterrence strategy in the Levant via Syria and allied non-state actors. [70]

While Iran's operations in Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, and Syria had already established credible risk to the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, gaining a foothold on a second international trade chokepoint and Saudi Arabia's southwestern border would offer Iran magnitudes more political leverage with other states dependent on the trade through the strait now having to join the diplomatic fray.[71] The strategically important Bab al-Mandab waterway connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and ultimately to the Indian Ocean. The strait serves as a strategic chokepoint from the Mediterranean Sea to Southeast Asia, and it is one of the most important shipping lanes on the planet. The U.S. Energy Information Agency estimates over 4.8 million barrels of oil pass through the strait per day, constituting 6–8 percent of all maritime oil trade.[72]

Influence over the Bab al-Mandab strait would provide Iran with a second maritime chokepoint and give it further strategic leverage on the international stage even in the absence of sophisticated conventional weaponry. Iran has already threatened the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint along its coast through which nearly one third of the maritime oil trade passes per day.[73] Threats of disruption to both chokepoints would create major fluctuations in the price of oil and wreak havoc on the maritime trade industry. It would similarly make the provision of supplies to Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and PIJ harder to interdict with new lines of communication in play, and it would provide Iran another strategic point where its swarming fast boat attacks could be effective against more powerful navies.[74] Moreover, gaining access to Saudi Arabia's southwestern border would offer Iran a potential second front in a conflict scenario. Instead of focusing on its defenses along the Persian Gulf shoreline it shares with Iran, Saudi Arabia would in this circumstance redistribute a portion of its defense assets and limited personnel

away from the main threat. While this scenario has been playing out for years, an enduring Houthi-Iran partnership would make it a permanent feature of Saudi defense posture and prevent it from concentrating its forces.

Lessons from Lebanese Hezbollah and Quds Force

During the 1980s, Lebanon served as the main focus for Iran's system of growing proxy forces. The most enduring of these, Lebanese Hezbollah, is the model for how Iran has pushed its foreign policy agenda in other Middle Eastern countries with a Shi'a minority. While the rise of Lebanese Hezbollah occurred in the context of a civil war and intra-Shi'a fighting, the theocrats who founded Iran were successful in forming it based on years of preexisting relationships and, in the absence of effective state security services, the political space to assert itself. Lebanese Hezbollah adopted a strategy of providing social services while dominating the security space in areas under its control. The combination effectively created a proxy state within a state, one with contiguous borders to a chief rival, Israel. The Lebanese Hezbollah model of joining social services, the monopoly on the use of force, and Islamist religious fervor has been a potent one that has been replicated many times, with other pre-2003 proxy cases including Sunni Palestinian organizations Hamas and PIJ.

The Iranian Quds Force is in some ways the Iranian version of SOF, specializing in asymmetric warfare. It is the element of the IRGC responsible for conducting gray zone military operations outside the borders of Iran.[75] It has a long history of carrying out asymmetric operations well outside of Iran's borders with the intent of furthering the Islamic revolution. For example, the *Council on Foreign Relations* reported that during the early days of the Arab Spring, the Quds Force was sent to Syria to protect Shi'ite monuments. It was later proven that they were, in fact, sent to suppress resistance movements against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In April 2019, the IRGC and its component commands were designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. Government. The group is further known for its training and arming of radical Islamic groups, such as SCIRI's militia, the Badr Organization, and providing safe haven for al-Qaeda fighters.[76]

The IRGC-Quds Force is currently a key element of Iranian statecraft in that its unconventional warfare capability has since 2014 crafted a network of proxy organizations that have been strategically orchestrated to extend and embed Iranian influence in neighbors while disrupting the influence

and access of rivals. Until his death in January 2020, Major General Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, was regularly engaged in operations and diplomacy across Syria and Iraq, and is thought to have crafted Iran's engagement with the Houthis in Yemen.[77] The backbone of Iran's proxy strategy has been to provide material, political, and military support to Shi'a groups that view the central government as a potential threat; the exception to this strategy is with Sunni Palestinian proxies Hamas and PIJ. While this strategy on the surface seems to have worked extremely well, the reality is that there is a key vulnerability in this concept. There are many variants of Shi'a Islam, and they do not share the same interpretations about the role of the cleric as the ayatollahs leading the Iranian regime. So long as the Shi'a communities view their central governments as a threat, the differences in Shi'a practice become less relevant. But under different circumstances, the doctrinal differences could in and of themselves be considered threatening should Iran be viewed as a theological competitor.

Variations of Shi'a Islam and Iran's Principal-Agent Dilemma

The Sunni-Shi'a split is often regarded as one of the most important events in the history of Islam. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632, a council of elders selected Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, to be the next ruler of the faith. Abu Bakr was caliph for a little over two years when he died of a sudden illness. The next three successors, who along with Abu Bakr make the *Rashidun*, or Rightly Guided Caliphs (in Sunni Islam), were murdered. Abu Bakr's successor, Umar,[78] was assassinated by Persians; Uthman was killed by mutinous soldiers; and the fourth rightly guided caliph, Ali, was killed by extremist factions. It is the murder of the fourth caliph, Ali, which split the Islamic *ummah* (the Muslim community). After Ali's death, given the years of turbulence within the faith, there was great dissention on who should succeed him. One of Uthman's cousins, Muawiya, the governor of Damascus, filled the power vacuum, and moved to consolidate his political power with the burgeoning religion. Many in the faith rejected Muawiya's claim and believed the root of the political problems within the faith were caused by how successors of the Prophet were determined. This sect came to believe that man could not choose the Prophet's successor, and only the will of Allah would determine the successor to the Prophet through his progeny.[79] These early Shi'a split from the faith and rejected the three Rightly Guided

Caliphs that followed the Prophet. They determined that it was Mohammad's son-in-law, Ali, that should have been the Prophet's first successor—not Abu Bakr.[80] Since that time, within Shi'a Islam, descendants of the Prophet are entitled to the honorific "Sayyid," a distinction for male progeny.

Because the Sunnis rapidly fused the religion to politics, the Shi'a were regarded as an errant, minority faction that operated outside the political spectrum. Over the next several centuries, the Sunnis dominated the politics over much of the Islamic world. This changed, however, during the Safavid dynasty in modern-day Iran. Over the centuries following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Persians slowly converted to Islam though the influence of dynastic rulers, imperial politics, and intermarriage. By the late Middle Ages, descendants, and those claiming to be descendants, of the Prophet Muhammad had become powerful political players in Iran. When the Safavids, a wealthy and powerful Shi'a clan, defeated Mongol invaders in 1501, they became the rulers of the country, establishing Shi'a Islam as the official religion of the state. For the next five centuries, the eminence of Shi'a Islam dominated the culture on the Iranian plateau and directly countered the Sunni empires to the west.[81] Although Iran is the most well-known Shi'a country, some other Shi'a communities throughout the Middle East do not share the same theological precepts as Iran.

Twelver Shi'ism (Imamiyya, Ithna Asharis, Jafari)

The Twelvers, or *Imamiyya*, are the largest branch within all of Shi'a Islam.[82] The term "Twelver" refers to twelve Imams, the last of which is believed to be living in occultation and will reappear at the end of times as a messiah, or Mahdi. The Twelver tradition dates back to the first descendants of Imam Hussein and a pivotal battle in Karbala. The Twelvers are occasionally described as "Ja'fari," or following the Ja'far school of law, a tribute to the sect's 8th century founding jurist, Ja'far al Sadiq.[83] Generally speaking, Twelver doctrine believes in the infallibility of the Imamate.[84] The majority of Twelvers live in Iran, with significant numbers in Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain. Twelvers are marginalized minorities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and, to a lesser extent, in India and Turkey.[85] Within the Twelver community there are different schools of thought on the role of *ulama* (Muslim scholars) in giving legal opinions and intervening in the social matters of the Muslim community.[86]

Alawite Shi'ism

Alawi Shi'ism is a secretive minority sect found in Syria that blends traditional Shi'ism with ancient Greek and pagan beliefs. Notably, the Alawi believe Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, was the incarnation of God. The Alawite deification of Ali is a central component in the faith. The Alawites also believe in the transmigration of souls after death, where one is reincarnated to another form depending on his or her morality and behavior.[87] The Alawite community is tribally insular and found along the Mediterranean coast of Syria and Turkey. It was oppressed for much of its history, constituting less than 15 percent of the Syrian population, but solidified control over the Syrian state after Hafez al-Assad staged a coup in 1970.

Zaydi Shi'ism (Fivers)

The Zaydis, or Fivers, are a Shi'a sect that has much in common with Sunni Islam. The Zaydi sect appeared in the eighth century in the Arabian Peninsula.[88] This Muslim sect takes its name from Zayd ibn Ali—the great grandson of Hussein ibn Ali—and the son of the fourth Shi'a Imam, Ali ibn Hussein. For this Shi'a sect of Islam, family lineage is extremely significant. Zayd is directly connected to Hussein, who is the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad. The history of the Shi'a is colored by heroic stories of the Martyrdom of Hussein in his struggle against the oppressor Yezid in Karbala, Mesopotamia. This is a typical portrayal of the struggle between the forces of "good versus evil" in the messianic perspective of Shi'a Islam. Furthermore, the sect teaches a true Imam should fight against corrupt and unjust leaders.[89] From a religious perspective, Fivers differ most from Twelvers in that the role of Messianic divination—for Fivers the phenomenon is deemphasized. While the customs and traditions of tribal governance guide Yemen's Zaydis, from a Principal-Agent perspective, Iranian foreign policymakers are likely to face resistance towards the tenets of *vilayet-e faqih* and exportation of the Islamic revolution.

Ismaili Shi'ism (al-Batiniyya)

Ismaili Shi'a also believe in the primacy of the Imamate but split from the community over a dispute regarding the successor to Ja'far al Sadiq. The Ismaili saw Ja'far's eldest son Ismail as the rightful heir, whereas the majority of the Shi'a community at that time saw one of Ja'far's younger sons, Musa al-Kazim, as the rightful heir. The Ismailis rapidly expanded, growing viable

sects outside Arabia by the 9th century.[90] Moreover, the Ismailis generated a political dynasty, the Fatimids, which was eventually headquartered in Cairo. The Fatimids grew to incorporate most of North Africa and wide expanses of the Levant and Eastern Arabia before being absorbed into the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate in the 12th century. Today, Ismailis are led by a hereditary imam, Aga Khan. Ismailis are primarily found in Central and South Asia but have communities in over 25 countries.[91]

The Limits of Iranian Shi'a Islamism

An important distinction in Shi'a religiosity is the rivalry between the religious authority of Najaf, Iraq and the authority of Qom, Iran. For centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Najaf was the holiest city in Shi'a Islam. Najaf houses the tomb of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law to the Prophet, who was seen as his rightful heir. Najaf's Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani ascribes to a "Quietist" apolitical approach to religious matters in governance. In this view, the Shi'a clerics provide guidance and support to the population to seek a right and just life, but they do not directly participate in the government per se. In contrast, Qom's ruling clerics advocate *Vilayet-e Faqih*, or an activist approach to becoming involved in politics, whereby the most senior ayatollahs hold power over the government to set the boundaries of and interpret civil law.[92] The concept of Vilayet-e Faqih became the rallying cry of pro-Khomeini revolutionaries after the fall of the Western-backed Shah in 1979.

Khomeini's ideology underpins the entire nature of the Iranian regime and its foreign policy. In dictating it is not enough to be the defender of Shi'a Islam in Iran, the Iranian government also seeks to export its form of theocratic governance of Vilayet-e Faqih. In this interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, Tehran has a duty to bring its form of government to all Shi'a populations, particularly those in nearby Iraq and Syria, but its identity as a regime is inherently religiously revisionist and, consequently, politically revisionist. Moreover, it attained success through a social movement platform, which focuses on changing internal political dynamics over time, which indicates the value it places on developing influence in other countries through empowered domestic allies, i.e., proxies. Iran extends its influence primarily through soft power: protecting Shi'a religious sites across the region; providing resources and services to the impoverished; refurbishing

mosques; and appealing to emotion, tradition, and shared experience. Since the rise of ISIS, however, Iran has been able to further extend its influence through hard power in the form of support through the Quds force. While the Qom-Najaf distinction generally does not foment animosity during times of peace, the contest for political influence over Twelver communities has caused the ideological divide to assume an amplified sociocultural role.

Conclusion

Iran's regime leads a revisionist foreign policy despite the fact its strategic environment is one of constrained national resources, hostile neighboring state regimes due to historic, religious, and geopolitical factors, and severe constraints on traditional forms of national power due to open hostility with a great power rival. Its main opportunity to affect its position in the system rests with the pockets of Shi'a populations that have historical concerns with their central governments due to centuries of marginalization. Iran learned early how to foment proxies through its engagement with Lebanese Hezbollah, which draws upon a co-religionist Twelver Shi'a population.

However, many of the Shi'a communities across the Middle East practice different variants of Shi'ism. Even within the Twelver population there are significant, politically divisive interpretations of theology, while other variants have fundamentally different identity, doctrinal and historical experiences that prevent a full integration with Iranian revisionist objectives for Shi'a Islamism. Under conflict conditions with non-Shi'a populations, the Shi'a identity serves as a unifying principle, but once conflict abates, the differences become stark and could exacerbate the Principal-Agent Dilemma. The balance of threat theory of proxy conflict suggests that, so long as Iran can encourage some level of conflict within the targeted states, it can maintain its sponsor-sponsored proxy relationship, but once the threats abate, its proxies will have the agency to determine their own interests independent of Iranian political objectives.

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Chapter 2. Iranian Proxies in Iraq

> We brought you to help but you became like the Pharaoh.
> - Iraqi Colloquialism

This chapter outlines the context for Iraq's domestic politics, explains the political schisms in the country, and provides information on Iranian proxies acting within the country. Iraq's amalgamation of hostile ethnic, national, and religious entities make political institutionalization difficult and dangerously susceptible to the influences of new governance under the guise of fundamentalist Islam. To understand the dynamics of politics in Iraq after the fall of the Baath party, it is important to understand the history of how the Shi'a political class came to be the majority faction within Iraq, as well as the sect's history of oppression in the country. It is also important to understand the historical context of Iraq's theocratic neighbor to the east, Iran, as well as the religious context of the rivalry between two major Shi'a Twelver factions.

Like Iran, Iraq's Shi'a population is overwhelmingly Twelver Shi'a and both countries share important religious centers of learning in Najaf, Iraq and Qom, Iran, though Najaf is considered the more prominent of the two. Shi'a scholars and religious leaders, the *marjah*, hail from both Arab and Persian backgrounds, and what distinguishes them is not their ethnicity or nationality, but their mastery of Shi'a theology. It is for this reason that Iraq's most revered *marjah*, is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistanti, an Iranian-born cleric who has lived in Najaf, Iraq for decades.

As will be seen, Iraq's Shi'a population is deeply divided now along the traditional and more widespread belief in al-Sistani's Quietist variant of Twelver Shi'ism while the most powerful militias are affiliated with Iranian-backed proxies with varying degrees of attachment to the concept of Vilayet-e Faqih. While many in SOF interpret Iraqi politics through the rudimentary prism of Sunni-Shi'a-Kurd ethno-sectarian conflict, the main axis of politics in Iraq now is this intra-Shi'a schism backed by militias, called since 2014 Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs). Prior to 2014, most were political parties and affiliated militias that predated the Iranian Revolution, but which became Iranian proxies soon after. Others, however, contested Iranian

influence along Quietist versus Vilayet-e Faqih lines. Due to the diversity of Iraq's ethno-sectarian communities, the Principal-Agent Dilemma is acute for Iran as it seeks to assert its influence through proxies vis-à-vis the Iraqi central government.

Ethno-Religious Context and the Iranian Proxy Opportunity Structure

Iraq's ethno-religious context provides the framework for understanding how Iranian proxies have gained political power and influence inside the country. To understand the current political reality, it is important to look at the modern history of Shi'a political activism inside Iraq. The Islamic Dawa party was one of the first Shi'a parties in Iraq to organize and gain clout within the modern Iraqi political arena. Formed in 1957, the Dawa party focused on Islam as the basis of legislation through the ummah (the Muslim community). After the overthrow of Iraq's monarchy in 1958, the Dawa party gained momentum under the leadership of the famous Iraqi clerics Mohammed Baqr al-Sadr and Mahdi al-Hakim, the eldest son of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Tabataba'i al-Hakim. When the Iraqi Prime Minister began instituting socialist-style land reforms, he earned the enmity of many Shi'a clergy and traditional landlords. Over the following decades, the party attracted disenfranchised Shi'a youth, clerics, and prominent Shi'a academics. By the 1970s, the organization had grown to the point where it was a threat to the standing Baathist regime. Because of this, Dawa members were routinely targeted, arrested, and killed by the Baath party.[93] Dawa members generally supported the religious revolution in Iran and adopted Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of Vilayet-e Faqih. For decades the party was considered a hostile organization in the west due to its anti-imperialist discourse, but Dawa's militant wing has shown little activity since the 1983 bombings of the U.S. and French Embassies in Kuwait for which it claimed responsibility.[94] Despite the fact that Iraq's Dawa party ultimately came to distinguish its doctrine on Vilayet-e Faqih as separate from that of Iran's current leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the bonds between the party and the IRGC are strong.[95]

SCIRI was organized nearly a quarter of a century later in 1982. During the Iran-Iraq war, exiled prominent Iraqi Shi'a clerics living in Tehran formed a council aimed at the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the establishment

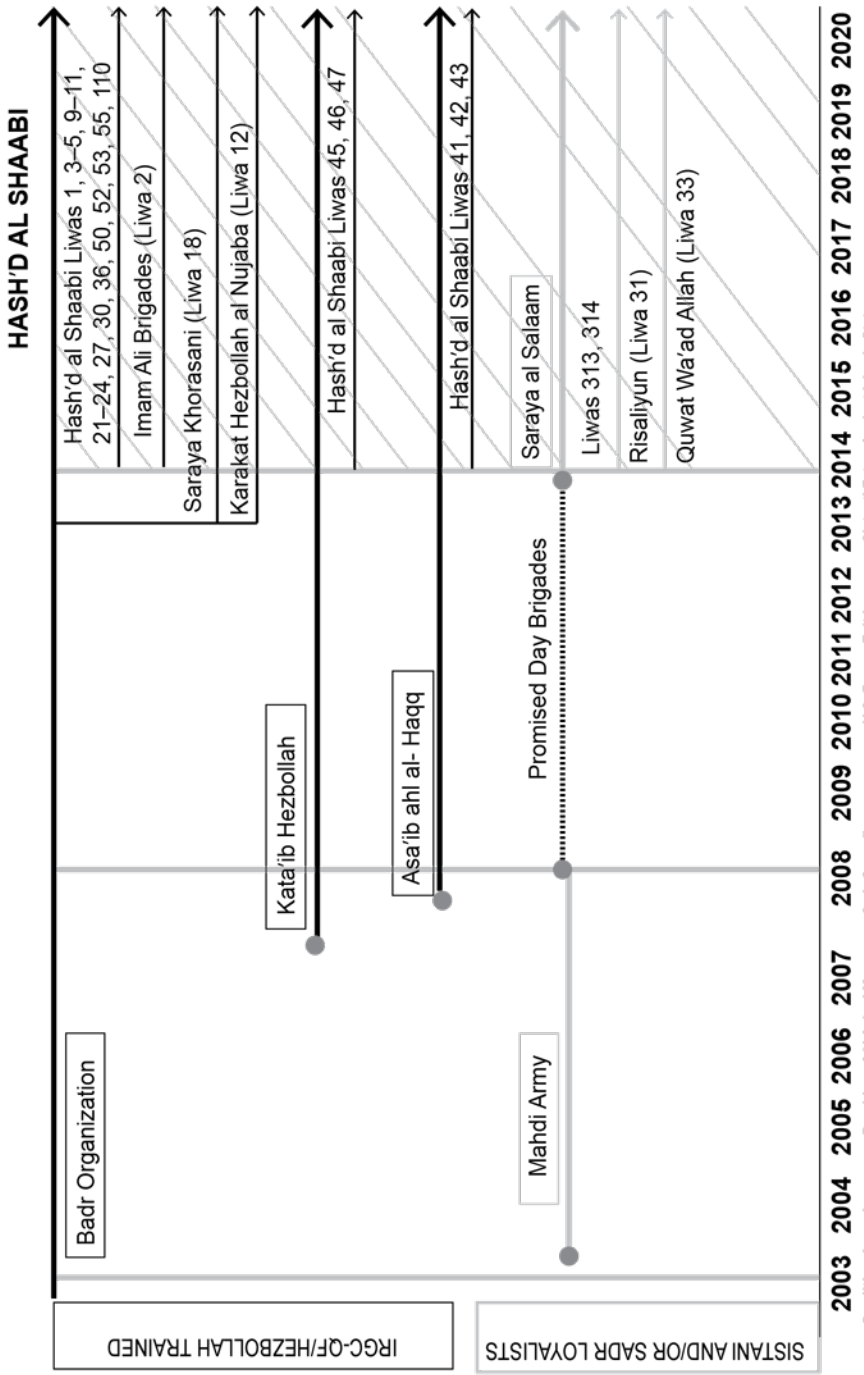

Figure 1. Major Iraqi Shi'a Militant Groups, 2003–2020. Source: Authors.

of an Islamic state like the one in Iran. The IRGC was directly involved with the founding of the organization and filled SCIRI's leadership positions with former Iraqi Shi'a refugees who had fled to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. The leader of the council, Mohammad Baqr al-Hakim, had worked closely with al-Sadr and the Dawa party in the 1960s and 1970s to advocate for the Shi'a people of Iraq. The primary point of departure between SCIRI and Dawa leaders centered upon whether political power belongs with the *ulama* (clerics) or the ummah (the Muslim community). A key ideological issue—Dawa's leaders believe that the "legitimacy of a government in an Islamic state comes from the people"[96]— is a clear ideological break from the top-down approach advocated by religious leaders like SCIRI and the Iranian regime.

The primary point of departure between SCIRI and Dawa leaders centered upon whether political power belongs with the ulama (clerics) or the ummah (the Muslim community).

Operationally, SCIRI formed the Badr Corps (or Badr Brigades), a military wing, alongside its political organization much earlier than Dawa. The progeny of the IRGC's Quds Force, Badr Corps, has one of the strongest military forces in Iraq. In contrast, the military wing with the most affinity towards Dawa, Asa'ib ahl al-Haqq (AAH), was not officially recognized until 2006, and it is not an official part of the Dawa organization.[97] SCIRI and its militant branch, the Badr Corps, have traditionally recognized the tenets of Vilayet-e Faqih and Ayatollah Khamenei as their Supreme Leader, though for political reasons this loyalty has not always been perceived as a direct contrast, or as an affront, to Sistani's preeminence. Throughout the U.S. and coalition presence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, SCIRI leaders regularly met with Sistani in Najaf to discuss political developments and shifting alliances.[98]

In 1980, fearing Khomeini's Islamic revolution would come to Iraq—and, in a dispute over the Shatt al-Arab waterway—Saddam Hussein launched a full-scale invasion of Iran. The conflict was reminiscent of World War I tactics: trench warfare, chemical weapons, and human wave attacks. Over time, the conflict became a war of attrition and of strategic stalemate. Despite challenges with the Iraqi government for decades, the oil wealth and a nationalist education system were successful in creating a strong Arab nationalist identity among Iraqi Arabs, which helped sustain the loyalty of the majority

of the country's Shi'a population against its Persian adversary throughout the eight-year war.[99]

In 1986, leaders from both sides of the Iraqi Kurdish political spectrum met in Tehran to form a coalition against Saddam Hussein. During the eight-year war, some of the border areas in eastern Kurdistan had fallen under de facto Iranian control; some with assistance from Kurdish political groups.[100] In response, Saddam Hussein committed two major atrocities against Kurdish civilians. The first was the Al-Anfal campaign, from 1987–1989, which is said to have killed and/or displaced hundreds of thousands of people in the region.[101] The second, the Halabja chemical attack, targeted civilians from the city of Halabja who supported the Kurdish resistance movement and pro-Iranian forces. After eight years, the Iran-Iraq War nearly bankrupted both sides of the conflict and ended in a United Nations (UN)-backed ceasefire.

In the wake of the U.S. and coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003 and after years of enduring the chaotic politicking of Saddam Hussein, many Iranian policymakers welcomed a more tractable Iraqi government, hoping for political and economic outcomes benefiting groups that had been marginalized under the Baathists. Policymakers and elites across Iran saw an opportunity to penetrate Iraqi decision-making. In a stunning turn of fortune, Iran's major political and military proxies were empowered by the U.S. to craft the Iraqi constitution and dominate the security services.[102] Iran's enduring influence over the Iraqi state has been a major factor in its ability to spread and sustain its proxy forces across the Middle East.

The third major Shi'a political faction in Iraq did not gain organizational success until the coalition invasion of 2003. During this period, urban Shi'a were threatened by the impact of looting and widespread lawlessness. A young, firebrand religious cleric named Moqtada al-Sadr quickly moved to fill the security vacuum in his native Sadr City by providing aid, assistance, and rule of law. His organization grew and formalized its military wing, which became known as Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), which translates to the "Army of the Mahdi" or "Mahdi Army" (the twelfth imam). Sadr's unique blend of charisma and religious authority quickly made him one of the most consequential Iraqi politicians.

Moqtada al-Sadr hails from the famous Sadr family of religious theologians. He is the son of the former Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, cousin to the academic Musa al-Sadr, and the son-in-law of the prominent Dawa party member and theologian, Grand

Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr.[103] Over the years, the Sadr family cultivated numerous works and philosophical ideas on the nature of jurisprudence, theology, economics, and Islamic history.[104] Importantly, during the sanctions era (1991–2003), Sadeq al-Sadr's movement developed a network of social support organizations for the Shi'a community, which in effect created the foundation for a social movement and militia once the Baathist regime fell.[105] While not a Quietist in the traditional sense supported by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, neither does Moqtada al-Sadr subscribe to Vilayet-e Faqih. Instead, he is an ardent anti-American, Arab (and possibly Iraqi) nationalist with familial connections to the Iranian regime. Both Iran and al-Sadr opportunistically engage with and distance themselves from one another as circumstances change.[106]

It is important to note that Iraq's Kurds have also had political organizations operating for decades, most notably the secular Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), established in 1975 by Jalal Talabani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), established in 1946 by Massoud Barzani. Tensions between Kurdistan and Baghdad have ebbed and flowed through the years—at points contentious and at others unified. The major difference between the two Kurdish secular nationalist parties and the Shi'a religious parties is that the Kurds often seek independence from the Arab majority in Iraq due to the impact of Arab nationalism in Iraqi politics.[107]

Finally, outside Iraq, prominent Shi'a businessmen—from equally prominent urban Shi'a families exiled during the Hussein regime—founded secular political parties, two of which gained major support from Western sponsors: Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress (INC), and Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord (INA). While influential with the U.S. and coalition, they did not have active militia networks at the time of the invasion.

The Balance of Threat in Iraq after Saddam Hussein

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, there was no central government to speak of since the Baath party was the regime. The majority of the population—Shi'a and Kurds—had tangible fears of a future central government, and ethno-sectarian tensions created a classic security dilemma within the borders of Iraq. While the U.S. and coalition attempted to restore central control through the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), its influence and capability were marginal at best, and the preexisting ethno-sectarian political parties and

militias had the most influence over populations on the ground. Competition immediately commenced among them for influence over the creation of the new state in order to prevent others from presenting a future threat.

As a result, elements within Iran's Shi'ite political class saw a chance to assert their influence in Iraq.[108] Iraq's Shi'a leaders recognized the demographics favored a democratic system, hence Dawa and SCIRI (later renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq or ISCI), supported the U.S. in the fight against political extremists, including Sadr, despite his family's historical connection to the Iranian regime.[109] The Iranians overtly supported the religious parties, notably by providing arms and assistance to Dawa, SCIRI, and elements within the Sadrist movement.[110] Outside Iraq, both the Allawi-led INA and the Chalabi-led INC saw a chance to claim power within the country and legitimize their decades of work in exile. The Americans—who had worked with both Allawi and Chalabi in the past—included them along with representatives from Dawa and SCIRI in the Western-backed IGC.

Moqtada al-Sadr, on the other hand, became the Shi'a voice of opposition in the country and publicly denounced the legitimacy of the IGC. While his rhetoric offended many entrenched politicians, his message gained traction with the disenfranchised and urban poor—many of whom lived in Sadr city and firmly ascribed to the belief that political legitimacy comes from the Islamic ummah. The U.S., coalition partners, and the Iraqi political elite sought to temper Sadr's movement and his popular appeal; during the spring of 2004, JAM went on the offensive in several cities considered to be holy places by Shi'a Muslims. The coalition was hesitant to directly counter Sadr himself, fearing an even more massive Shi'a resistance.[111] JAM fought the U.S. and coalition partners until August 2007, when Sadr declared a ceasefire. Of all the major Shi'a parties, only the Sadrists took an openly active role in resisting the coalition presence. To the contrary, the Dawa Party and SCIRI, both long serving proxies of Iran, encouraged their members to join the reconstituted Iraqi Army, police forces, and ministries because they were handed the opportunity to institutionalize their theological influence in the central government. For different reasons both the INA and INC worked closely with the Americans as well.

After the 2005 elections, Iraq's Shi'a saw that they had a major role in the new government. The coalition occupation was a major issue for the Sadrists, but Dawa, SCIRI, and the other parties worked with the coalition, not against it. It was the Sunni population who, at this point, realized their potential

for marginalization, which is what gave al-Qaeda in Iraq the opportunity to gain currency with portions of the population. When the coalition was viewed as a threat, it was JAM that took the lead in fighting them. For many Iraqis, JAM was nothing more than a criminal element, operating on the fringes of society, but for the urban poor JAM was operating as security and protection against criminal and Sunni extremist elements.[112]

During the remainder of the U.S. and coalition occupation, Sadr remained steadfastly opposed to the political order led by the Dawa party. Shi'a Prime Minister Maliki's harsh treatment of JAM and its splinter Shi'a militias only exacerbated this split. From 2005 until 2008, there was jockeying between the two for political power, which resulted in frequent clashes between Sadr's JAM and Dawa's quasi-aligned militant arm, the League of the Righteous, or AAH.[113] Many Shi'a were reluctant to fight JAM because unlike al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Sadrist trend had become a powerful political movement with religious doctrine and a robust security apparatus. By late 2007 the hostility between JAM and the coalition had ceased, and many of the Sadrists were seeking amnesty and integration into the Iraqi Security Forces. Sadr officially disbanded JAM in 2007, but later reorganized it as the Promised Day Brigades.

When the U.S. left Iraq in 2011, there was little public support on the Iraqi street for political groups with military wings.[114] Under Maliki's regime this sentiment changed, partially because he did not integrate them into the formal security apparatus, and partially because he legitimized the militias by giving them formal missions and authority in police matters. Once U.S. forces were no longer in the country, Iraq's powerful neighbor quickly filled the void. Iranian officials quickly seized upon the opportunity to overtly work with the longstanding Shi'a militias by providing military and financial support. In conjunction with penetration of the security services, Iran pushed a soft power strategy consisting of non-oil industry trade as well as economic support to Shi'a organizations and political parties. Yet, as Iran filled the power vacuum, it created a friction point for Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds, as well as Western policymakers.[115]

Once U.S. forces were no longer in the country, Iraq's powerful neighbor quickly filled the void.

Balance of threat calculations in Iraq were therefore compounded by the centralization of security power in the central government by an

Iran-leaning party with control over state security services.[116] Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki exacerbated the situation by marginalizing the Sunni community and aggressively seeking concessions from the Kurds. Within three years, the Sunni Salafi ISIS raised its flag over government buildings in the western Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2014 in part with Sunni acquiescence due to their experience with the Iran-backed Iraqi regime. A few months later, ISIS took complete control of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. At that time, the leader of ISIS declared it to be an Islamic caliphate and renamed itself the IS.[117] IS was, in many ways, more effective at governance than the Shi'a dominated Iraqi central government. IS had rule of law, order, license plates, a judicial system, plans for currency, and a monopoly on the use of force in the area it controlled.[118]

Expanding the Proxy Network: Iranian Influence in Iraq after 2003

As far back as 2008, U.S. officials accused the Quds Force of providing financial and military aid to the Badr Corps.[119] Prior to the coalition invasion, Iran began preparing to wage an insurgency against the U.S. and its allies inside Iraq. Iranians made use of the Special Groups—Shi'a militia trained by Hezbollah and the IRGC—and Muqtada al-Sadr's JAM. The former was better trained than the latter and saw their numbers expand quickly when the Quds Force began using Hezbollah soldiers to train them. The Quds Force decided to model the Special Groups after Hezbollah.[120] The Special Groups acted as facilitators for JAM, bringing in support from Iran.[121] The Quds Force sent two of Hezbollah's leaders, Yussef Hashim, head of special operations in Iraq, and his subordinate Ali Mussa Daqduq to advise and assist. Daqduq was given orders to go in and out of Iraq to report on the progress of the Special Groups. As al-Qaeda wore down, these groups became the primary threat to coalition forces by August 2007.[122] Particularly in southern Iraq, the carnage they created forced the British to withdraw prematurely from Basra, which set the stage for the battle that occurred in the spring of the following year.[123]

Iran employed a technique described as the Iraqi Master-Trainer Strategy, which brought Iraqis to Iran for advanced training that they then passed on to other militants inside Iraq. This technique minimized the risk for Iran and maximized the results for militants with more reliable access to expertise coming from Iraqis themselves. The Master-Trainer course focused on

more advanced areas of warfare including EFPs, projectile weapons, small arms and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and guerilla warfare tactics.[124] The IRGC's Master-Trainer tactic has an additional benefit of eliminating unnecessary distrust and rancor between Iraqi militants and their Iranian benefactors. Despite the socio-religious ties that the two nations have with one another, there is a history of betrayal and conflict that has a much stronger influence than the ideological rhetoric of those that support Vilayet-e Faqih and Iraqi-Iranian solidarity.

The IRGC provided weapons to Iraqi Shi'a militants through various smuggling mediums. One of the most widely known is that of Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani—who in 2008 was named along with Deputy Commander of the Ramadan Headquarters, Ahmad Foruzandeh, as an "individual fueling the Iraqi insurgency" based on evidence that Foruzandeh and several hundred individuals belonging to his smuggling network had transported a new type of improvised explosive device known as an EFP into Iraq from Iran. The Sheibani network is believed to be connected to Iran based on the ties that it had to JAM and Badr Corps. It was important to Iran to maintain plausible deniability as to the source of the components, so the Sheibani network did not carry out attacks itself. Coalition forces in Iraq were largely unable to produce a "smoking gun" to prove that Iran provided weapons to Iraq. Coalition forces did, however, discover weapons caches that are suspected of originating in Iran. One Multi-National Forces-Iraq report claimed coalition forces discovered almost 200 Iranian weapons caches between July 2006 and May 2008.[125]

During this period, the capability of the IRGC to train Shi'a militants inside and outside Iraq was beneficial to the regime's interests on several levels. Training Iraqis gave them the intellectual and technological knowledge and skills they need to fight the enemies they share with the IRGC. A simultaneous benefit of this training was the opportunity to indoctrinate Shi'a Muslims with the Vilayet-e Faqih principles that guide the Iranian regime. While the focus of Iran's political manipulation is on Dawa and ISCI, the Quds Force's training initiatives were oriented toward converting al-Sadr's JAM and the Special Groups into reliable proxies.[126]

PMU

After the fall of Mosul in June 2014, the balance of threat inside Iraq changed in unimaginable ways as ISIS unleashed a level of violence that made even

the sectarian conflict of the mid-2000s pale in comparison. In response to the Iraqi Army crumbling before ISIS, the Iraqi government formalized a program under the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to integrate local militias into Iraq's security apparatus. Likewise, Najaf's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa for a "righteous jihad" against ISIS.[127] It is important to note the distinction between the nature of Sistani's call for jihad versus the jihad espoused by Iranian-backed militias. The distinction lies at the heart of the authority for adherents of the Shi'a sect of Islam. Sistani's authority is institutionalized in Najaf, Iraq, and the majority of Shi'a—from the African Maghreb to Indonesia—follow his dictums. The religious reference for most of the Iranian-backed militias is with Iran's Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who resides in Qom, Iran. While he is revered by millions of Shi'a adherents, Sistani's authority as a religious and theological figure greatly surpasses that of Khamenei. Yet, Sistani's fatwa greatly enhanced the legitimacy of Iraq's PMUs, or *Hash'd al Shaabi*, inside and outside of Iraq—a move the Iranians quickly capitalized upon.

Iraq's PMUs are often portrayed as legitimate organizations that keep the peace, and in many instances, it is an accurate characterization. Nearly all the Shi'a militias are tied to formal political parties, many of which have existed for decades. Three of the most established Shi'a militias are: Badr Corps, which is linked to the Badr Organization and the ISCI, led by Hadi al Ameri; AAH which has ties to the Dawa party, but is led by former Sadrist Qais al-Khazali; and Sayara al Salaam, linked with the populist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al Sadr and the Sadrist Trend. Table 1 shows the three most prominent Shi'a political trends in Iraq, the year or decade of their founding, ideology, and military wings. It should be noted that AAH is not directly affiliated with Iraq's Dawa party but has carried out attacks under the direction of Dawa leadership since splintering off from Sadr's JAM under the guidance of the Quds Force.[128] Because of their longevity and ties to political groups, the Shi'a militias are oftentimes better funded and equipped than the Iraqi Army and police forces. Yet, many of the PMUs have overstepped their authority, and in some cases have participated in death squads or been accused of war crimes.[129] Many Sunnis in outlying provinces have voiced concerns over the professionalism of the Hash'd al Shaabi and do not want them involved in governance or police matters in Sunni towns and villages.[130]

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Table 1. Prominent Iraqi Shi'a Political Trends. Source: Authors.

Prominent Shi'a Political Trends	Founded	Ideology	Militant Wing 2003–2014	Militant Wing 2014–Present
Dawa	1950s	Iranian Sponsored	Asaib ahl al Haqq	
Supreme Council Islamic Revolution Iraq/Islamic Supreme Council Iraq (SCIRI/ISCI)	1982	Iranian Sponsored - Islamic Revolutionary	Badr Organization	Badr Organization
Sadrist Trend	2003	Iraqi Populist	Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM)	Saraya al Salaam

Three months after Sistani's fatwa, IS militiamen overran Tikrit and murdered 1,700 young Shi'a cadets from the Tikrit Air Academy in cold blood. The mass mobilization and ultimate widespread support across Iraq for the Hash'd al Shaabi was, in part, motivated by this atrocity. In a symbolic gesture, Tikrit was the first major battle in the Iraqi government's quest to take back territory held by the IS. The Hash'd al Shaabi were a key part of the battle and generated nationwide pride in pushing back the IS. The leaders of the Hash'd al Shaabi also maintained close relations with the Quds Force, led by Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. At the height of the conflict with the IS, the PMUs had an end strength of approximately 120,000 fighters.[131] These included not only the Shi'a brigades, but also Sunni, Christian, Yazidi, Turkomen, and Shabak units.

The Hash'd al Shaabi became a fully state-sanctioned organization of paramilitary groups responsible for assisting Iraqi forces in fighting the IS and by 2016 the Iraqi parliament approved a law that ideally would transform the PMUs into a legitimate entity under direct orders of the Iraqi Armed Forces once ISIS was defeated.[132] By 2019, the *Hash'd* groups largely fell into three major categories: those that used Iran's Vilayet-e Faqih ideology as a reference point, those that used Sistani's Quietism as a religious reference, and those that used a third religious reference. In 2016, an Iraqi MOI document listed over 67 distinct *Hash'd* brigades.[133] The most prominent of these—Badr, AAH, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), and Saraya al Salaam—follow the major Shi'a political trend lines in Iraq. Only Badr and AAH-affiliated groups overtly claim Iranian sponsorship. Saraya al Salaam and those that follow the Sadrist trend have denounced any foreign intervention in Iraq, including Iranian intervention (see table 2).

Table 2. Pre-and Post-IS Iranian Proxies. Source: Nicholas Heras, "Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network," *Middle East Institute*; Aymenn Jawad al Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index;" Smyth, "The Shia Militia Mapping Project;" *Kitabat*, "Numbers and Names of Popular Mobilization Units" [in Arabic]; "Washington provides Baghdad with a list of militias that must 'be frozen'" [in Arabic], *Al Arabiya*.

PRE-ISLAMIC STATE IRANIAN PROXIES				POST-2014 IRANIAN PROXIES		
NAME	ASAIB AHL AL HAQ (AAH)	KATA'IB HEZBOLLAH (KH)	BADR	SARAYA KHORASANI	MOVEMENT OF THE PARTY OF GOD'S NOBLES (Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, HHN)	IMAM ALI BRIGADES
ARABIC NAME	عصائب أهل الحق	كتائب حزب الله	بدر الجناح العسكري	سرايا الخرساني	حركة حزب الله النجباء	كتائب الإمام علي
LEADER	Qais al-Khazaili	Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis	Hadi al Ameri	Ali Al-Yassiri	Akram Abbas Kaabi	Abu Zaidi
END STRENGTH	10,000 - 20,000	400 – 30,000	10,000 – 50,000	500 - 1000	~9,000	4000 - 7000
HASHD LIWA(S)	41, 42, 43	45, 46, 47	1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 30, 36, 50, 52, 53, 55, 110	18	12	2
2018 POLITICAL ALLIANCE	FATAH	FATAH	FATAH	FATAH	FATAH	FATAH

Badr Organization

The Badr Organization can trace its origins to the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s when it operated as a pro-Iranian force throughout the course of the war fighting against the forces of Saddam Hussein. Originally known as the Badr Corps, the group renamed itself in 2003 as the Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development. Often referred to as Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq, the group has claimed anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 militants, or 15 to 50 liwas.[134] If the claim is true, it would make Badr comparable to Lebanese Hezbollah—it is a militia group/political party with significant backing from Iran that has grown into a large and powerful force in its home country and consequently is a potential threat to rivals.

The leader for both the military and political branches of the group is Hadi al-Amiri, a long time stalwart in the Badr organization. Al-Amiri has close ties to Iran and served as the Iraqi Transportation Minister from 2011 to 2014. A U.S. federal indictment linked Badr's leadership to individuals involved in the 1996 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 U.S. Air Force Servicemen.[135] On 28 February 2019, Badr dissenters created a new party—the Patriotic Badr Movement—blaming Amiri for not achieving the group's goals.[136]

Not all of Badr's constituent groups are ideologically linked to religious figures in Iran. For instance, the Babylon Brigade has a large portion of Christian Chaldean fighters. The group originated as one of many popular mobilization units—a militia that was formed and led by Rayan al-Kildani in 2014 as a response to ISIS and their persecution of religious minorities throughout Iraq.[137] Although al-Kildani is Christian and claims that the group as a whole is Christian, "most of Al-Kildani's fighters aren't Christians … but members of the non-Christian Shabak ethnic minority or Iraq's Shi'a Muslim majority."[138]

Like it does with so many of its other constituent groups, the Badr Organization exerts a great deal of influence over al-Kildani. Throughout the fight against ISIS, the Babylon Brigade and al-Kildani established a strong relationship with the Badr Organization. An official statement made by the Badr Organization states: "any violation to Babylon means a violation to Badr."[139] The close ties between these two groups has led many within the Christian minority in Iraq to grow weary of Iranian influence within their communities. To add to Iraqi Christians' concerns, in the 2018 elections

members of the Babylon Brigade won two of five seats reserved for Christians in Iraq's Parliamentary elections—despite many Iraqi Christians believing that the group does not represent them, as many members of the group are not actually Christian.[140]

AAH

Led by Qais al-Khazali, AAH is the main ideological contender against the Badr Organization. In accordance with the Divide-Empower-Control strategy, AAH originated as an offshoot of JAM, and many of its original members were former Sadrists. Recently declassified tactical interrogation reports reveal al-Khazali had a falling out with Sadr in the 2004 timeframe because of Sadr's paranoia and misguided leadership.[141] The documents allege that Sadr wanted more Iranian monetary support for JAM, but also needed to create an aura of plausible deniability regarding the Iranian involvement. The interrogation reports further reveal that IRGC-Quds Force leaders, including General Qasem Soleimani, frequently met with Sadr and al-Khazali and suggested al-Khazali act as the front for Iranian support. Through al-Khazali, Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC created AAH in 2006. The Iranians suggested the Shi'a constituency always show deference to al-Sistani, which they argued, would create a unified bloc.[142] The organization also maintained strong ties to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. [143]

AAH copied the organizational style of Lebanese Hezbollah by providing social services, schools, and mosque refurbishment to Iraq's rural poor, but eventually spread to organizations outside Iraq. AAH's major goals include establishing the Shi'a domination of all political aspects of the Iraqi community, institutionalizing sharia law in Iraq, and supporting Shi'a leaders and communities elsewhere. AAH has kept mutually beneficial ties with the IRGC, the Quds force, and the Iraqi Shi'a community. AAH also amplified activities and messaging in support of Lebanon and Palestine, lending the group a solid ideological identification with Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian Islamic Revolution.[144] In 2017, in a widely circulated speech to Iraq's top Shi'a clerics, al-Khazali vowed to establish what he termed the "Shi'a Full Moon," or "Badr," which consists of an alliance of Shi'a militant groups across the Middle East. He suggested this Shi'a Badr would include several armed groups, namely: AAH, Iran's Revolutionary Guard; Lebanese Hezbollah; Houthi rebel forces in Yemen; and the "brothers and sisters" in Iraq and Syria.[145]

Despite accusations that his loyalty is to Iran and not the Iraqi central government, it is important to note that Khazali has emerged as one of the most prominent voices from Iraq's PMUs. Khazali's artful rhetoric shed the prevailing narrative of a Shi'a "crescent" in the Middle East and replaces it with one of Shi'a dominance. The term "Shi'a crescent" is attributed to the Jordanian King Abdullah II, who used the term after the fall of Saddam Hussein to describe an area in the fertile crescent of the Middle East with Iranian-allied areas—namely in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In his speech Khazali added this "Full Moon" would precede the emergence of "Sahib al-Zaman" or "time holder;" the twelfth Imam from the Shi'a religious tradition.

Khazali's artful rhetoric shed the prevailing narrative of a Shi'a "crescent" in the Middle East and replaces it with one of Shi'a dominance.

While the "Full Moon" narrative demonstrates the robust nature of Tehran's political influence through Shi'a religious institutions across the Middle East, it is also indicative of a political cleavage within Iraq's Shi'a population—those who openly espouse Iranian hegemony and those who oppose it. Many of Iraq's religious clerics openly oppose support of Iran's political objectives outside Iraq. For instance, in 2017 Ayatollah al-Sistani published a fatwa forbidding the Iranian-backed PMUs from working in Syria.[146] This did not stop many of AAH's constituents from traveling or fighting outside Iraq.

Saraya al-Salaam

The Shi'a political process in Iraq demonstrates the importance of charismatic leadership in early group development. Nowhere is this more evident than with the emergence of Moqtada al-Sadr as a political force within the country. When Moqtada al-Sadr formed JAM in 2003, he did not have the luxury of longevity or an institutionalized political party. He did have a well-regarded family name and legitimate religious connections. The people that supported Sadr legitimized his movement, directly affirming the religious doctrine of political legitimacy being determined by the ummah. Moqtada al-Sadr quickly mobilized and organized a political and security apparatus. This rapid mobilization is a function of several factors. Many of the members of JAM were disenfranchised, lower class Shi'a males—unlike the more politically sophisticated SCIRI and Dawa parties. Sadr capitalized on this cleavage in Iraqi politics and remained loyal to the Iraqi street, always

shifting to reflect the voice of the Iraqi populace. Furthermore, Sadr always remained loyal to Najaf, instead of turning to Qom for religious legitimacy.[147]

As the Sadrists matured and became viable as a political actor, their actions could be better explained through a structural framework of analysis. The Peace Brigades (also known as Saraya al-Salaam) linked with the populist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al Sadr and the Sadrist Trend. The fall of Mosul to ISIS in 2014 prompted Sadr to revive and rebrand the Mahdi Army. Saraya al Salaam had two main aims: the defeat of the IS, and the "resignation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki."[148] In 2014, Sadr deployed the Peace Brigades to Samarra to ensure that the city did not fall to ISIS. Since then, Sadr's forces have built businesses and political relationships with many influential Sunnis in the city, which is very different from other Shi'a militias that still often engage in sectarian violence. In a similar vein, Sadr routinely denounced Maliki's concessions to the Iranians and has consistently voiced his desire to coalesce Iraq's secular parties.[149] Although many U.S. servicemen consider al-Sadr an Iranian proxy, his behavior and interests have in many circumstances diverged from Iran's preferences. His Sadrist movement and affiliated militias represent the epitome of the Principal-Agent Dilemma for Iran.

By December 2017, the Iraqi government claimed all ISIS-held territory had been reclaimed by the Iraqi armed forces. Following this, in June 2018, *Reuters* reported that Sadr ordered that the Peace Brigades "must disband in all cities except for the capital Baghdad and the cities of Karbala and Samarra, both homes to holy Shi'a shrines."[150] Since the disbandment of the majority of Sadr's forces, *Saraya al Salaam* has still been active at least within Samarra, with a report from *The Atlantic* stating that it operates as a peacekeeping force with the mission of maintaining order and rebuilding the city since the defeat of ISIS.[151] Yet, Sadr's anti-sectarian nationalist rhetoric suggests this mission could end soon. After the withdrawal of non-essential staff from the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in May 2019, Sadr voiced support for peace and reconstruction.[152]

KH

KH is an Iraqi branch of Lebanese Hezbollah estimated to contain anywhere from 400 to 30,000 fighters. The organization follows the tradition of Vilayet-e Faqih and serves as a key element of Iranian influence. The former leader of this group was the Iraqi born Jamal Jaafar Ibrahimi, who was more commonly known as Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis. He was later given responsibility

as deputy chief of all the Hash'd al Shaabi. Mohandis reportedly served as an adviser and "right hand man" to Iran's former military envoy to Iraq, the IRGC-Quds Force commander Major General Qasem Soleimani before their deaths in a January 2020 U.S. air strike.[153] KH members have received training from Iran's Quds Force as well as from Lebanese Hezbollah. The group has been active since 2003, and actively fought against the U.S. presence in both Iraq and Syria.

Distinguishing Iranian Proxies from Other Shi'a Movements

The number of Iranian proxies operating in Iraq, their leadership, sizes, and compositions have varied—especially over the course of the conflict with the IS. Likewise, the Hash'd al Shaabi has had a wide variety of organizational structures, splintering, and group modification. Not all of the brigades of the Hash'd al Shaabi are Iranian proxies. For instance, despite making up over one third of Iraq's paramilitary units, very few, if any of the militia groups affiliated with Saraya al-Salaam and the Sadrist trend should be categorized as Iranian proxies.

Iranian proxies in Iraq can be categorized along two major trend lines. The first contains three prominent groups: Asaib ahl al Haqq, KH, and the Badr Organization (see table 3). All were trained by components of Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC's Quds Force long before the IS took root; they have the most longevity in the country. The other trend line includes the paramilitary units that gained prominence after Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa against the IS. The most prominent in this category are the Iran-sponsored Imam Ali Brigades, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba (HHN), and Saraya Khorasani. A composite list of Hash'd al Shaabi brigades by numerical affiliation as well as component organizations can be found in the Appendix. This list, however, is not comprehensive, and is subject to change.[154] Notably, leaders and constituent groups are constantly shifting, splitting, demobilizing, and forming new organizations under the paramilitary umbrella.

The crisis with the IS enabled Iran to employ the efficient and cost-effective "Divide-Empower-Control" model. First, the move to offer training and assistance to Iraq's Hash'd units came at an opportune moment. Sistani's 2014 fatwa not only legitimized the Hash'd al Shaabi, but also gave the impetus to the Iraqi government to release funding for the organization. Second, the IRGC Quds Force capitalized on this opportunity by inserting

trainers from Lebanese Hezbollah into Iraq. Thus, the analysis reveals the IRGC-QF multiplied its presence by finding cleavages inside newly formed units, dividing military units, creating splinter factions from those units, and empowering the most obsequious frontrunners.

Post-2014 Hezbollah Trained

Looking at the post-2014 Hash'd al Shaabi brigades, those who emerge as the most prominent are the Imam Ali Brigades, HHN, and Saraya Khorasani. The Imam Ali Brigades was one of the first brigades to form after Sistani's fatwa in 2014, and its constituent fighters have been seen with QF leadership in Iraq and Syria.[155] HHN is an offshoot of AAH formed in 2013. HHN is known to have sent fighters to Syria. Notably, brigade Saraya Korasani formed in 2013 but gained wide acclaim and QF assistance after Sistani's fatwa.[156] Each of the new brigades swore allegiance to the 2018 Fatah Alliance political list formed by the Badr Organization's leader, Hadi al-Amiri, which continues to serve as a proxy of Iran.

Assessing Divide-Empower-Control and Its Vulnerabilities in Iraq

With the formal defeat of ISIS announced by then-Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in late 2017, several Hash'd al Shaabi factions began to form a political list in early 2018 to run in the elections months later. The new group, known as the Fatah Alliance, consisted of the established Iranian proxies Badr, AAH, and KH, along with newer proxies such as Saraya Khorasan and the Imam Ali Brigades. Badr commander Hadi al Amiri led the alliance. Moqtada al Sadr created the primary opposition to Fatah, a populist, anti-Iranian party which became known as Saairun. Saairun consisted of the Sadrist Trend and Iraq's Communist Party. Given the fact that Iranian proxies had won the elections in 2006, 2010, and 2014, it was assumed that Iran would again maintain its influence in Iraqi politics after the 2018 election through its influence in the Fatah Alliance. Ironically, many in the U.S. military actually wanted Prime Minister al-Abadi's Victory Alliance to win as well because, despite the fact its origins are as an Iranian proxy, his government worked closely with the U.S. to defeat ISIS.

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Table 3. Major Hash'd al Shaabi Brigades. Source: Nicholas Heras, "Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network," *Middle East Institute*; Aymenn Jawad al Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index;" Smyth, "The Shia Militia Mapping Project;" *Kitabat*, "Numbers and Names of Popular Mobilization Units" [in Arabic]; "Washington provides Baghdad with a list of militias that must 'be frozen'" [in Arabic], *Al Arabiya*.

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS
	League of the Righteous (Asaib ahl al Haqq)		Qais al-Khazali	Salah al-Din, Nukhayib, Syria
41	League of the Righteous (AAH)	اللواء 41 (عصائب أهل الحق)		
42	AAH al Qa'd Abu Mousa al Amiri	للواء 42 (عصائب أهل الحق)		
43	AAH Saba al Dujail (Seven Dujail)	اللواء 43 (سبع الدجيل)		
	Hezbollah Brigades of Iraq (Kata'ib Hezbollah)		al Muhandis	Syria
45	Hezbollah Brigades of Iraq (Kata'ib Hezbollah)	اللواء 46 (سرايا الدفاع الشعبي)		
46	Hezbollah Brigades of Iraq (Kata'ib Hezbollah)	للواء 47 (سرايا الدفاع الشعبي)		
47	Hezbollah Brigades of Iraq (Kata'ib Hezbollah)	اللواء 50 (بابليون)		
	Badr Organization		Hadi al-Amiri	Salah al-Din, Diyala, Syria
1	Liwa al Imam Muhammad al-Jiwad	اللواء 1 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
3	Tashkil Asad Amerli	اللواء 3 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
4	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 4 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
5	Tashkil al-Karar	اللواء 5 (بدر الجناح العسكري)	Abu Dergham al Maturi	
9	Liwa Karbala	اللواء 9 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
10	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 10 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
11	Liwa Ali al-Akbar	اللواء 11 (لواء علي الأكبر)		
21	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 21 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
22	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 22 (بدر الجناح العسكري)	Abu Kawthar al-Muhammadawi	Maysan
23	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 23 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		Diyala
24	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 24 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		Diyala
27	Muhammadawi	اللواء 27 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
30	Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Ninawa	اللواء 30 (قوة الشبك)		
36	Lalish Regiment - Yezidi Forces	اللواء 36 (قوات لالش الايزيدية)		
50	Babiliyun Battalion	اللواء 50 (بابليون)	Rian al Kidani	Baghdad Belt
52	Fawj Amerli	اللواء 52 (لواء الحسين)		
53	Liwa al -Hussein	اللواء 53(بدر الجناح العسكري)		
55	Tashkil Malik al-Ashtar	اللواء 55 (بدر الجناح العسكري)		
110	Fayli Kurdish (Elephant Kurds)	اللواء 110 (الكورد الفيلية)		
	Post-2014 Hezbollah-Trained			
2	Imam Ali Brigades	اللواء 2 (فرقة الإمام علي القتالية)	Abu Zaidi	Baghdad Belts/ Syria Square
12	Hezbollah Movement Nujaba (Harakat al Nujaba)	اللواء 12 (النجباء)	Akram Abbas Kaabi	Baghdad Belts/ Syria Square
18	Saraya Khorasani	اللواء 18 (سرايا الخرساني)	Ali al-Yassiri	Baghdad Belts/ Center of Baghdad

In either circumstance, it was assumed that Iran would remain the uncontested sponsor in the Principal-Agent relationship.

In May 2018, the Iraqis held their fourth democratic elections. In a surprising outcome, Moqtada al-Sadr's Saairun alliance gained the most seats in parliament, followed very closely by Hadi al Amiri's Fatah Alliance, former Prime Minister Haider al Abadi's Victory Alliance, and former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's State of Law Coalition. In the Kurdish areas, the KDP and PUK held the largest share of the votes. Sadr's win was a major blow to Iran's grip on the country and led to Iran's targeting and assassination attempts on Sadr loyalists.[157]

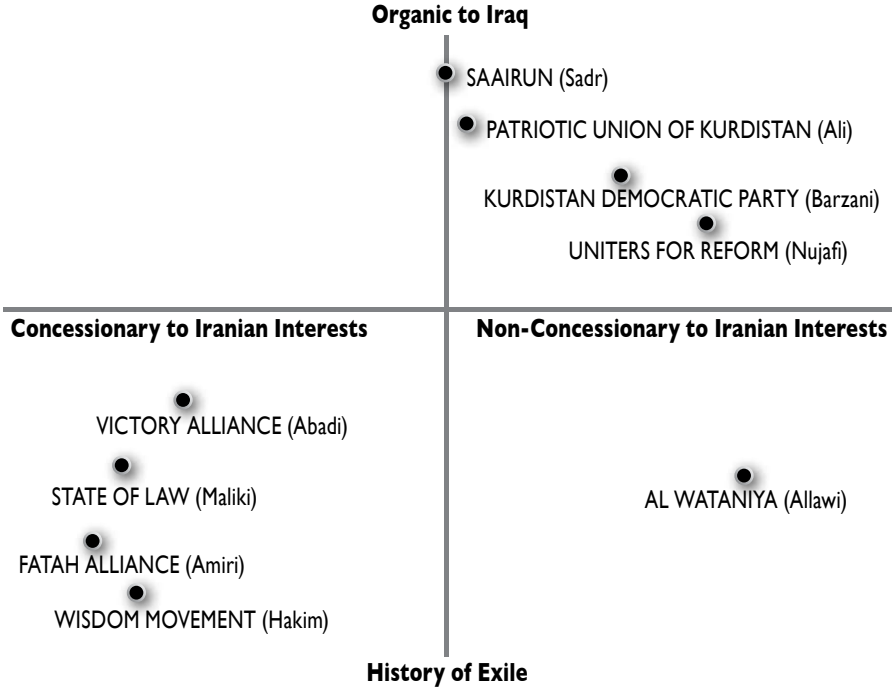

Figure 2. Iraq's 2018 political spectrum. Source: Authors.

Figure 2 shows a conceptualization of Iraq's 2018 major political blocs on a spectrum of how concessionary they have been to Iranian interests and whether or not they have a history of exile. In this representation, the Iranian-backed groups show a clear pattern of exile, while the groups organic to Iraq are less concessionary. Arguably the most organic Iraqi political party, Sadr's Saairun, maintains an even stance on Iran, whereas the Kurdish and Sunni parties are more hesitant to accept Iranian primacy.

Table 4 shows the non-Kurdish blocs in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections. In Iraq's predominantly Sunni Anbar province, Osama al-Nujafi's bloc won the most seats; Ayad Allawi's Al Wataniya gained a respectable 21 seats in parliament; but the outcome heavily favored Shi'a strongholds, particularly those with a notable presence in Hash'd al Shaabi brigades. Both of Iraq's Iranian-backed Shi'a political heavyweights, Dawa and ISCI, split their allegiances. Dawa split its allegiance between Haider al Abadi and Nouri al Maliki; ISCI split allegiances between Hadi al-Amiri and Ammar al-Hakim.

The Dawa and ISCI splits became a major issue for Iranian policymakers whose Divide-Empower-Control strategy ricocheted as they maneuvered to convince party leaders to put aside their differences to form a government.[158] The splits also exposed a key vulnerability in Iran's proxy strategy—the difficulty of placating long-seeded host country rivalries in lieu of a unified front. Much like Iraq's previous parliamentary elections, it was Moqtada al-Sadr, not Iranian policymakers, who played the role of political arbitrator, eventually gaining concessions from Iraqi Communists, Allawi's Wataniya, al-Amiri's Fatah, and Abadi's Victory Alliance in return for forming a coalition government.[159]

Conclusion

Iran has leveraged the "Divide-Empower-Control" strategy to create options and opportunity inside Iraq. Iran's success comes, in part, due to its long-standing support of major Iraqi political parties, a deep understanding of Iraqi culture, as well as proximity, economic interests, and to a lesser extent, tribal and familial ties to the region. Iran's Principal-Agent Dilemma can now be assessed against the five major variables.

Type of Shi'a Identity

Iran benefits from the fact that Iraq's Shi'a population is Twelver, so there is a natural commonality in this layer of identity. Additionally, Iraq and Iran share important centers of religious learning in Najaf and Qom, respectively; their scholars frequently engage in exchanges; and hundreds of thousands of pilgrims travel from Iran to Iraq each year for the Shi'a holy day of Ashura.

Degree of Similarity in Religious Interpretation of Shi'a Theology

Although the Twelver identity is held in common, the majority of Iraq's population practice it within the Quietist doctrinal variant, as do the majority

Table 4. 2018 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections. Source: Al Arabiya, "Washington provides Baghdad with a list."

2018 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections							
Political Bloc	**Saairun (Forward)**	**Fatah Alliance**	**Victory Alliance**	**State of Law**	**Uniters for Reform**	**Al Wataniya**	**National Wisdom**
Leader	Moqtada al-Sadr	Hadi al-Amiri	Haider al-Abadi	Nouri al-Maliki	Osama al-Nujafi	Ayad Allawi	Ammar al-Hakim
Seats	54	48	42	25	23	21	19
Notable Hash'd Brigades	Saraya al Salaam	Badr Organization		League of the Righteous (AAH)	Hashd Sunni		Jihad Brigade (Saraya al Jihad)
	Risaliyun (Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali)	Asaib ahl al Haqq		AAH al Qa'id Abu Mousa al Amiri			Supporters of the Faith
	Quwat Wa'ad Allah (aka Liwa al-Shabab al-Risali)	Kataib Hezbollah		AAH Saba al Dujail (Seven Dujail)			Forces of the Expected Brigade (Liwa al-Muntadhar)
		Saraya Khorasani					Saraya Ashura
		Harakat Hezbollah al -Nujaba					
		Imam Ali Brigades					
Meets Initial Behavioral Conditions	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Revisionist or Status Quo	Status Quo	Revisionist	Status Quo	Status Quo	Revisionist	Revisionist	Revisionist
Notable Iraqi Political Parties	Sadrist Trend	ISCI	Dawa	Dawa	Mutahidoon	INA	ISCI
	Iraqi Communist Party	Al Fadhila	INC		Al Hadba		Al-Muwatin
		Islah			Al Hal		
		Al Sadiqoun			Sunni Iraqi Islamist Party		

of the world's Twelvers. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and to a much lesser extent Muqtada al-Sadr, represent Iraqi Quietism, have extensive and politically important indigenous social movements, and can generate—when necessary—significant militia capability.

The Iranian regime's version of Twelver Shi'ism stresses the concept of Vilayet-e Faqih, which has some currency in Iraq. Indeed, al-Sadr's great uncle was essential in creating juridical justification for aspects of the concept, though neither Moqtada al-Sadr nor his father were thought to subscribe to it. However, Vilayet-e Faqih remains a minority perspective within the Shi'a community of Iraq. What has given Iran strength since 2003 is the fact that the Shi'a parties in exile since Saddam Hussein, Dawa and ISCI, were empowered by the U.S. to form the Iraqi government and the affiliated militias that have arisen since 2003 have made them the undisputed arbiters of hard power in the country.

High Balance of Threat among Proxies

Since the era of Saddam Hussein, especially since Gulf War I, ethno-sectarian tension has been a feature of Iraqi politics, with active conflict occurring regularly. Due to the overt politicization of ethno-sectarian identity by Hussein's Baathist regime, the central government has been recognized by all parties as a potential threat. Furthermore, the sectarian conflict following the U.S. invasion in 2003, the atrocities thereafter, and the impact of ISIS have all made maintaining militias for in-group protection a necessity. In the process, though, a security dilemma internal to Iraq persists, and the questionable legitimacy of the Iraqi government does not appear poised to manage security sufficiently to cause a complete disarmament and demobilization of many militia groups.

Degree of Active Conflict

Active internal conflict has characterized Iraq since 2003. Even when the civil conflict was predominantly resolved by 2008, there was still low-level hostility between the Iranian-backed, Shi'a-dominated central government and the Sunni and Kurdish communities. ISIS was in part able to expand rapidly in Iraq from 2013–2014 due to the Sunni community deciding it was the lesser evil as compared to the central government. The anti-ISIS fight created the conditions for an internally mobilized, highly armed group of

militias. The inevitable result has been an acute security dilemma that, while reduced since 2018, still creates the perceived need for capable militias.

Strength of Host Country Government Relative to Other Domestic Actors/Militias

The Iraqi central government has been able to generate a significant degree of institutional capability, partly due to the fact that key Iranian proxies, especially the Badr Organization and now AAH, contribute to the security apparatus of the state. Without their direct support, however, the capacity of the government would likely dissipate rapidly. As it currently stands, the military and police forces are sufficiently powerful to constitute a threat to Sunni, Kurdish, secular, and opposition Shi'a populations. However, recent protests have rocked the political foundation of the Iraqi central government, demonstrating that its strength during times of peace are less ominous than previously thought.

Assessment

From the Principal-Agent perspective, the Iraq case demonstrates most clearly Iran's Divide-Empower-Control approach to proxies because it was presented with a larger Twelver population, a high degree of active conflict, and the ability to leverage splits in proxies to expand its options for different political circumstances. The Hash'd al Shaabi present a direct challenge to the Iraqi government's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and this issue is growing as a source of contention between the Iraqis and Iranians. The biggest short-term challenge for the Iraqi government is keeping the momentum the Hash'd al Shaabi generated in fighting the IS without alienating the Iraqi population writ large. Indeed, the loss of Major General Soleimani was a significant blow to Iran's proxy strategy because he was successful in mitigating agency slack and maintaining a strong delegation strategy with the sponsored proxies. Without him, many proxies appear to be developing new interests as they compete with one another for influence. The Iraqi government is challenged with integrating the forces into the security apparatus in a formal way, while some political leaders have called for a demobilization of the Hash'd al Shaabi units.[160]

The real contest for power in Iraq now lies between Iraq's Shi'a parties, which are split between the Iranian-backed Dawa, Fatah, and ISCI factions, and the populist Saairun. The uptick in Iraqi support for Moqtada al-Sadr

and Saairun challenges Iran's grip on the country's politics. Sadr has always been the populist force for Iraq's working-class Shi'a and has branded himself as an Iraqi nationalist. Sadr proved he is the country's conciliator, bringing together disparate political factions and enabling the formation of a coalition government. Importantly and consistent with Christia's analysis, Sadr has a pattern of allying with Iran when he perceives U.S. influence as too great, but defects to al-Sistani once the U.S. steps back again. Thus, Sadr is constantly engaged in shifting alliances based on his perception of the balance of threat.

Under conflict conditions, Iran's strategy makes it possible to expand political influence into the state itself, with the Hash'd al Shaabi working as a de facto security service. Yet, under ordinary political conditions, the proxies' and Iran's influence irritate the population. Because of this, there is growing resentment amongst the Iraqi population regarding Iran's presence in the country. This trend demonstrates that host country political groups and host country populations are much more acquiescent to outside influence when they can coalesce around a common enemy. Once that enemy threat disappears, however, the "near enemy"—competition amongst host country factions—drives the political landscape and Principal influence over Agents wanes.

Chapter 3. Iranian Proxies in Syria

> To Damascus, years are only moments, decades are only flitting trifles of time. She measures time, not by days and months and years, but by the empires she has seen rise, and prosper and crumble to ruin. - Mark Twain[161]

Syria's Assad regime and Iran have been close strategic allies for decades. Their friendship was clearly on display during the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War, one of the bloodiest and most destructive wars in the Middle East during the 20th century. During that conflict, almost all Arab states stood behind Saddam Hussein in support of his invasion of Iran. The only Arab-majority state which was unwavering in its support of Iran was Syria.[162] The persistence of civil war starting in 2011 has led to the destruction of Syria's fragile infrastructure and society. There is no doubt that the disastrous effects of civil war will set the country back not only developmentally, but also socially and politically.

Unlike in Iraq, the Iranians struggled to generate proxy support within the Syrian population for three principle reasons. First, while Iran maintained a decades-long relationship with the Assad regime in Syria, it did not have the same kind of longstanding religious or political relationships among key constituencies inside the country. In short, there simply were not many Shi'a living in Syria outside the Alawite community. Second, the Assad regime's ruling Alawite faction was able to govern independently of external support and did not rely on Iranian assistance for domestic security. Instead, the Assad regime was an equal partner with Iran against a common enemy in Israel, and they shared interest in supporting Lebanese Hezbollah against that enemy. Third, as a Baathist regime, the Syrian government espoused secular Arab nationalism, not Shi'a Islamism, which put it at odds with Iran's fundamentalist worldview and its Persian ethnicity.

In Syria circa 2012, Iran found a desperate partner who needed assistance at the moment of an existential threat in the form of a multi-ethnoreligious, domestic, political and military insurrection against the regime. Since Iran relied heavily on Damascus International Airport for supporting Lebanese Hezbollah and needed it to prevent a potential Sunni takeover of the

government, the Quds Force moved forward to support the Alawite Assad regime. Without a natural domestic population base from which to generate proxies, Iran creatively imported fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In other words, Iran's main Principal-Agent Dilemma in Syria was that it did not have a sufficient population to form domestic agents; it had to manufacture them. The prolonged nature of the civil war transformed the Assad regime itself from an equal partner to a nearly dependent agent, which enabled Iran to win concessions from the Assad regime to embed its foreign proxies across key terrain along the ground lines of communication from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, to Lebanon for long-term regional influence. This chapter briefly reviews the Syrian ethno-religious context and the opportunity structure Iran exploited to generate proxies, explains the balance of threat dynamics, and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Iran's proxy strategy in Syria.

Ethno-Religious Context and the Iranian Proxy Opportunity Structure

Syria sits literally at the crossroads of history, empire, and religion. It can trace some of its urban centers to 4,000 BC, and across the millennia it saw the passing of the Persian, Greek, Assyrian, Hittite, Egyptian, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman empires while playing an important role in the rise of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, each in multiple forms. Additionally, many ethnic groups were relocated to Syria at various points in time from other parts of the previous empires to serve as security or administrative agents. Others fled to Syria as refugees during times of crisis. As a result, Syria's population consists of a wide range of ethno-linguistic groups which include Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Circassians, and Armenians. The dominant religion is Sunni Islam, but there are also Shi'a Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, Mandeans, Christians, and Yazidis inside the country's borders (see table 5).[163]

In sociopolitical terms, it is common for these ethno-religious identity layers to cross over. For instance, an Arab can practice Islam, Christianity, or subscribe to the Alawi or Druze religions. On the other hand, a Kurd could practice Sunni or Shi'a Islam or practice the Yazidi religion. Indeed, much of Syria's history during the twentieth century was precisely about reorganizing the political structures to enable greater economic and political

opportunity for the peasantry and religious minorities against entrenched, centuries-old, central, Sunni Muslim feudal governing structures.[164] It is in this context that Hafiz al-Assad, an Alawite, was able to leverage his Arab and military identities to become the dictator of Syria and eventually pass the reins to his son, Bashar, as his successor.[165]

Over 50 percent of the Syrian population resides in the western coastal plain along the Mediterranean Sea, Damascus and Aleppo Governorates, and the river valley along the Euphrates.[166] Most of central and eastern Syria is desert, though there are a few pockets with oases or sufficient rain to support pastoralist grazing. This area was traditionally under the control of Arab Bedouin tribes who until the mid-twentieth century traversed—and raided from—it and what are now the deserts of Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. As a result, many tribal confederations, families, and clans have relations across international borders, which constitute enduring lines of communication and trade—or smuggling—despite periodic government efforts to control them.[167] The main concentrations of Kurdish communities are along the northern border with Turkey, especially in the northeast in Hasakah Governorate, though there are, or were, pockets of Kurds around the cities of Damascus and Aleppo.[168]

Table 5. Syrian Demographic Estimates. Source: Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook.

Syrian Demographics		
SECT	**POPULATION PERCENT**	**TOTAL POPULATION**
ETHNICITY		
Arab	50%	~10 million
Alawite	15%	~3 million
Kurd	10%	~2 million
Levantine	10%	~2 million
Other	~15%	~2–3million
RELIGION		
Muslim	~87%	~17.4 million
Sunni	74%	~14.8 million
Shi'a	13%	~2.6 million
Christian	<10%	<2 million
Druze	<3%	~500k–1 million
Other	<1%	<500k

Syria's contemporary history began in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire when in the late-1800s the Turkification of the Ottoman state led to a countervailing rise of Arab nationalist sentiment in key urban centers of the empire, Damascus among them. A new class of young, well-educated, urban Arab professionals, merchants, and military officers became enchanted with Arab nationalist ideology and drew support from across the ethnic and Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Alawite communities.[169] Although the territory of Syria was promised to the Arabs by the British for their support against the Ottomans in World War I, it quickly fell under French control as a mandate under the League of Nations. The French were forced to fight a multi-ethnoreligious insurgency in 1925–1927, which quelled the rebellion, but cemented Arab nationalist sentiment in the country.[170]

The French ruled nominally through the traditional Sunni Muslim aristocracy, but this group would not allow its sons to enlist in the military. Instead, the French relied upon marginalized minorities and impoverished Sunni peasants for the majority of its domestic military capability.[171] Upon its independence in 1948, Syria's governing elite attempted to reconcile the religious demands of traditional Sunni elites for influence over law with demands of secular Arab nationalists to recognize a socialist, religiously neutral platform.

After thirteen politically tumultuous years and an aborted attempt at creating a unified Arab state with Egypt, called the United Arab Republic, a series coups d'état occurred. A politically active group of Syrian Baathist officers, who represented the Arab nationalist and socialist platform, became concerned about the condition of their political party and union with Egypt and created a secret Military Committee that included Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Umran, Major Salah Jadid, and Captain Hafez al-Assad. Following a coup in September 1961, the Syrians left their union with Egyptians. A March 1963 Baathist coup aimed to end the political instability that had followed the 1961 coup. Baath Party political leaders, including founders Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, led the transition process, and the new Syrian cabinet was comprised completely of Baath party members. In 1966, another coup led to a major political division within the Baath Party, splitting the original pan-Arab Baath Party. In late 1970, General Hafiz al-Assad formally assumed control of the Baath party after another *coup d'état* and began concentrating power through his family and tribes within the Alawite community.[172]

Since the Assad regime's ascension, there have been periodic attempts to break its grip over the institutions of government and reform the system. Notable contestation has come from militant Sunni Islamists (late-1970s to early-1980s) and from waves of democratic reform efforts, most recently in 2001, 2005, and finally in 2011.[173] In each instance, the regime initiated crackdowns against the opposition, the most notable being a major battle against the Islamist militants in the city of Hamah in 1982 with a tally of the dead estimated at over 10,000.[174] Democratic protestors, however, often faced prison and torture for their efforts.[175] In sum, elements from nearly every community in Syria have participated in one way or another in efforts to reform or eliminate the regime, but each has failed.

From a Principal-Agent perspective, the Assad regime is a poor long-term proxy option for Iran. While its interests converge in many foreign policy areas, they diverge in terms of Syrian domestic politics. Syria's Alawite ruling class is self-consciously divorced from Shi'ism in general and Iranian Shi'ism specifically. Syria's Baath party, which includes Christians and Marxists, has no interest in promoting Iranian-style theocracy or the doctrine of Vilayet-e Faqih. Ultimately, the Syrian Baath party is non-sectarian, and Syria's Alawites reject fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic law. Even with all of Iran's assistance and as a Shi'a variant, the Assad regime has no intention of supporting Vilayet-e Faqih. For this and other reasons, the Assad regime has also benefited from a second principal, Russia, which has provided direct military assistance since 2015, and which has a history of supporting the Assad regime dating back to the Cold War.

The Balance of Threat in the Syrian Civil War

As a secular Arab nationalist party, the Baath theoretically encompassed the entirety of the Syrian population—except for non-Arab ethnic groups, such as the Kurds, Circassians Turkmen, and Armenians. So long as members of these communities chose to drop their ethnic affiliation, they could be welcomed into the benefits of the Baathist regime. Unsurprisingly, millions opted to retain their ethnic and religious identities, and many traditional Sunnis in particular argued that an Alawite could not legitimately lead a Muslim state since they claimed Alawites were not even a variant of Shi'a Islam.[176] As a result, early on the Assad regime created a vast internal intelligence service that spied on, arrested, tortured, and repressed dissenters.[177]

By the time of the Arab Spring in 2010, the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad had repressed two multi-ethnoreligious democratization movements that even included Alawites, Christians, and Druze; put down violent Kurdish demonstrations; and refocused investment in the industrial sector causing tens of thousands of young, rural farmers stressed by drought to rapidly urbanize despite having few social safety nets.[178] The sudden and dramatic collapse of seemingly untouchable Arab dictatorships emboldened Syrians to press for reforms, but they were met by the Assad regime with live rounds from the security services.[179] By March 2011, the Syrian Civil War started with significant protests in the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

Early in the Syrian Civil War, the balance of threat featured three main perspectives. First, to the majority of the population, the Assad regime was the main threat since nearly everyone had an acquaintance or family member who had been harassed or imprisoned by the regime. Moreover, the lack of regime support during harsh economic conditions made the suffering intolerable and the future under such conditions unfathomable for many of the country's youth. Due to the heavy concentration of Alawites in the government, especially the military and intelligence services, there was an incontrovertible ethno-sectarian dimension to the impending conflict.[180] Second, the Alawites in particular recognized the precariousness of their situation should the regime fall without an organized political transition to follow. The potential for retribution against the Alawite community was tangible given historical examples of a Sunni majority exacting revenge on them. Anger, fear, and calculations of existential threat permeated the regime due to the growing opposition.[181] Third, while the opposition was overwhelmingly multi-ethnoreligious in 2011, the minority Christian and Druze communities recognized that Baathism as a non-religious, civil secular governing structure was essential to their individual and communal opportunity prospects. While imperfect, it at least gave them institutional protections they only achieved half a century earlier. The prospect of a return to a Sunni Muslim-dominated government—especially one influenced by well-organized Sunni Islamist parties, like the Muslim Brotherhood—sent shock waves through the religious minority communities. While many of their youth participated in the protests against the regime, the leaders and elders tended not to invest in the movement in case the alternative appeared worse.[182]

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the regular army of the al-Assad regime, has been the dominant component of the regime's military effort against

the opposition during the civil war, though the Syrian Air Force has been essential to its survival and offensive capacity. Until 2011, the best estimated figure of army personnel was about 200,000. In 2011, the majority of the Syrian armed forces, largely made up of conscripts, were Sunni; most of their leadership were Alawites.[183] To protect the regime, the Alawites dominated the Syrian forces' most elite divisions—the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division, both of which were commanded by Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad.[184] Beyond the SAA and air force, the Assad regime relied heavily on the *shabiha*, an all-Alawite mafia-turned-militia accused of atrocities, and the militia reserve, called the National Defense Force (NDF), to support its campaign.[185]

In July 2011, defectors from the Syrian military announced the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and they began forming and training combat units. Most were SAA Sunni Muslims from rural areas who returned to their families to protect them from the SAA and other security services. The FSA's stated goal was to overthrow the al-Assad regime, and while there was a clear religious division between the Assad government and main rebel forces of the FSA, there was not an Islamist character to the FSA in the first year. The loss of Sunni conscripts and officers dealt a crushing blow to the SAA in particular. With the loss of manpower, the Assad regime could not maintain unit effectiveness, nor assert power across the country. Very quickly the regime had to pull forces back to the crucial Damascus and coastal Mediterranean regions where the Alawite and Christian communities were concentrated.[186]

Despite the civil secular orientation of the FSA and the clear multi-ethnoreligious base of the political opposition, the Assad regime blamed Sunni Jihadis for the uprising. However, by late 2012, through a policy of releasing Sunni Islamists from prison and a flow of Sunni Jihadi foreign fighters traveling to Syria to fight the regime, a true Jihadi threat appeared. At this point the religious minorities had to make a decision whether to remain loyal to the Baathist regime or support an unknown alternative when Jihadis were part of the mix. Most decided to stay loyal to the Assad regime, which helped secure the western coast despite a concerted FSA push to split Damascus from the coast in late 2012.[187] It was at this point that Iran mobilized all its assets to prevent the Assad regime from falling and cutting its main line of support to Lebanese Hezbollah.

The balance of threat in Syria by the time Iran directly intervened with ground forces was thus severe. For all intents and purposes, the central government lost the ability to control the majority of its territory, the population began to arm according to different religious and political visions, the religious minority communities distrusted both the regime and the alternatives, and the Kurds and Arabs in the east generally distrusted one another. As groups armed to protect themselves and/or seize control of local governments, localized security dilemmas ensued across the country. The ascension of Sunni Islamist armed groups by 2013 eliminated the possibility of a civil secular regime other than the Assad regime, and the establishment and battlefield effectiveness of ISIS cemented a three-way security dilemma between the Assad regime and the religious minorities, the mostly Sunni non-Islamist opposition, and the Salafi Jihadi opposition.

Expanding the Proxy Network: Iranian Influence in Syria after 2011

Iran has provided significant support for the survival of the Assad regime throughout the Syrian Civil War. Iranian support includes logistical, technical and financial support; training, and some combat troops.[188] Iranian leaders consider the survival of the Syrian government as vital to their foreign policy objectives.[189] In September 2011, Supreme leader Ali Khamenei clearly indicated that he favored the survival of the Syrian regime.[190] After the Arab Spring uprisings turned into a civil war, there were reports that Tehran sent military support and IRGC training of the NDF in Syria and Iran.[191]

By 2013, Iran cajoled Lebanese Hezbollah to intervene and retake Homs to secure the vital linkage between Damascus and Latakia.[192] This was marked shift in Iran's proxy strategy in Syria and was later bolstered by Russian intervention in September 2015. During the 2011–2017 period, the Syrian Civil War spilled over into Lebanese territory. Both pro- and anti-Assad factions traveled to Lebanon to fight and attack each other; Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL) and the Al-Nusra Front also engaged on the ground with the Lebanese Army. Meanwhile, Tel Aviv officially declared neutrality but considered Hezbollah and pro-Iranian forces in southwestern Syria as a serious threat and, consequently, conducted several airstrikes to counter their efforts.[193]

There are many reports of Iranian intelligence services assisting Syrian security and military forces.[194] Nevertheless, certain reports overestimated

Tehran's impact, and by December 2013 reports claimed that Iran had about 10,000 operatives in Syria.[195] Other observers used lower figures, suggesting that Tehran assisted Damascus with only a limited number of units and personnel, and certainly not thousands as the Syrian opposition claimed in exaggerating the Iranian impact.[196] On the field, Tehran's support has been indirect;[197] for example, Lebanese Hezbollah fighters took direct combat roles starting in 2012.[198] In the summer of 2013, Tehran and its Hezbollah proxy offered significant battlefield aid for the Syrian government forces which made field progress against its opposition.[199]

In addition to official Iranian assistance to the Assad regime, Iran's Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'a proxies, as well as recruits from Pakistan and Afghanistan, have assisted in the transformation of Syrian Shi'a militias into effective fighting units. Some Syrian NDF factions openly acknowledge aid from the IRGC, Hezbollah, and/or Iran's Iraqi Shi'a proxies. While some of these proxy groups advocate the Islamic Republic's doctrine of Vilayet-e Faqih, many are motivated purely by money or the promise of Iranian citizenship. The following section offers a discussion of the nature, role, and activities of the main pro-Syrian Iranian proxies.

Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA)

LAFA is a pro-Assad regime Shi'a militia. LAFA is also known as the al-Abbas Brigade and is connected to the Syrian Republican Guard. The group takes its name after al-Abbas ibn Ali, who was a son of Imam Ali. LAFA has its origins in the 2012 timeframe. During this period, Tehran assisted Damascus in establishing and organizing local and regional militias.[200] LAFA was founded to protect the mosque of Sayyidah Zaynab and other prominent Syrian Shi'a holy sites.[201] The group became well-known when anti-government rebels damaged Shi'a mosques, shrines, and heritage sites during the early years of the war. Subsequently, LAFA cooperated with the Syrian military and fought against the Assad regime's opposition. At its height, the 10,000-strong membership of LAFA was a diverse mix of fighters consisting of native Damascus Shi'a, Iraqi Shi'a, and Shi'a groups from other states.[202] However, Iraqi Shi'a constitute the majority of LAFA's membership.[203] LAFA has mainly conducted military operations near Damascus, but it was also involved in battles to retake Aleppo.[204]

In mid-2013, reports suggested that political disagreements developed in the brigade over finances and leadership leading to a

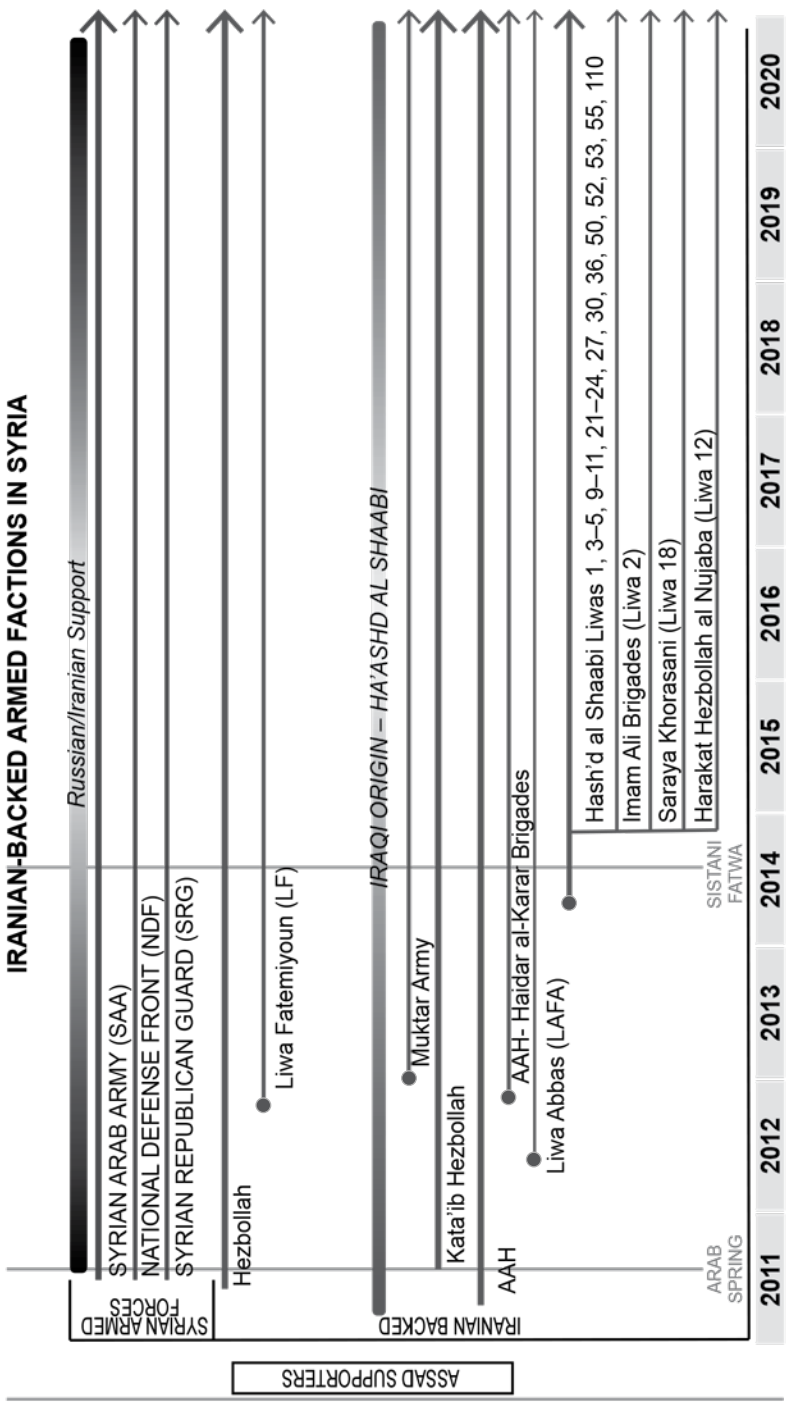

Figure 3. Iranian Proxies in Syria. Source: Authors.

shootout. As a result, in accordance with the Divide-Empower-Control tactic, many non-Syrian members left to form a different group.[205] In May 2014, an IRGC general stated that it had formed "a second Hezbollah in Syria." Regional observers suggest that the general may have referred to numerous militias that compose President Assad's multiethnic and cross-sectarian NDFs. Moreover, it is assumed that he was possibly signaling about a more specific Shi'a-focused plan.[206]

LAFA consists of multinational and multiethnic groups of Shi'a community from around the Middle East. One of the Iraqi volunteers shared his experience of joining LAFA, which was comprised of three major steps. The first step was to register with any Shi'a resistance office, like AAH, the Iraqi Mukhtar Army, or KH. The second step was to participate in a 45-day training camp in Iran to learn how to use specific weapons, like rocket launchers, Kalashnikov rifles, sniper rifles, and/or RPGs. The final step, after passing the training, was a trip to Syria to join the brigade.[207]

Like other factions fighting in Syria, LAFA has shown both strengths and weaknesses. It has been effective in keeping unity among different Shi'a groups against Syrian rebels. It has also succeeded in extending its political and military agendas with the support that it has received from Tehran. In fact, this group has gained legitimacy among all Iranian proxies mainly due to its effective organizational skills. Beyond its Iranian connections, there are strong ties between the group and the Syrian government which has provided the brigade with significant military hardware. As a strategy of consolidating power by creating closer ties between the army and the militia, Damascus made overtures to combine LAFA with the Syrian Republican Guard. [208]

Haidar al-Karar Brigades (HKB)

One of the most prominent Iranian proxies in Syria is composed of splinter factions from Iraq's AAH and LAFA. The offshoot is known as the HKB, but members often work in parallel with AAH.[209] HKB has been under the leadership of Akram al-Kabi, who commands the militia from the Syrian city of Aleppo. In 2014, this faction formed through a split from LAFA. The HKB have followed Hezbollah's successful model in establishing lasting grassroots ties with the Shi'a community and creating meaningful local loyalties among the community members. The clear transition of splintering from the Mahdi Army, to AAH, to the HKB shows the progression of Iranian's influenced divide-empower-control strategy.

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Liwa Fatemiyoun (LF)

Officially established in 2014, Liwa Fatemiyoun (LF) translates to English as "Fatimid Brigade," which is also known as "Fatemiyoun Lashgar" (Corps) in Persian. In Afghanistan, the group is known as Hezbollah Afghanistan. LF is an Afghan Shi'a militia organized by Tehran to fight in Syria against anti-Assad forces. Some Persian media sources suggested that the main body of Fatimid Brigade consists of the Shi'a militia group Muhammad Army, an armed faction during the Soviet-Afghan War, and once used against the Taliban until the demise of that regime following the U.S. invasion.[210] Iranian news agencies have indicated that Liwa Fatemiyoun includes the Abuzar Brigade, which is an all-Afghan Shi'a militia that voluntarily supported Tehran during the Iraqi invasion in the early 1980s, suggesting Iran's use of proxies from Afghanistan goes back several decades.[211] According to Iranian news outlets, due to their extensive experience with fighting in mountainous areas, the Abuzar Brigade was placed in the mountainous areas of Loolan and Navcheh in northwestern Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.[212]

Fatimid Brigade fighters were often utilized to spearhead numerous, important pro-Assad offensives alongside Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese Hezbollah forces. The Fatimid Brigade fighters are commanded by IRGC officers, trained by Tehran or instructed by the Russian Armed Forces, and equipped by the Iranian military.[213] Its troops are mainly recruited from the approximately three million Afghan refugees in Iran, the six million Shi'a Afghan Hazara, and the Afghan refugee community in Syria.[214] The Iranian recruiters for LF are usually members of the IRGC Basij troops.[215] There have been documented cases of LF forces fighting in Homs, Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor and Idlib.[216] It has been reported that the Fatimid Brigade has recruited child soldiers as young as 14-years old from Afghanistan to serve with them in operations.[217]

In terms of recruitment, the material incentives for joining to fight in Syria is reportedly a monthly salary of $300–$500 plus an Iranian residency card for those Afghan fighters who return from Syria. Many of the Afghan fighters had very little understanding about why they were fighting and the ultimate goals of the campaign.[218] Some reports suggest members of the LF

had to be bribed or coerced or take part in the fighting, and one report even suggested Iran had given some fighters the option of prison, deportation, or service in Syria.[219] There was little evidence the Afghan fighters intended to promote Iranian ideology or the tenets of Vilayet-e Faqih.

In terms of training, Afghan fighters were provided with two-to-four weeks of basic infantry training conducted by IRGC officers in one of the nine Iranian training camps recognized by the American intelligence community. Most fighters are used as simple infantry, not specialized forces, but some receive more training so they can operate in support of tank crews.[220] Reports suggest the better trained LF members have operated a variety of Russian-made heavy weapons, including field artillery pieces, armored personal carriers, anti-tank missiles, and on multiple occasions, the LF fighters have been seen using sophisticated Russian T-90 tanks.[221] Various reports suggested that LF had 10,000 to 20,000 soldiers by late 2017.[222]

The Fatimid Brigade, as one of the largest pro-government militias in Syria, has contributed significantly in aiding Syrian forces in the battle against anti-Assad forces. LF had 2,000 killed and 8,000 wounded in combat in Syria since its establishment, according to one of its officials.[223] In November 2017, Iran began to downsize Fatimid Brigade after it declared victory against ISIL.[224] The first demobilized groups were the oldest and youngest soldiers, along with those who had shown behavioral problems, such as insubordination and/or indiscipline. The demobilized fighters were rewarded by returning to their families in Iran.[225]

Liwa Zainabiyoun

Liwa Zainabiyoun is comprised of Pakistani Shi'a who come primarily from the Kurrum region of Pakistan and the Baluch regions of Pakistan and Iran.[226] The unit's name refers to the revered Shi'a Shrine of Zainab in Damascus, which was attacked by ISIS fighters in 2013.[227] Some reports indicate that the unit emerged out of Liwa Fatemiyoun as larger numbers of Pakistani Shi'a steadily joined the fight. Exact numbers of the unit are unknown, but approximated at around 2,000.[228] Official Iranian sources, for their part, claim that 2,000 Liwa Zainabiyoun personnel have been killed in the fighting and another 8,000 injured, and that the force can recruit and sustain around 5,000 personnel when needed.[229] While the unit was most commonly used around Damascus, Aleppo, and Idlib, its forces have also been suggested in Abu Kamal and Dar'a.[230] While no longer serving as frontline infantry,

these fighters provide support to Syrian offensives when necessary, and they secure Iran's gains along the southern land bridge and key urban areas. [231] More importantly, the Liwa Zainabiyoun represents another example of Iran outsourcing the costs of its forward deterrence strategy to proxy groups in order to minimize the political fallout with its own population.

Assessing Divide-Empower-Control and Its Vulnerabilities in Syria

With the Syrian population containing too few indigenous Shi'a and the Alawite regime clinging to power based on its value to the Druze and Christian communities, it is unlikely that Iran will be able to effectively implement an organic Divide-Empower-Control strategy in Syria. Instead, it appears poised to retain influence in Syria based on imported Shi'a populations that will rely on Iran for support in perpetuity since they lack bases of social support among the Syrian population. With these proxies Iran will likely be able to maintain a delegation strategy in the sponsor-sponsored relationship. The Shi'a Afghan and Pakistani proxies being settled along key ground lines of communication between the Iraqi and Lebanese borders will enable Iran to assert influence across key terrain irrespective of what happens with the Assad regime. Should Syria fragment, its proxies in different regions of the country will continue to offer it placement, and, when necessary, armed support. However, these proxies could over time become a source of social friction that, under future conflict scenarios, could be driven out of key communities if the surrounding populations gain sufficient military capability and external support.[232] In the meantime, Iran will continue to support the settled proxies and influence the border areas through Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Hash'd al Shaabi in Iraq.

Conclusion

There are two significant trend lines inside the majority of the Iranian-backed armed factions in Syria. First, the Iranian-backed factions have consistently maintained their distinct group identities; and second, they have remained outside the Syrian command and control structure even while serving in mainline SAA units. Instead of a partnership, Iran seeks to transform Syria into a client state. Without Iran's proxies and IRGC support, Assad could not remain in power. By keeping the proxies in place, Iran gains leverage with the Assad regime and controls ground lines of communication to the

Mediterranean Sea. Without the Assad regime's direct support, however, Iran's main proxies would likely require significant military support to maintain their position along key ground lines of communication to Lebanon. For those reasons, Iran's influence in Syria is more fraught than many people realize.

Type of Shi'a Identity

The Alawite-based regime, while officially falling under the Shi'a branch of Islam, is part of a highly insular community that rose to power based on a platform of secular Arab nationalism. Its survival is based not on reinforcing the religious identity, but reaching out and consolidating support among the Christian, Druze, and atheist communities. While there are Twelver Shi'a in Syria, their numbers are small and cannot generate sufficient mass to achieve a political effect.

Degree of Similarity in Religious Interpretation of Shi'a Theology

Alawites have a very particular interpretation of Islam and incorporate practices that the Iranian regime would otherwise consider heretical. The Alawite Assad regime therefore has no interest in supporting the concept of Vilayet-e Faqih despite the incredible degree of Iranian support it has received.

High Balance of Threat among Proxies

For close to a decade Syria has epitomized the concept of an internal security dilemma among armed factions. The three dimensions of threat continue with a repressive regime, Sunni Jihadis, and Kurdish separatists each fighting one another and with major powers providing support to their aligned proxies.

Degree of Active Conflict

Although the conflict dynamics clearly favor the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia at this time, there is still active conflict in three sectors of the country and indicators of ISIS persisting and/or preparing for a future resurgence. Currently there is conflict between:

- Sunni Jihadis backed by Turkey and the Assad regime on one front and Kurdish separatists on a second front;
- Kurdish separatists and ISIS;
- The Assad regime and Kurdish separatists; and
- The Assad regime and ISIS.

These conflicts appear to be set to last for another year at least, which will provide reason for proxy dynamics in Syria to continue and benefit Iran's interests.

Strength of Host Country Government Relative to Other Domestic Actors/Militias

While the government has officially restored control over the majority of the remaining Syrian population, it does so only with the backing of Iranian-backed, armed proxy groups, the threat of Russian air power and mercenaries, and the Assad regime's security services. So long as the Sunni Jihadis and Kurdish separatists continue receiving external support, they will continue to be able to resist the Assad regime. Should this support end, then the Assad regime appears poised to recapture the entire country. However, the Assad regime is severely weakened from this experience, and it will likely require the continued support of Iranian patronage and proxy support to repress future uprisings.

Assessment

Despite Iran's successes in Syria, the fact that the factions have maintained their distinct group identities may muddle the Assad regime's attempts to disband local groups with regional identities and sympathies. In this regard, Damascus' strategy is in conflict with the strategy of Iran, which has continuously aimed to establish a network of groups loyal to Iran. Meanwhile, Iran's biggest vulnerabilities are that they are relying on non-indigenous personnel to man their proxies, and they are aligned with an unpopular, minority regime with extremely different views on theology. It can be deduced that while Syria and Iran are enjoying the benefits of their alliance today, the regime in Damascus could eventually tire of Tehran's militarized interference and start to balance against the proxy groups if their common enemy is defeated. If this were to happen, Iran would have little support from the Syrian population, relying only on the non-indigenous proxy forces.

Looking at the Syrian conflict from a Principal-Agent perspective, as Assad gains stability his need for Iranian support will wane, yet Iranian policymakers need Syria to remain a viable passageway to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea. With the Assad regime, Iran will likely be able to adopt an intervention strategy in the sponsor-sponsored relationship for a period of time, but this could weaken if the Assad regime is able to generate greater

independence through the support of a second sponsor, such as Russia. Meanwhile, the non-indigenous population of Hezbollah and Afghan/Pakistani fighters are likely to ally with Iran to keep a foothold in the country, which will enable Iran to retain its delegation strategy through these proxies. Moving forward, Iran's leverage in Syria will likely be through the proxy forces they have settled in the country. If Iran is no longer able to support those proxy forces, their presence in the country will diminish.

Iran's proxy strategy in Syria also demonstrates its Divide-Empower-Control approach to proxy development, but in a different way from Iraq. With too few indigenous Shi'a, Iran imported personnel from other proxies and continuously expanded its network as either organizational politics or sheer numbers permitted. Importantly, the use of foreign Shi'a as proxies in Syria indicates a broader strategy of using them as a kind of foreign legion for important geostrategic initiatives. Already there are reports of employing LF in Yemen, though perhaps in small numbers. Still, this strategy could be replicated in other places leading to new proxies in the future as Iran seeks to minimize pressure on its own domestic population.

Chapter 4. Iranian Proxies in Yemen

> When Dhu al-Qarnayn opened up Bab al-Mandab, all the lands were drowned, and their high lands became islands in the sea.
> - Ibn al-Mujawir[233]

Yemen presents a complex and ever-changing security situation with one of the ripest environments prone to violence in the Middle East. Its recent political history consists of externally backed militant groups, multiple civil wars and armed resistance, tribal powers with access to modern weapons, historical enmity between the north and south, and the steady degradation of a strongman's political coalition. Government corruption, political and military defections, and the shifting power dynamics among local elites sustained Yemen's highly destructive environment, where each actor employed a balance-of-threat strategy to survive. Adding to the complex security dynamic, to Western eyes Yemen appears on the surface to have a growing sectarian fault line between its Sunni and Shi'a populations. The chaos in Yemen provides Iran and its neighboring geopolitical rival, Sunni Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, a reason to conduct a regional proxy conflict.

Before analyzing the nature, scope, and impact of Iran's intervention in Yemen, it is important to highlight the effect of strategic factors that set the scene for the current complex interactions among a number of local, regional, and global players. In this regard, the chapter begins by reviewing the geopolitical, religious, and historical factors that set the country's strategic posture. Next, it discusses the political and military issues that set the parameters for the operation of both local and foreign forces. Then, the chapter examines the ideological factors and behavior of the proxies towards Yemen's minorities. It concludes with an assessment of the prospects for Iran to implement a Divide-Empower-Control strategy in Yemen.

Ethno-Religious Context and the Iranian Proxy Opportunity Structure

Yemen is located in the southwestern-most part of the Arabian Peninsula where the land meets three bodies of water: the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden.[234] Yemen's neighbors are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the north and the Sultanate of Oman to the east. Yemen's climate is mostly

arid or semi-arid land where it is difficult to produce agricultural products and sustain a growing population. Yemen straddles one of the most active shipping lanes on the globe with its strategic location astride the Bab al-Mandab Strait. At its narrowest point, the country is less than 20 miles from Djibouti and Eritrea on the Horn of Africa. The western side of the Strait of Bab Al-Mandab provides access to the African continent, a significant military and economic strategic advantage since ancient times. Adding to its strategic value are several islands in both the Red Sea (Hanish Islands, Kamaran, and Perim) and in the Arabian Sea (archipelago of Socotra).[235] The latter is the largest of the Yemeni islands, many of which are volcanic. Yemen is a transcontinental country, since some of its islands are in Asia, but Socotra lies in Africa east of Somalia.[236] Geographically, Yemen is divided into four major regions: the coastal plains in the far west, western highlands, eastern highlands, and an Empty Quarter (Rub' al Khali) to the Far East.

In the modern era, the Yemeni (northern) Kingdom in Sana'a secured independence from the Ottomans in 1918 at the end of World War I. By 1962, the kingdom, led by the centuries-old Zaydi Shi'a imamate, underwent a regime change to become the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). In 1967, the British withdrew from a protectorate area around the port city of Aden after nearly 140 years of colonization. Its inhabitants subsequently adopted a Marxist ideology, and by 1970 changed the country's official name to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). This led to a mass exodus of Yemenis from the south to the north, which contributed to roughly 20 years of hostility between the two ideologically divided states. In 1990, however, the two Yemeni states unified as the Republic of Yemen under the leadership of the YAR's President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In 1994, a southern secessionist movement was defeated by Saleh and his northern allies, and in 2000 Yemen officially accepted an agreement with Saudi Arabia, in the latter's favor, to demarcate their common border after decades of contention over key provinces.[237]

From a sociocultural perspective, U.S. government estimates show Yemen to be almost entirely Muslim, with approximately 65 percent of Yemen's population being Sunni and the other 35 percent being Shi'a.[238] Other estimates, however, suggest Yemen's Shi'a and Sunni populations are roughly equal. A study by Columbia University put Yemen's Sunnis at 56 percent and Yemen's Shi'a at 43 percent.[239] Historically, Yemen's Shi'a population was considered the minority faith, though the Shi'a Zaydi led an imamate that endured for

over 1,000 years until the 1962 political transformation.[240] Yemen's Sunni population largely follows the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence, which also dominates the Horn of Africa and Indonesia. Historically, the Zaydi and Shafi'i populations have enjoyed mostly harmonious relations, and since the 1970s the two communities have seen a rise in the number of marriages between members of the sects.[241]

There are also communities of Maliki and Hanbali believers whose sects are prevalent in North Africa and Saudi Arabia, respectively. The introduction of the Wahhabi variant of Hanbali Islam in recent decades has been a purposeful project of Saudi Arabia. In particular, the Saudis have given significant funding to religious and educational institutions in primarily the northern, Zaydi regions of Yemen.[242] Furthermore, elements within the Saleh regime promoted Wahhabism and welcomed Mujahedeen fighters who fought in Afghanistan and returned after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union.[243] These two factors have given Sunni Jihadi groups, like al-Qaeda and ISIS, some limited opportunity to generate local support, but for the most part Yemen is an ally with them for local and tribal political reasons, not ideological or religious ones.[244]

While the overwhelming majority of Shi'a Muslims in Yemen are Zaydi, there are also Yemeni Shi'a that follow the Ismaili and Twelver schools of Shi'a jurisprudence, which express a wide ideological departure from the Zaydi teachings, most notably in the infallibility of the imamate that passes from father to son.[245] Because of the political history, the size of the Zaydi community has always been an important factor in how the Yemeni state is composed.[246] Importantly, the Zaydi diverge significantly from the Iran's belief system. Zaydis reject the hereditary imamate, the concept of the hidden Mahdi, and Vilayet-e Faqih. Neither do they subscribe to the institution and the eminence of the ayatollahs as advocated by the Iranian regime.[247]

Geographically, Yemen's Sunnis are primarily located in the southern and southeastern regions of the country associated with the formerly Marxist PDRY. Yemen's Shi'a Zaydis are largely in the country's northwestern territories in what was the Yemen Arab Republic, and mixed communities are generally found in the bigger metropolitan areas, like Sana'a and Aden. While there is a general geographic correlation with religion, some tribes have both Sunni and Shi'a members, a fact that makes analysis based solely on Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict highly problematic. There are also are some non-Muslim groups in Yemen, including Christians, Baha'is, Jews, Hindus,

and other religious minorities. Official estimates vary, but in total these faiths represent less than 1 percent of the total population.

Table 6. Yemen's Religious Sects. Source: Europa Publications, *Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa*; Mohammad Izady, "Yemen: Ethno-Religious Composition," Columbia University; U.S. State Department, "2018 Report on International Religion Freedom."

Yemen's Religious Sects					
SECT	**PERCENT OF YEMEN'S POPULATION**	**TOTAL POPULATION**	**YEMEN'S PERCENT OF SECT'S GLOBAL POPULATION**	**AREA IN YEMEN**	**OUTSIDE YEMEN**
SUNNI	50–60%	~15–22 million	1–1.5%		
Shafi'i	50–56%	~15 million	1%	South/ Southeast Yemen	Horn of Africa; Indonesia
Hanbali	<0.05%	<5000	<1%	South/ Southeast Yemen	Saudi Arabia
Maliki	<0.05%	<5001	<1%	South/ Coastal Yemen	North Africa
SHI'A	40–50%	~10–15 million	5–10%		
Zaydi	30–45%	~10 million	90–99%	North Yemen	
Ismali	1–3%	1 million	6–7%	North Yemen, Sana'a	Central and South Asia
Twelver	<1%	<200,000	<1%	North Yemen	Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Lebanon
OTHERS	<1%	<200,000	<1%		
Christian	<0.05%	4000	<1%	North Yemen, Aden	Western Europe, North America
Hindus	<1%	100–150,000	<1%	Migrant Work Communities	Asia, India
Baha'i	<0.05%	UNK	<1%	North Yemen, Sana'a	Iran, Israel, Global
Jewish	<0.05%	<250	<1%	Sana'a	North America, Israel

As with Syria, before the advent of open hostilities Iran had limited opportunity for generating long-term proxy support from the indigenous Shi'a Yemeni population. The theological distinctions between Yemeni Zaydi (Fiver) Shi'ism and Iranian Twelver Vilayet-e Faqih Shi'ism are profound. Some scholars assess that Zaydi Shi'ism has more in common with Sunni Islam than Iran's version of Twelver Shi'ism.[248] Indeed, many in the Zaydi community have feared the loss of identity and practice to expanding Sunni traditions and, more perilously, the introduction of Wahhabi Sunnism since the 1990s.[249] Although the U.S. and its Gulf allies view the conflict through the political prisms of Sunni versus Shi'a and the West versus Iran,[250] the Houthi Movement (Ansar Allah) and Iran have few overlapping interests. The Houthi Movement is predominantly a Yemeni political phenomenon that has leveraged tribal politics, business concerns, elite interests, and influencing different factions more than Shi'ism to gain support, and its ascension is part of a larger story of political conflict within a fragmented state.[251] With an ethnic Persian government, Iran does not have long-standing ties with the Arab Yemeni population or its political establishment.[252]

From a Principal-Agent perspective, the ethnoreligious foundation for developing the Houthis into a solid proxy are not good for Iran. So long as there is active conflict in Yemen, Iranian weapons and training provide value to the Houthis. Under conditions of peace, the Houthi Movement as a sponsored agent could decide to defect from the relationship in significant ways as domestic and international politics provide new alternatives. More critically, the Houthi Movement has been able to attract a degree of support from a population politically frustrated with the elite-run regime officially recognized by the international community. In a context where conflict abates, schisms within the Zaydi community and among other disaffected populations could surface to mitigate the impact of the Houthi Movement and diminish Iranian influence.

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The Balance of Threat in Yemeni Politics

While there are many stressors and tensions in Yemeni society, there are five critical threats relevant for the intervention of Iran. First and with respect to the Houthi Movement, there has been a decades-long perception among the Zaydi that the belief system and identity have been under attack by both the secular state and encroaching Wahhabi proselytizing. Second, as a neo-patrimonial regime, President Saleh always viewed regime maintenance as a primary objective, and there were numerous social movement threats to his coalition since 2000. Third, the provinces affiliated with the former-PDRY in the south long felt marginalized by the Saleh regime and now view the northern, Zaydi Houthi Movement as an encroachment on their resources and society. They have consequently reanimated calls for independence from Yemen through the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Fourth, the youth of Yemen have grievances that diverge from both the Houthi Movement, the STC, and the former regime elites. Their issues, social mass, and ability to draw adherents across all social strata were essential to toppling the Saleh regime. Finally, and related to all the above, Saudi Arabia recognizes Yemen to be a potential threat vector for a variety of reasons and has steadily engaged both the government and religious sectors for decades. The gains made by both democratic activists and the Houthi Movement have presented particular threats to the Saudi government.

Threat to Zaydi Identity

The regime change from the Zaydi imamate under the Yemeni Kingdom to the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962 was due in large part to the perception of the imamate's poor record on governance and human rights. Many Zaydis agreed with the need for this transition and helped it to occur institutionally and politically. In reaction to the religious foundation of the previous regime, the YAR adopted a secular government platform and set out to create a unified Muslim identity that reconciled the differences between Zaydi and Shafi'i Islam while elevating the esteem for the state. In effect, Shi'a Zaydi Islam was to be neutralized in an attempt to prevent a counterrevolution from occurring in the future.[253]

Upon his assumption of the presidency in 1979, Ali Abdullah Saleh began ruling the YAR through a neo-patrimonial system of spoils given his background as a secular, non-ideological military officer with a Zaydi heritage;

anyone with influence could benefit from his rule so long as they worked to secure the regime.[254] His main political concern was preventing a Zaydi movement from forming, and to secure his regime he employed a combination of YAR nationalism, promoting Wahhabi and Salafi Islamic education and organizations, and repressing Zaydi movements.[255]

The political importance and physical presence of Wahhabi and Salafi Islam increased significantly after the unification of the YAR and PDRY in 1990. As president of the unified Yemen, Saleh was now presented with a further challenge of expanding the patronage of the state to southern constituencies. His main strategy was to divide and rule, which meant generating constituencies in as many locations and across as many tribes or sociocultural factors as possible. In part to mitigate the influence of the formerly communist south, Saleh curried favor with Sunni tribes, which in some cases meant welcoming back Jihadis from Afghanistan and expanding their influence in northern Zaydi regions. When the south rebelled against Saleh in 1994, the Wahhabi and Salafi forces allied with the regime helped him defeat the insurgency and earned a place in the regime's system of spoils.[256]

By the early 1990s, many Zaydis came to see the Yemeni government as openly hostile to their identity and religious practices, and the incorporation of Wahhabi and Salafi elements into Saleh's political coalition indicated future problems ahead. Consequently, a "Zaydi awakening" developed shortly after unification when Saleh opened up the political space for free speech, civil society movements, and new political parties.[257] After decades of political marginalization and the encroaching influence of extremist Sunni elements in their historical heartlands, a number of Zaydi clerics and intellectuals sought to reverse the "intellectual defeat" of their Islamic school of jurisprudence and practice.[258] Two developments in particular were essential to a Zaydi Shi'a revival in Yemen during this period: a social movement called Shabab al-Moumineen (SAM/Believing Youth) and a political party named Hizb al-Haqq.

The SAM was founded to revive Zaydi Shi'ism by teaching the youth about Zaydi history, philosophy, and practice in the face of aggressive Wahhabi and Salafi encroachment in Saad'a, a historically important Zaydi region contiguous to Saudi Arabia. Students from Saudi and government-financed institutions defaced Zaydi mosques and tombs in Saad'a during the early 1990s.[259] Saad'a was also home to a prominent Zaydi scholarly family, and the patriarch, Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, decided to organize his

community to reverse the trend along with other prominent Zaydi leaders.[260] SAM focused on educational activities, such as study circles, promoting and celebrating Zaydi festivals, and distributing Zaydi religious texts. While the youth were the main focus, SAM reached across generations and tribes.[261]

To complement the youth-oriented social movement, al-Houthi also helped form Hizb al-Haqq, a political party designed to influence the new, unified Yemeni government under President Saleh.[262] While Hizb al-Haqq was predominantly Zaydi, membership in the early years did include Sunnis, such as Shafi'is and Hanafis from the southern provinces of Yemen who were sympathetic to Zaydi concerns about encroaching Hanbali doctrine.[263] Hizb al-Haqq at the time of its founding did not seek the restoration of the Zaydi imamate; rather, its purpose was to create a modern Zaydi Shi'ism consistent with a republican system.[264] For a period Saleh tolerated the SAM and Hizb al-Haqq as a means of balancing out growing Wahhabi and Salafi influence in the north and even invited al-Houthi to join his party from 1993–1997.[265]

By the end of the 1990s, however, Hizb al-Haqq had become an opposition party to President Saleh as he started to economically marginalize the Zaydi in the north while expanding his relationship with Sunni-based constituencies and elites. After the 9/11 attacks, President Saleh sided with the United States in the War on Terror, a position al-Houthi in particular found objectionable, and Saleh's counterterrorism initiatives marked a second phase of the al-Houthi movement when he became more overtly anti-regime.[266] At that point, a political split occurred within the Zaydi community as many urban Zaydi sought political and economic reforms while the SAM transformed into the armed Houthi Movement militia.[267] The conflict between al-Houthi and Saleh intensified after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the Zaydi loyal to al-Houthi adopted anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli slogans as part of a broader anti-regime narrative. Some observers assess the SAM adopted this language to appeal for tactical purposes to a broader segment of Yemeni society beyond the northern Zaydis. Others assert that Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi and a number of lieutenants, such as Mohammed Salem Azzan and Abdul-Karim Jadban, had developed strong ideological and personal relationships with Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah while they lived abroad.[268]

By June 2004, Saleh believed al-Houthi's movement had become too influential in the north due to his tribal relationships, so he ordered his military to capture or kill him. In September 2004, al-Houthi was killed by government forces, which precipitated the full scale Houthi Movement

insurgency that now appears ascendant.[269] In response to a resilient armed Houthi Movement, Saleh employed Salafi fighters alongside his military and, to gain support from both the United States and Saudi Arabia, labeled it an Iranian-backed insurgency designed to reestablish the Zaydi Shi'a imamate.[270]

At the time of SAM's founding, the idea of an imamate was not a political objective, but recent scholarship suggests such a transition might be occurring after sixteen years of conflict.[271] Although there has been a clear basis of the Houthi Movement in Zaydi identity and religious concerns, its military and political success have been due in large measure to its ability to leverage widespread discontent with the Yemeni government under President Saleh and now President Hadi in the context of the tribal nature of Yemeni politics. For example, the Houthi were able to seize the capitol, Sana'a, due to the military assistance of former-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who defected from President Hadi to support the Houthis in a bid to weaken three of his tribal rivals.[272]

Given recent experience with central government and Wahhabi and Salafi expansionism in Zaydi areas with government support, the religious Zaydi are likely to perceive a government not under their control as a threat.[273] As Zweiri concludes

> The military attacks by Ali Abdallah Salih's former regime ironically have contributed significantly to the growth and spread of the Houthi movement. Ten years ago, the Houthis did not have strong social support from other tribes, and their legitimacy among many Zaydis was minimal; however, when the former regime killed Husayn Badr al-Din Al-Houthi in 2004, the situation started to change. Since then, the government has unleashed its media inspired accusations against all the Zaydis rather than focusing on the Houthis alone, who constituted a small number at that time. Furthermore, the government started to fight the Houthis with its army and by creating tribal militias (Hammidaddin, 2014). The fight did not only involve those who were supporting Houthis and the government forces, but it involved hundreds of tribesmen who were now seeking revenge. Consequently, this unrest started to be shaped as a religious and a tribal war rather than a kind of political instability.[274]

The threat to Zaydi Shi'ism has both internal and external sponsors, and the newfound political and military ascendance will require support to sustain given the shattered foundation of Yemen's economic and political infrastructure.

Threat to Regime

As mentioned previously, the Saleh regime itself persistently engaged in balance of threat politics within the regime. Indeed, observers almost universally describe the Saleh regime as proactive in coopting elements of nearly every constituency group in Yemeni politics in order to divide and rule through the patronage of the state. Underneath the veneer of the democratic system President Saleh instituted upon the unification of the YAR and PDRY in 1990, his rule was effectively authoritarian in nature with layers of tribal, political, and business elites tied to the regime.[275] His strategy was to coopt the Bakil and Hashid tribal confederations due to their difficult history with the former Zaydi imamate while filling most of the critical security positions with members of his Sanhan tribe.[276] At the same time Saleh attempted to marginalize the socio-economic power of the tribes and regions most affiliated with the imamate, which, not coincidentally, emanated from Saad'a Province.[277]

Saleh's patronage system was carried out through the General People's Congress (GPC), Saleh's non-ideological political party.[278] Since his rise to power in 1979, Saleh sought to coup-proof his YAR regime by making Zaydi activists "bad Zaydis" and promoting Yemeni nationalists who subordinated their Zaydi identity as "good Yemenis."[279] "Good Zaydis" were included in the GPC, and Saleh mitigated the influence of "bad Zaydis" by coopting key northern elites, such as Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussain al-Ahmar, the influential Hashid confederation's highest-ranking tribal leader, who served in government and became a paramount Yemeni business leader. [280] Saleh also placed a cousin, Ali Mohsen, in command of the First Armored Division to protect the regime, and he supplied Mohsen with the best equipment and training he could muster.[281]

The Saleh-Ahmar-Mohsen coalition through the GPC persisted effectively for over two decades. During the 1990s, Sheikh Abdullah Ahmar developed close relations with Wahhabi and Salafi groups, including returning mujahedeen from Afghanistan, and later formed a Sunni Islamist party, Islah, along with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni factions with Saleh's

blessing in order to cultivate support in the newly unified southern provinces of Yemen.[282] The rise of Islah created two problems: first, the religious Zaydi perception of threat intensified, and second, a powerful, militarily experienced bloc formed under the influence of Sheikh Ahmar. By the early 2000s, Saleh realized the new threat to the regime and began to marginalize the Ahmars by introducing new economic competition in key emerging industries.[283]

The threat to Saleh's regime coalesced throughout the early-2000s when he began preparing his son, Ahmed Ali, as his successor, which required curtailing the resources and influence of the Ahmars and Ali Mohsen. To weaken Mohsen, Saleh sent the First Armored Division to fight the Houthi Movement in 2004, and Mohsen employed Salafi fighters that first contributed to his success the 1994 war over southern secession.[284] At this point the lines of threat to the regime were fixed. The Houthi Movement viewed the government as a perpetual threat, Ahmar and Mohsen became more tightly linked to Islah and Salafi fighters, and Saleh saw threats from Saad'a, Ahmar, and Mohsen.[285]

None of Saleh's gambits were successful in the medium term, and by 2007 Saleh's coalition frayed with the consequences to Saleh's inner circle becoming fully apparent by the time the Arab Spring reached Yemen in 2011. With the Houthi Movement persisting despite frequent armed clashes and a new youth movement swarming the main urban centers, the Ahmar family, Mohsen, and Islah mobilized against Saleh.[286] This threat to the regime was a persistent theme contributing to Saleh labelling his enemies terrorists or proxies of Iran in order to curry favor with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia even though they were dubious of the claims.[287]

Importantly, the internal threat to the regime transcends the Saleh regime. Upon the transition to the internationally-recognized Hadi regime in 2012, the new president immediately began replacing Saleh's allies with his own, which to keep international backing meant marginalizing the networks associated with Saleh, the Ahmars, and Mohsen.[288] Although President Hadi had invited the Houthi Movement to join the new government given its military strength, it quickly began fighting with the Sunni Islamist Islah Party, which weakened the transition process. Saleh's allies watched as President Hadi's government steadily weakened through infighting. In the end, Saleh and his allies supported the Houthi Movement as it seized the

capitol of Sana'a, thus demonstrating the degree to which regime control is a persistent, internal threat. [289]

Threat to Southern Interests

The southern provinces from the PDRY reluctantly unified with the YAR under President Saleh in large measure due to the end of the Cold War and loss of the Soviet Union's patronage. With few options to sustain the country in the new world order, the socialist government and military leaders agreed to integrate in exchange for inclusion in the Saleh's patronage structure. By 1994, just four years after unification, southern grievances began coalescing around three key themes. First, although Yemen's main oil reserves were found in southern territories, the wealth from the extraction industries were overwhelmingly concentrated in hands of northern elites. Second, the patronage expected from participating in Saleh's GPC never materialized to the degree necessary to satisfy southern interests, especially in light of the unequal distribution of oil wealth. And third, decades of socialism under the PDRY had diminished the cohesiveness of the tribal structure, and Saleh's reliance on elites with a Zaydi heritage created coherent political power in a way the mainly Shafi'i south could no longer muster.[290]

In response, the southern provinces led by secular socialists tried to secede from the new state, but were defeated by Saleh, Mohsen, and the newly returned Salafi fighters. Saleh then removed southern bureaucrats and military leaders at scale and enacted policies to undermine the socio-economic powerbase of southern elites.[291] By 2007, southern military leaders and elites created the Hiraak political party to reclaim their lost assets and government benefits, but there were also nascent calls for secession once again, especially in light of Saleh's struggles with the Houthi Movement. Hiraak expanded its political base to include a broader range of southern grievances between 2007 and 2012 such that, by the time of Saleh's ouster in 2012, it had sufficient social support to potentially press for secession once again.[292] However, none of the main players in Saleh's transition—the northern elites who benefitted from southern resource wealth, the international backers of the transition, nor President Hadi—had any intention of allowing the southern provinces to secede given their critically important oil and water resources.[293]

Three events between 2012 and 2017 resulted in the southern provinces overtly seeking independence in 2017 through the formation of the STC. First, the Hadi regime with the backing of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),

UN, and more importantly Saudi Arabia, sponsored a National Dialogue Council (NDC) to create a unity government while meeting Houthi and southern grievances. Although federalism was agreed to in principle by all the parties, the form proved a harder concern. In the end, the Hadi regime unilaterally pushed through a design to which both the Houthis and Hiraak objected resulting in the Houthis launching an attack on and seizing the capitol in 2014 with Saleh's assistance.[294] Having been captured in his palace, President Hadi resigned and later escaped to Aden where he rescinded his resignation and reconstituted his government. Once again, the Houthis marched on and seized Aden, the main southern urban center. To Hiraak and many southern Yemenis, the Zaydi Houthi capture of Aden appeared like yet another northern attack, which united southern militias and tribes in fighting alongside Hadi's forces backed by Saudi Arabia and the GCC.[295]

Second, southern elites and militias expected support from the Hadi regime after retaking Aden, but were frustrated at the lack of resources provided and influence gained.[296] Third, with Aden under Houthi control and many key Hadi-regime officials based out of Riyadh, local forces effectively filled the governance gap, especially after they repelled the Houthis and recaptured areas under al-Qaeda control. Despite these successes, the Hadi government often did not prioritize southern interests.[297] The announcement of the STC, therefore, represented decades-long southern perceptions of threat emanating from central governments divorced from their interests. In the case of President Saleh, it was a northern patronage network. In the case of President Hadi, it was an international coalition whose interests diverged from local ones. In the case of the Houthis, it was a northern Zaydi Shi'a movement whose religious, cultural, and political allegiance diverged significantly from southern ones.[298]

Threat to Youth Futures

Below the surface and often hidden by the militarized disputes, Yemen's youth began to suffer from a lack of opportunity in Yemen's job market due to the concentration of benefits in Saleh's GPC structure. Some estimates place youth unemployment at approximately 40 percent, with female unemployment significantly higher.[299] With access to the internet and global communication, Yemeni youth developed a stronger foundation in the language of human rights, and their expectations crossed regional, tribal, and religious demographics. Consequently, the existing political parties, including the

Houthi Movement, Hiraak, and Islah by the nature of their constituencies could not adequately represent their interests.[300] In fact, many in the youth movement did not want their participation due to the fear of being coopted by the traditional elite.[301]

Their interests and demands were given international backing as a consequence of the Arab Spring wave that affected authoritarian regimes across the region. Yemeni youth quickly generated social mass across the country as a result of the universal grievances and threats. By mobilizing through non-traditional means in numerous important urban centers, Yemeni youth were able to pressure the regime in ways that could not be placated through the patronage network.[302] More importantly, by 2011 Saleh's coalition with the Ahmars and Mohsen had already frayed to the point they were ready for a change. Hence, Mohsen, as mentioned previously, used his First Armored Division to protect the protestors in Sana'a instead of clamping down on them. Ultimately, the GCC led by Saudi Arabia was able to use the youth protest movement to urge Saleh to agree to hand over the regime to Vice President Hadi, but this resulted in a reshuffling of the elite power structures more than a change to meet youth demands. To this point, Yemeni youth still struggle to have their issues met as the conflict empowers established parties and traditional elites.[303]

Threat to Saudi Arabia

To Saudi Arabia, Yemen had for decades been an area of concern due to the secular socialism of the PDRY and the Zaydi history in the YAR. Its patronage of Wahhabi institutions in Zaydi areas was specifically designed to increase Saudi cultural and political influence along its southwestern border. The SAM and the Houthi Movement presented a clear challenge to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy objective of consolidating its influence in the area.[304] Following 2004, the Houthi Movement transformed into a potential area of Shi'a instability, a threat to which Saudi Arabia was especially sensitive following Iran's spreading influence in Iraq along its northeastern border. The prospect of restive Shi'a populations in two neighbors was a threat with national security implications. Saudi Arabia consequently supported the Saleh regime in its fight against the Houthi Movement with direct military support by 2009.[305]

In addition to the geopolitical contest with Iran, Saudi Arabia had other concerns. For instance, although Saudi Arabia had initially supported the

advancement of the Islah party and by extension the Muslim Brotherhood, the Brotherhood's role in the ouster of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak caused it to shift support away from the Ahmar family and the party. Indeed, the Saudi Ministry of Interior designated the Islah party (and the Houthi Movement as well) a terrorist organization in 2014, which created problems for President Hadi's coalition options later on as the Ahmars turned to Salafi fighters and tribal support to combat the Houthis.[306] Additionally, their shared 1,800 kilometer border is permeable due to tribal connections, and smugglers frequently send contraband through Saudi Arabia. Finally, the demarcation of the border with Yemen assumed that Saudi Arabia would be able to influence the Yemeni central government in perpetuity, but demands for decentralization and the expansion of Houthi influence through tribal connections combined to diminish its ability to coherently address this geostrategic area.[307] In combination with a fear of Iranian support to the Houthis, Saudi Arabia viewed the Yemen crisis as a key foreign policy crisis requiring its direct involvement.[308]

The Realization of the Security Dilemma in 2011-2014

The balance of threat within Yemen in 2011 was consequently severe at the time the Saleh regime came under stress from the Arab Spring. With a northern Houthi Movement, a southern secessionist undercurrent, and a growing schism within his own coalition, President Saleh's weakened position made military power increasingly important in the internal balance of threat. The ten-month long protest against the regime across the country united the Houthi Movement, the members of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (Islah and the Yemen Socialist Party), Hiraak, the Ahmars and Mohsen, and the Yemeni Youth against Saleh and resulted in Saudi Arabia's loss of confidence in his ability to weather the political storm. For this reason, Saudi Arabia brokered a transition to the Hadi-led regime through the GCC and UN.[309]

Although the Yemeni youth movement provided the spark for Saleh's ouster, the Saudi-backed GCC transition initiative sought to grant it residual influence through the GPC that permeated the bureaucracy and through which Saleh continued to exercise political influence as the party's chairman.[310] In turn the coalition of contradicting interests that supported Hadi's ascension did so mainly to counteract Saleh's residual influence in the government and security sectors.[311] However, the GCC-backed process soon

became a dialogue between the GPC, Joint Meeting Parties, and the international community, which left the Houthis, Hiraak, the Yemeni youth with ineffective influence in the National Dialogue Council that was charged with drafting a new constitution.[312] The plan for federal autonomous zones penned by the Hadi regime were rejected by the Houthis and Hiraak, but the Hadi regime pressed forward with Saudi and international backing.[313] With the political option exhausted, the Houthis marched on Sana'a in 2014 with Saleh's tacit support.[314] After one month, President Hadi escaped Houthi house arrest and fled to Aden where he called for GCC support in reclaiming the government. Saudi Arabia put together a coalition of countries and counterattacked the Houthi Movement days later. The only countries opposed to this international support for the Hadi regime were Iran, Russia, and China.[315]

Expanding the Proxy Network: Iranian Influence in Yemen after 2014

While there is a connection between Iran and the Houthi Movement, it is not overtly clear what type of capabilities the Iranians have provided to the Houthis. In an interview with *Al Arab*, one of the founders of the SAM, Mohammed Ezzan al-Houthi, defined the Houthi Movement as having no religious relationship to Iran or Shi'a Twelvers. Instead, he contended the relationship to Iran was only political.[316] Yet, because Yemen has historically and traditionally been a source of insecurity for the Saudis, from the perspective of Iran and Hezbollah the Houthis appear like a natural partner to cultivate.[317]

As mentioned previously, there are reports that Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi interacted with or received training from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, but the extent of contact is unclear. From a Shi'a religious perspective, the Houthi Movement seems a poor fit with Iran and Hezbollah, but all three do face systemic threats from Western and Sunni Muslim actors. It is possible that Hezbollah has played the role of successful Arab Shi'a mentor. In their war against the Saudi coalition, the Houthis see themselves in a similar situation to Hezbollah fighting the Israelis. Despite their differences as Shi'a groups, the two movements have a natural ideological gravity against the West and Saudi Arabia. News reports suggest that aside from military training, Hezbollah has also provided much needed political and strategic communications expertise.[318]

Table 7. Yemen's Major Political Players. Source: Gamal Gasim, "What is going on in southern Yemen?," *Al Jazeera*; "Death of a leader: Where next for Yemen's GPC after murder of Saleh?," *Middle East Eye*; Peter Salisbury, "Yemen's Southern Powder Keg," Chatham House; Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: The Road to War*.

Yemen's Major Political Players					
LEADERS	**ROLE**	**IDEOLOGY**	**LOCATION**	**HOLD TERRITORY**	**BENEFACTORS**
GENERAL PARTY CONGRESS					
Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi	**President of Yemen**	**Arab Nationalism**	**Aden, Southeast Yemen, Riyadh**	**Yes**	Saudi Arabia
Sadeq Ameen Abu Rass	Chairperson of GPC	Arab Nationalism	Sana'a	No	
Tareq Saleh	Nephew of Saleh	Arab Nationalism	Sana'a	No	United Arab Emirates
Ahmed Saleh	Son of Saleh	Arab Nationalism	Sana'a	No	United Arab Emirates
DOMESTIC OPPOSITION					
Abdul-Malik al-Houthi	**Leader of Ansar Allah**	**Shi'ia (Zaydi)**	**Sana'a, North Yemen, Northwest Yemen**	**Yes**	Iran, North Korea
Mohammed Malik al-Houthi	**Head of Supreme Revolutionary Committee**	**Shi'ia (Zaydi)**	**Sana'a, North Yemen, Northwest Yemen**	**Yes**	Iran, North Korea
Aidarus al-Zoubaidi	**Leader of Southern Movement**	**Socialist**	**South/ Southcentral Yemen**	**Yes**	United Arab Emirates
Qasim al Rami	Leader of AQAP	Sunni (Salafist)	South/ Southcentral Yemen	No	Al-Qaeda Central, Qatar, Saudi Arabia
Abu Bilal al Harbi	Leader of Islamic State Yemen Prov.	Sunni (Salafist)	South/Coastal Yemen	No	Islamic State
Mohammed al-Yadumi	Leader of Islah	Sunni	Sana'a	No	

While the timeline and extent of Iranian financial, military, and political support to the Houthis cannot be known, there are reports of limited assistance dating back to 2003, but little hard evidence of a meaningful interaction before 2011.[319] What is known is that Iran has helped to create linkages between the Arab Shi'a Lebanese Hezbollah to the Arab Houthi Movement, and senior Quds Force officers are known to operate in Yemen.[320] Some scholars assert that prior to the Houthi Movement's gambit for Sana'a, there was not much need for foreign military assistance since it could readily obtain arms in Yemen through tribal relationships or from corrupt members of the military. But, as the insurgency grew, the need for external patrons with logistical and political experience managing government affairs in a fractured state required external guidance and resourcing.[321] For instance, one report suggests Hezbollah operates training facilities in Yemen.[322] Although the Houthis have the same Twelver and Fiver divergence with Lebanese Hezbollah as it does with Iran, both, however, are rooted in a social movement and utilize a combination of military and political organization to establish deep roots and legitimacy with the population. The al-Haqq party, for example, is considered by the Yemeni government to serve as an agent for the Houthi Movement much like Lebanese Hezbollah is the party apparatus for a military capability.[323]

Although the Houthis have the same Twelver and Fiver divergence with Lebanese Hezbollah as it does with Iran, both, however, are rooted in a social movement and utilize a combination of military and political organization to establish deep roots and legitimacy with the population.

Since 2014, however, a different relationship seems to have developed between the Houthi Movement and Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. Whereas previously the Houthi Movement faced a repressive government, it thereafter faced a hostile international community with only Iran, Russia, and China willing to side with it. Its rhetoric had since 2003 contained anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli stances, but by 2015 it seems to have become more proactively part of the opposition to the global security order. Indeed, it was not until 2015 that Iran publicly announced its support for the Houthi government based in Sana'a, some months after it seized control of the country's capitol.[324] To date there have been seven maritime seizures of suspected Iranian weapons destined for the Houthis, with the latest in February 2020 containing components

for advanced anti-aircraft missiles.[325] With significant Saudi and Emirati military forces intervening in the conflict to push back Houthi advances into southern Yemen in an attempt to restore sovereign authority back to the Hadi regime through 2017, it should be little wonder that the Houthi Movement might perceive a more significant balance of threat internal to Yemen requiring similar support from an international patron, such as Iran. Missile and rocket attacks into Saudi territory from Yemen make more sense in the context of a decades-long Saudi cultural and political incursion into historically Zaydi regions, which then transformed into direct military strikes.

However, recently there seems to be a trend of the Houthi leadership adopting policies more in line with Iranian policy interests even when they are controversial in the Yemeni context. In addition to the missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, the Houthis arrested twenty Baha'i leaders in 2018, which is consistent with Iran's policy toward the religious minority, but atypical for Yemen. The Baha'i leaders were finally released in March 2020 by Houthi leaders along with a statement that all Baha'i should be able to practice their religion without persecution.[326] Similarly, the leader of the Houthi Movement, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, recently agreed to release a captured Saudi Arabian pilot in exchange for the release of Palestinian and Jordanian members of Iran-backed Hamas. He stated, "Unfortunately, the regimes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have presented [themselves] as worse than Israel," demonstrating how the Houthi Movement has become internationalized due to years of conflict with external patrons supporting enemy factions in Yemen.[327] Along with threats by al-Houthi to attack Israeli interests in Eritrea, such stances lead some observers to conclude that the Houthi Movement "seek[s] an end to the war, but on their terms—including an expanded regional profile that puts them on the bigger map of the Middle East and on the same level with the likes of Lebanon's Hezbollah in the Iran-led Shi'ite Axis of Resistance."[328] Tables 8 [329] and 9 [330] describe in detail Houthi missiles and drones, and Iranian involvement in the Houthi rebellion.

Assessing Divide-Empower-Control and Its Vulnerabilities in Yemen

Iran's ability to sustain policy influence, placement, and access through the Houthi Movement is questionable at best. While both the Houthi Movement and Iran need each other at the moment, it is a partnership of necessity and is not based on common religious principles. Iran's interests are mainly

Table 8. Houthi Missiles and Drones.

Houthi Missiles and Drones			
Houthi Missiles & Drones	**Supply Line**	**Houthi Acquisition**	**Notable Strikes**
Scud-B	Purchased from Soviets, pre-1990	Yemeni National Arsenal	
Scud-C	Purchased from Soviets, pre-1990	Yemeni National Arsenal	
North Korea Hwasong 5 (Scud-B)	Purchased from Soviets, pre-1990 or North Korea 2002; copy of R-17	Yemeni National Arsenal	
North Korea Hwasong 6 (Scud-C)	Purchased from Soviets, pre-1990 or North Korea 2002	Yemeni National Arsenal	
Soviet Tochka (SS-21 Scarab) missile	Purchased from Soviets, pre-1990	Yemeni National Arsenal	2015: attacks in Yemen against Saudi coalition
Qaher-1 surface to air missile	Houthi modified Soviet SA-2	Yemeni National Arsenal	
Qaher-2 surface to air missile	Houthi modified Soviet SA-2	Yemeni National Arsenal	2018: struck military base near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Zelzal ballistic missile versions	Iranian/Hezbollah ballistic missile, variant of Soviet FROG 7	Hezbollah	2018: uncorroborated missile attacks on Saudi Arabia
C-802 anti-ship cruise missile	Chinese-made Iranian & Hezbollah antiship missile	Hezbollah	2016: fired at UAE military vessel in Bab al Mandeb
Badr-1	Multiple rocket launcher	Yemen	2018: struck Saudi National Guard camp
Barkan 1	Scud missile; based on Iranian Scud B or Scud D	Iran; Houthi modification	2016: struck military base near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Barkan-2H	Scud C or D missile; according to US State Department, missile is Iranian Qiam 1	Iran; Houthi modification	2017: struck Aramco oil refinery in Saudi Arabia 2018: several missiles struck targets in Saudi Arabia, including the Defense Ministry & Riyadh International AIrport
Qasef-1	Yemeni manufactured drone identical to the Iranian Ababil-T	Iran; Houthi modification	2019: attack on Saudi pipeline

Table 9. Iranian Involvement in the Houthi Rebellion.

Iranian Involvement in Houthi Rebellion				
YEAR	TYPE	ALLEGATION	PUBLISHED SOURCE	PRIMARY SOURCE
2005	Training	Hezbollah is in Yemen training Houthis.	Financial Times	Interview with Hezbollah leader
2009	Weapons	Yemen's navy intercepts Iranian ship with anti-tank weapons and Iranian weapons experts.	Al Arabiya	Interview with Yemeni Navy
2012	Weapons	Yemen's navy intercepts Iranian ship with anti-tank weapons and Iranian weapons experts.	New York Times	Official citing Intercepted phone conversations
2013	Weapons	Aided by the United States, Yemen's central government intercepted IRGC weapons shipments including anti-aircraft missiles, C4 military grade explosives, ammunition, circuits, remote triggers, and handheld explosives.	CNN, Reuters	Announcement by Yemen's government
2014	Training	IRGC sent hundreds of military personnel to Yemen for training.	Reuters	Unnamed Iranian officials
2014	Training	Yemen sent hundreds of Houthis to Iran for training.	Reuters	Unnamed Iranian officials
2015	Diplomacy	Houthi leader Mohammad Abdulsalem visits Beirut to pay condolences to Hezbollah.	Arab Weekly	Statement by Lebanese analyst Nidal al-Sabe
2015	Personnel	Iranian fighter pilots were sent to Yemen via Lebanon	USA Today; Washington Institute for Near East Policy	Unnamed Lebanese officials
2015	Weapons	Iranian cargo ship unloaded military equipment in Yemen.	Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya	Port Employees
2016	Training	Hezbollah operatives are training Houthis on how to govern.	Various new sources	Letter from Hezbollah Secretary General to President Hadi
2016	Training	Hezbollah leader Abu Ali al-Tababai is in Yemen.	Al Arabiya video	Hezbollah forces shown with
2018	Weapons	Yemeni missiles and drones exhibit characteristics of Iranian missiles and drones.	United Nations report	Expert analysis
2018	Diplomacy	Yemeni Houthi delegation visits Beirut.	Arab Weekly	Eye-witness accounts; Tweeted photograph
2019	Training	Hezbollah has established military bases in Yemen.	Makkah Newspaper (Arabic)	Interview by Saudi-led Arab coalition with captured Houthi militia leader

geostrategic: establishing the ability to affect the Bab al-Mandab strait and establishing a foundation for a potential second line of approach against Saudi Arabia. With different political objectives and only light religious connections, Iran would be unwise to rely solely on the Houthi Movement over the medium-to-long term.

The one foreign policy similarity between the Houthis and Iran is the stated opposition to the United States and Israel. From a geostrategic perspective, this suggests the Houthis would naturally seek to build relationships with the anti-Western bloc of China, Russia, and Iran under any circumstance. While Iran would certainly be in the mix, it would not likely be able to serve as Yemen's only patron, and the proxy relationship would probably fade as China and Russia competed for access and influence for their own purposes in this critical international choke point.

For this reason, it seems rational that Iran would seek to identify potential splinter groups within the Houthi Movement to extend its patronage. While such divisions do not appear in the public domain currently, it is likely that Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah are currently assessing their options. Should the Houthi Movement achieve victory or negotiate a peace with the remaining opposition groups, Iran's value to the Houthis would decline and their ability to secure lasting influence threatened. It is unclear, though, how the Iranians would be able to achieve much of a splinter within the Zaydi community. The Zaydis are diverse, but the Houthis comprise the core of those who would be most open to Iranian influence in Yemeni politics. There is a class component within the Zaydi community with the urban Zaydis considering the highland Houthis as less sophisticated and educated.[331] The al-Haqq party consequently does not and cannot represent all elements of the Zaydi population, though Houthi military success does generate tribal support as leaders seek to bandwagon with the winning coalition. [332]

It will be difficult for Iran in the near term to engage in a Divide-Empower-Control cycle in Yemen without diminishing the political and military coherence of the Houthi Movement. It appears Abdul Malik al-Houthi is also presenting a sufficiently aligned foreign policy to maintain Iranian patronage. The degree to which the alignment can be sustained is questionable, though, as domestic political pressures require less strident and dogmatic approaches to non-Shi'a groups as the experience with the Baha'i demonstrates. Indeed, while the Houthi Movement seems like a viable proxy under current conditions, domestic political pressure could change the

equation in the absence of direct external intervention sustaining a regime with limited local legitimacy.

Conclusion

While Iran currently appears to have a strong Principal-Agent relationship, it actually faces more dilemmas than not. Although the framing of the conflict from a Western perspective tends to emphasize the Sunni-Shi'a lens, in fact Yemen's main conflict driver is a severe internal balance of threat challenge. However, in Yemeni politics it is highly problematic to view the dynamics through such dichotomies since identity and alliances are more fluid and contextualized meaning new and unexpected alliances can form quickly as circumstances change.[333] As Thomas Juneau concludes:

> There is no evidence, in particular, suggesting that the Houthis have become dependent on Iranian assistance, or in any way fallen under Tehran's authority … The Houthis believe that the Sana'a-based elite has long excluded them and has no interest in giving them a greater say in the state's affairs. In their view, the 2011 transition agreement that led to Hadi's accession to the presidency merely reshuffled the balance of power among the elite, without offering genuine prospects of integration for marginalized actors such as themselves. Furthermore, this domestic order is backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States, Iran's main rivals. It is these common anti-status quo interests that are bringing the Houthis and Iran together, not a shared Shi'i faith."[334]

This assessment was more recently supported by the former-U.S. ambassador to Yemen and the United Arab Emirates, William Rugh. He writes, "Despite Saudi claims, Iran is not controlling the Houthis, who have strictly Yemeni domestic motives. However, Iran is indeed giving humanitarian aid and rhetorical support to the Houthis, as it is a low-cost way of keeping the Saudis off balance in their regional competition."[335] Instead, the Houthis are an indicator of an internal balance of threat problem with respect to central government authority and power, not an Iranian proxy issue per se.[336]

Type of Shi'a Identity

The Houthi Movement is rooted in Zaydi Shi'ism and is therefore not of the Iranian Twelver variant that would create a strong religious-ideological

agenda. Internally, its allies and enemies have emanated from both the Sunni and Zaydi communities. Thomas Juneau is again instructive on this matter. He writes:

> The Zaydis, moreover, are not monolithically united behind the Houthis. During the six rounds of fighting between 2004 and 2010, for example, some Zaydi tribal militias fought alongside the government against the Houthis, while many government officials and troops—including Saleh—are Zaydi. Similarly, when the Houthis approached Sana'a in 2014, they faced resistance from some Zaydi tribes. The Yemeni conflict is therefore first and foremost about access to power and the spoils of conflict. It is at its root a civil war, driven by local competition for power, and not a regional, sectarian or proxy war. The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry has superimposed itself over this domestic conflict and has inflamed it, but it does not drive it."[337]

Moreover, within the Zaydi community there are multiple forms of practicing the faith from the rural highlands, to the urban elites, and to the secular or non-practicing, culturally Zaydi communities.[338]

Degree of Similarity in Religious Interpretation of Shi'a Theology

Iranian Twelver, Vilayet-e Faqih Shi'ism is substantially different from Zaydi Shi'ism. Scholars sometimes describe Zaydi Shi'ism as a fifth school of Islamic jurisprudence that fits somewhere in between Sunnism and Twelver Shi'sim.[339] There are at least three key differences that would prevent the Houthis from ever adopting Iranian interpretations of Shi'a Islam. First, the Zaydi reject the notion of the messianic nature of the hidden twelfth imam from which Twelvers derive their name.[340] Second, many Zaydis believe that Twelver veneration of the hidden imam approaches idolization in a way that Islam proscribes.[341] And third, the Zaydi do not recognize the authority of ayatollahs in the way that both Quietist and Vilayet-e Faqih Twelvers do, and it is known for its doctrinal flexibility.[342]

High Balance of Threat among Proxies

Yemen has long been and remains today a fragmented state, and its politics nearly always resemble a security dilemma whereby various coalitions seek to establish control over the state to manipulate the distribution of resources.

As already noted, the dimensions of threat emanate from multiple directions—government security forces, militias, religious marginalization, religious extremism, tribal politics, lack of opportunity, and resource scarcity to name a few. Because of this, the opportunity for external powers to engage different local armed groups will likely persist for years to come. Additionally, the presence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS in Yemen make the consequences of defeat dire for non-Sunnis.

Degree of Active Conflict

Yemen is currently in the midst of an active conflict that has persisted since 2015 with several rounds of large-scale violence in the preceding decade. As a result, each armed faction currently benefits from an external patron. Although the conflict currently favors the Houthi Movement, the fortunes of war have ebbed and flowed in multiple directions over the past five years. The high balance of threat, the presence of multiple external patrons backing different agents, and the inability of any single party to dominate the others ensures that conflict is likely to continue unless a grand pact is yet again attempted. Indeed, the resilience of the Houthi Movement, with limited military support against forces with advanced weaponry arrayed against it, indicates that active conflict can continue indefinitely, and that Iran will continue to have utility to the Houthis so long as this situation continues.[343]

Strength of Host Country Government Relative to Other Domestic Actors/Militias

The UN-recognized government under President Hadi operates out of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and survives only due to the direct involvement of the Saudi military in its armed forces. The government is under threat from both the Houthi Movement and the STC. It is a weak actor, and many of the armed proxies have greater military capability, more effective political relationships, and better access to local resources than the government itself. Even under normal circumstances, the central government's authority had trouble extending beyond urban areas, which required it to rely on tribal relationships and alliances.[344] The complete breakdown of the state into three main factions—the Houthis, Hadi, and STC—means the system of governance has been significantly ruptured.

Assessment

The nature of Iran's involvement in Yemen differs greatly from its involvement in Iraq and Syria. Unlike Iraq and Syria, Iran's interests in Yemen are not with the extraction of resources or access to supply routes. Instead, Yemen is strategic because of the proximity to the Bab al-Mandab waterway; a position along the Bab al-Mandab Strait would provide Iran the ability to extend its forward deterrence strategy to the Red Sea. Furthermore, this foothold would allow Iran to present Saudi Arabia with multiple fronts. Yet, the Zaydi rejection of the core tenets of Iran's theological beliefs could eventually lead to pushback against Iranian influence—especially after major combat operations have waned. It is hard to imagine that, after successfully reversing a Wahhabi threat to Zaydi practices and identity, the Houthis would willingly subordinate themselves to Iranian Twelver Vilayet-e Faqih theology that is equally foreign. This is a key vulnerability in Iran's strategy, and may serve as a key wedge in the Principal-Agent relationship over time. In short, Iran is likely to be able to exert an intervention strategy with the Houthi Movement, but it is unlikely to be able to achieve anything more substantive due precisely to intra-Shi'a theological differences. But in the midst of continued domestic anarchy and an internationalized conflict, Iran will be able to maintain a relationship with the Houthi Movement and exploit the security dilemma.

Conclusion and Analysis

> There is only one basic way of dealing with complexity: divide and conquer. - Bjarne Stroustrup[345]

The comparative case studies in chapters 2–4 offer exceptional insight to answer the primary research question of this study: How does Iran develop, employ, and sustain proxy organizations in targeted states? In each of the cases, Iran followed key principles:

1. Develop
   a. Identify geostrategic locations that enhance its "forward deterrence" strategy,
   b. Identify indigenous social movements with grievances against the government or the Western-backed security order,
   c. Take advantage of or exacerbate internal security dilemmas to become a patron to the targeted agent, and
   d. Identify potential schisms within groups to diversify the choice of agents.
2. Employ
   a. Create dependencies on Iranian political, material, and/or military resources based on local conditions through the Divide-Empower-Control approach,
   b. Train key individuals in Iran to become Master Trainers who then expand the indigenous network,
   c. Use existing proxies as surrogates based on identity, linguistic, religious, and operational requirements,
   d. Achieve a monopoly of power over the territory and population associated with the agent, and
   e. Identify pliant individuals who could become future proxy leaders.
3. Sustain
   a. Leverage local resources to create indigenous support networks,

b. Utilize political fronts to achieve access to state resources,

c. Utilize Iranian and proxy diplomatic assets to provide international mobility, and

d. Provide resources overtly or clandestinely as circumstances permit.

The analysis presented here validates the insights provided by Fotini Christia. In each of the cases, the domestic actors faced growing security dilemmas for which military power was a determining factor in their protection and political influence. Increasing conflict spirals caused actors to seek external support, which created the opportunity for Principal-Agent relationships to form. The internal alliances were based first on military and political considerations with religious considerations being a secondary though rhetorically useful component for Iranian foreign policy. Juneau again summarizes Iran's approach to proxies extremely well:

> Contrary to a widespread misperception, Iran does not choose its partners on the basis of a common adherence to Shi'i Islam. To enjoy Iranian support, actors must oppose the status quo, defined by the regional order dominated by the United States and its local partners, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia; they do not necessarily have to be Shi'i. That is why Hamas and Islamic Jihad—Sunni nationalist groups opposed to Israel—have been Iran's partners in the Palestinian occupied territories.[346]

The comparative case studies also answer the second research question: Why do Iran's proxies thrive over host domestic governmental structures and institutions? In short, it was the domestic anarchy in each of the cases that enabled Iran to gain broader influence, not a common Shi'a religious identity.

In short, it was the domestic anarchy in each of the cases that enabled Iran to gain broader influence, not a common Shi'a religious identity.

By gaining placement and access over time, Iran was able to amplify its proxies' capabilities just as their central governments' relative power started to wane. Iraq presented Iran with an exceptional opportunity given the historical grievances of the Twelver Shi'a population against the Saddam Hussein regime, its long experience with Iraqi proxy groups, and its access to the

institutions of power with U.S. support. In Syria, Iran transformed a state partner into a sponsored proxy not on the basis of Shi'a religious identity per se but based on the regime's fear of collapse in the face of determined armed opposition. In Yemen, Iran was able to steadily build influence with a nascent Shi'a social movement opposed to a government that was incapable or unwilling to restructure to meet a wide range of popular demands. That the Houthis were eventually able to seize the capitol and other urban areas was due to a collapse of the regime's internal governing coalition, not direct Iranian intervention.

A growing realization in the counterterrorism literature is that agents have the ability to manipulate principals' misperceptions of local conditions by playing to their ignorance of local conditions and to their concerns with terrorist organizations. In viewing foreign political landscapes through the counterterrorism and security lenses and providing assistance primarily within these frames, the U.S. risks reinforcing the very dynamics that enable adversary patrons to become useful to local insurgent proxies.[347] Brian M. Perkins explains the dynamic for Yemen:

> Saleh positioned himself as a partner in the U.S. War on Terror, which reinforced his control over Yemen, and caused the United States to cede a significant amount of power to his regime in order to ensure his future cooperation, much like Saleh delegated some authority to tribal leaders in Yemen's hinterlands. The United States, and other external donors, hindered the potential for political and societal change from above by solely seeking to stabilize the regime, thereby facilitating Saleh's rent-seeking behavior and necessitating change from below. The allocation of foreign military and economic aid strengthened the mechanisms through which Saleh controlled both radical and moderate opposition. Rather than fighting AQAP or funding social and economic programs in order to mobilize the support of civil society, Saleh marshaled the resources to put down dissent and line the regime's coffers. His relationship with the United States aggravated existing grievances and encouraged revolutionaries because it promoted repressive regime behavior and allowed the regime to dispose of key domestic alliances on which it previously relied. The United States, therefore, exacerbated the very disorder

> it sought to eliminate as it had little control over the political and social dynamics its patronage facilitated.[348]

Were this lens to be applied against other counterterrorism environments, there is a high probability that similar conclusions would be reached, not just for Iran, but for Salafi Jihadi organizations across the U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command areas of responsibility. By focusing on the internal balance of threat and the potential for domestic anarchy, it is possible to better determine the potential for alliances and external patrons based on common interests.

The Balance-of-Threat Posture and the Divide-Empower-Control Model

Iranian military leaders understand they are at a major strategic disadvantage when compared to the U.S. military and many Western powers.[349] Iran's forward deterrence approach is rooted in asymmetric military strategy, and it therefore actively seeks to keep regional conflicts in the gray zone by influencing domestic power struggles to its own advantage.[350] The driving factor behind Iran's proxy strategy is the need to continuously expand its deterrence capability against threats to Iranian national interests by gaining placement in key geostrategic locations, chief amongst these are ground and maritime lines of communication, adversary points of vulnerability against its missile and rocket technology, and Shi'a religious sites.

To overcome the potential problems associated with adverse selection and agency slack, Iran employs where possible an operational approach of Divide-Empower-Control to gain more predictable leverage inside host country political establishments. This model has been most effective in Iraq where Iran has a long history of supporting Iraqi political parties but does have significant limitations in Syria and Yemen. In these latter cases, both the Assad regime and the Houthi Movement have incentives to cultivate other foreign patrons precisely because of the shared Shi'a identity. Iran's version of Shi'ism constitutes a threat to the Alawite and Zaydi Shi'a identities and practices. As a result, it is probable that once active conflict abates, both will engage in principal shopping to dilute Iranian influence over them.

Strengths in the Iranian Proxy Strategy

Iran has become a reliable ally to organizations opposed to U.S.-backed interests in the region. In Iraq, Iran has created a wide range of proxy groups

that have penetrated the government apparatus, which allows it to extract resources, dispense patronage, control government security services, and control the ground lines of communication. In Syria, the Iranians have worked closely with the Assad regime, which enables Tehran to have unfettered access to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea, but it has also reinforced its ground lines of communication by embedding foreign Shi'a fighters in communities and villages along key transportation routes to Lebanon. In Yemen, the Iranians have provided the Houthis with much needed political guidance, military training, and increasingly advanced weapons technology in the hope that its foothold will translate into a naval deterrent capability at the Bab al-Mandab maritime chokepoint, a second potential threat to Israel along a southern front, and a threat to Saudi Arabia from the south. It has achieved all of these effects with limited direct involvement of its own forces and at a sustainable financial cost.

Iran's strengths are its mature and institutionalized experience with proxy forces and its creativity with asymmetric tactics. Iran's most enduring proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah, is the model for how Iran has pushed its foreign policy agenda in other Middle Eastern countries by showing value through the balance-of-threat manipulation. While most of the environments in which it operates contain an aggrieved Shi'a population, it is willing to work with aggrieved Sunni populations when their interests against the U.S. coincide. Nearly all of Iran's offensive operations against U.S. interests are executed by proxy.[351]

Vulnerabilities in the Iranian Proxy Strategy

Iran's regional strategy does face several vulnerabilities. First, despite the socio-religious and military ties that Iran has cultivated across the region, in the end it is the domestic anarchy that enables its influence to persist. As with all Principal-Agent relationships, there are still the possibilities of Principal betrayal and divergent Agent interests that could have a much stronger influence than the ideology of Vilayet-e Faqih or Shi'a Muslim solidarity. When seen through Fotini Christia's analysis, where domestic political considerations create internal alliances more than religious identity, the Sunni-Shi'a divide becomes a secondary factor that can be mitigated over time as circumstances and new domestic payoffs become possible.

The challenge for the U.S. and its allies is determining how to reduce active conflict while creating stronger incentives for internal alliances that

seem more beneficial to a wider range of actors than the payoffs created by Iran. Doing so likely requires reimagining environments where Iran is attempting to cultivate proxies from a counterterrorism prism to an internal balance of threat one. Doing so will, at a minimum, mitigate the contribution U.S. policy and counterterrorism efforts contribute to threat perceptions and giving Iran utility to potential agents. In the cases of Iraq and Yemen, U.S. policy played a part in amplifying the domestic anarchy over time.

Another of Iran's vulnerabilities is the ground lines of communication it now relies upon between Iraq and Lebanon. Because Syria and Iraq do not have effective control over their borders, Iranian-backed smugglers freely traffic high-value, high return-on-investment merchandise to proxies in Lebanon where they have access to the Mediterranean and beyond. The Iranian regime relies on these supply lines to keep the support of the Iranian people, and if they were compromised the regime would suffer. The intra-Twelver tension in Iraq presents an opportunity to interfere with this pathway of influence, but it requires deft diplomacy to generate a political alliance to countervail Iran's. In Iraq, the real contest for power now lies between Iraq's Shi'a parties, which are split between the Iranian-backed Fatah, Dawa, and ISCI factions; Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's Quietist allies; and the populist Saairun. Moqtada al-Sadr has always been the populist force for Iraq's working-class Shi'a, and his brand as an Iraqi nationalist is an enduring narrative. As the perception of Iran's power diminishes, so does the likelihood of Iraq's other Shi'a parties continuing to bandwagon with Iran's objectives. For instance, in June 2019, after Katyusha attacks in the country, ISCI and Wisdom movement leader Ammar al Hakim publicly distanced himself from Iranian decision makers in the country.[352] Meanwhile, Saairun's prominence is likely the biggest threat to Iran's quest for hegemony in Iraq, and as U.S. forces pivot from the region, the regime in Tehran is likely to see more agency slack from key Iraqi politicians.

In Syria, the Assad regime's interests—as a secular, socialist government, not a Shi'a one—are intrinsically different than Iran's. The Iranian effort to establish a network of groups loyal to it in Syria could lead the Assad regime to principal shop over time with Russia and possibly China being likely candidates. While the two countries are ideologically united by an enmity for Western interference, the regime in Syria could eventually tire of Tehran's operational interference. However, the mutual interest in balancing against

Israel would likely lead to a continuation of support for Lebanese Hezbollah over the long term with diminished Iranian influence over Syrian policy.

In Yemen, international media sources have reported that the Houthi Movement (Ansar Allah), once deemed the political outlier, is actually one of the most stabilizing and organized sociopolitical movements in the country.[353] As it accrues domestic Yemeni support from a broader range of constituencies—including various Zaydi and Sunni tribes, professionals, and possibly youth—it will have to govern in a way that accommodates the diversity of domestic interests. The Houthi Movement represents just a subset of the overall Zaydi population, and it cannot govern legitimately without the acquiescence of other tribes. The domestic anarchy will continue for some time, and a heavy handed or illegitimate foreign policy would likely cause defections from the Houthi Movement if other alternatives presented themselves. The Houthi Movement as an agent is, therefore, prone to defection from Iran over time, and it would be hard for Iran to cultivate new proxies with social mass in the Yemeni context. Although the Houthi Movement could in the near-to-medium term seem to negatively impact Saudi Arabian interests, accommodating Zaydi and other tribal interests in a unity government might be a decisive political move for U.S. policymakers to undermine Iran's model.

Assessing the Major Variables

Of the five variables initially identified as being important, the most critically important ones were assessed to be: (1) a high balance of threat among proxies and (2) the degree of active conflict. The ability of Iranian proxies to generate influence over central governments is due to the latter losing their bases of support and internal coalitions and, as a result, their relative power as compared to domestic competitors. The security dilemma that ensues tends to provide Iran with opportunity to amplify its operations for effect.

Contrary to the predominant framing, the Shi'a identity layer was not a key source of strength in Iran's expansion. Rather, it was a pretext that allowed it to recruit fighters and create a narrative of support based on a primary identity layer that was already rooted in religious rivalry and regional conflict. Indeed, in both Yemen and Syria, extreme differences between Iran and its main local proxy's present barriers to aligned religious practices. These differences present Iran with critical vulnerabilities that, if properly

understood, could be exploited for effect. But, under conflict conditions, the differences between the sects become blurred as all fight under the rubric of nebulous Sunni-Shi'a tensions. In actuality, Iran faces significant socio-religious headwinds within the Shi'a community in each of the cases under review in this monograph, though they are obscured by active conflict.

Policy Implications of the Research

Three key policy implications arise from this comparative case analysis. The first is that the counterterrorism frame and support to security training to partner central governments can be an enabling factor in the expansion of Iranian proxy and gray zone operations. If not balanced by policies and engagement that seek to ameliorate the underlying grievances contributing to domestic anarchy, then a securitized central government with U.S. backing can perpetuate illegitimate rule and create the conditions in which revolution becomes the only means for reform. In both Iraq and Yemen, U.S. counterterrorism support to host governments enabled illegitimate regimes to persist without enacting substantial reforms causing the populations to turn to armed actors for redress of grievances. In Syria, the Assad regime lost its popular mandate after decades of repression through a highly capable security state. This is not to say that the U.S. can reverse all such trends, but simply that it must recognize it can contribute to the very outcomes it seeks to avoid.

The second implication is that viewing Iranian proxies through the lens of Shi'ism is counterproductive at best and strategically blinding at worst. By lumping all variants of Shi'ism under the simple category of "Shi'a," analysts are likely to miss the crucial nuances that constitute opportunities to erode Iranian influence over the proxies' populations. This finding is in line with the Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations, which notes that appealing to relevant populations is critical to achieving sustainable strategic success.[354] Rolling back Iranian influence through proxies is an inherently political undertaking, not a military one. To achieve a political effect, non-kinetic operations will be necessary over a long period of time.

Finally, if the first two implications are correct, then it is necessary to re-conceptualize how SOF undertake counterterrorism strategy, planning, and operations. Counterterrorism with a kinetic orientation—whether by U.S. SOF, allies, or partners—is insufficient and can contribute to instability.

Likewise, the existing counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and counter threat network joint publications readily acknowledge that kinetic operations contribute to a political solution and cannot independently eliminate the threat.[355] However, this analysis comes to a different conclusion regarding the role of the central government in such operations. As mentioned in the first implication, the central government can actually drive the domestic anarchy and internal perception of threat, so determining how to resolve internal political disequilibria is possibly more important for sustainable strategic success than the dissemination of counterterrorism and counter-network tactics.

Iran has been effective in its development of proxies because it has effectively transformed local social movements into viable militias and political organizations. It has benefitted from and exacerbated internal security dilemmas and conditions of domestic anarchy. In order to neutralize Iranian activities through proxies, it is necessary to gain more advanced appreciations of domestic politics in areas that could feasibly contribute to its forward deterrence posture to identify the gaps and seams in its approach in each location. Unfortunately, each operating environment has its own unique characteristics, and it will be impossible to use a one-size-fits-all approach. Beyond the general principle of identifying medium-to-long term strategies to mitigate internal security dilemmas, analysts will need to develop or have direct access to deep knowledge of each country under pressure. Fortunately, this information is generally available for analysts in the open source though the mechanisms for obtaining it and translating it into strategic and operational concepts are not yet robust.

One last implication could arise from this research. Internal security dilemmas occur in many countries, not just the ones Iran targets. It is highly likely that these policy implications could also apply to a different range of Principal-Agent relationships, such as those consisting of great powers and even violent extremist organizations. If true, then there probably is not a tremendous amount of difference in how SOF should conceptualize counterterrorism campaigns and influence-based operations in great power competition. This comparative case study reinforces the analysis that terrorism, counterterrorism, and proxy conflict are inherently political phenomena just as great power competition promises to be. This is an area worthy of future research, but there is prima facie reason to believe SOF can achieve positive results in both problem sets. In the meantime, to effectively compete

with Iran's expanded proxy network, the U.S. most first focus on its political vulnerabilities in each context and adapt the counterterrorism strategy accordingly.

Appendix. Iraqi Militia Groups

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
1	Liwa al Imam Muhammad al-Jiwad	اللواء 1 (ردب الجناح العسكري)				Badr
2	Imam Ali Brigades	اللواء 2 (فرقة الإمام علي القتالية)	Abu Zaidi	Baghdad Belts/ Syria Square	Khomeini	Iran
3	Tashkil Asad Amerli	اللواء 3 (ردب الجناح العسكري)				Badr
4	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 4 (ردب الجناح العسكري)				Badr
5	Tashkil al-Karar	اللواء 5 (ردب الجناح العسكري)	Abu Dergham al Maturi			Badr
6	Soldiers of Imam Brigades (Kata'ib Jund al Imam)	اللواء 6 (كتائب جند الامام)	Ahmed al-Asadi/ Abu Jaafar al-Asadi	Anbar, Salah al-Din	Khomeini	ISCI
7	Forces of the Expected Brigade (Liwa al-Muntadhar)	اللواء 7 (قوات المنتظر)	Dagher al-Musawi	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	ISCI
8	Saraya Ashura	اللواء 8 (سرايا عاشوراء)				ISCI
9	Liwa Karbala	اللواء 9 (ردب الجناح العسكري)				Badr

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
10	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 10 (بدر الجناح العسكري)				Badr
11	Liwa Ali al-Akbar	اللواء 11 (لواء علي الأكبر)				Badr
12	Hezbollah Movement Nujaba (Harakat al Nujaba)	اللواء 12 (النجباء)	Akram Abbas Kaabi	Baghdad Belts/ Syria Square	Khomeini	Iran
13	Liwa al-Tafuf	اللواء 13 (لواء الطفوف)				
14	Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada	اللواء 14 (كتائب سيد الشهداء)				
15	Quwat al-Shahid al Sadr	اللواء 15 (قوات الشهيد الصدر)				
16	Turkmen Force	اللواء 16 (القوة التركمانية)				
17	Jihad Brigade (Saraya al Jihad)	اللواء 17 (سرايا الجهاد)	Hassan Rahdi Sari	Anbar	Sistani	ISCI
18	Saraya Khorasani	اللواء 18 (سرايا الخراساني)	Ali al-Yassiri	Baghdad Belts/Center of Baghdad	Khomeini	Iran

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
19	Thaer al-Hussein Brigades	اللواء 19 (انصار الله الوفاء وتشكيل الحسين الثائر)	Ghassan Shahbandar	Nukhayib (Western Anbar)	Khomeini	Sadrist splinter
20	Liwa al-Taff	اللواء 20 (لواء الطف)	Hashim al-Tamimi			
21	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 21 (ردب الجناح العسكري)				Badr
22	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 22 (ردب الجناح العسكري)	Abu Kawthar al-Muhammadawi	Maysan		Badr
23	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 23 (ردب الجناح العسكري)		Diyala		Badr
24	Badr Organization Military Wing	اللواء 24 (ردب الجناح العسكري)		Diyala		Badr
25	Quwat al-Shahid al Sadr al Awal (Martyr of Sadr 1st Forces)	اللواء 25 (قوات الشهيد الصدر الاول)				Dawa

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
26	Abbas Combat Squad (Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah)	اللواء 26 (فرقة العباس القتالية)	Maitham al-Zaidi	Nukhayib (Western Anbar)	Sistani	
27	Badr: Quwat al Shaeed al Qa'id Abu Muntadahar al Muhammadawi	اللواء 27 (بدر الجناح العسكري)				Badr
28	Supporters of the Faith	اللواء 28 (سرايا انصار العقيدة)	Jalauddin al-Saghir	Anbar	Sistani	ISCI
29	Kata'ib Ansar al-Hijjah	اللواء 29 (كتائب انصار الحجة)				
30	Liwa al-Shabak/ Quwat Sahl Ninawa	اللواء 30 (قوة الشبك)				Badr
31	Risaliyun (Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali).	اللواء 31 (رساليون)				Sadr
33	Quwat Wa'ad Allah (aka Liwa al-Shabab al-Risali)	اللواء 33 (وعد الله)				Sadr
35	First Martyr al-Sadr (Quwat al Shaheed al Sadr)	اللواء 35 (قوات الشهيد الصدر)	Gen. Abdul-Karim Gazan	Samarra	Khomeini	Dawa
36	Lalish Regiment—Yezidi Forces	اللواء 36 (قوات اللالش اليزيدية)				Badr

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
39	Harakat al-Abal					Iran
40	Kataib Imam Ali	اللواء 40 (كتائب الإمام علي)				
41	League of the Righteous (AAH)	اللواء 41 (عصائب أهل الحق)	Qais al-Khazali	Salah al-Din, Nukhayib, Syria	Khomeini	AAH
42	AAH al Qa'id Abu Mousa al Amiri	للواء 42 (عصائب أهل الحق)				AAH
43	AAH Saba al Dujail(Seven Dujail)	اللواء 43 (سبع الدجيل)				AAH
44	Brigade Supporters—Liwa Ansar al Marja'iyya	اللواء 45 (كتائب حزب الله)	Hamid al-Yassiri	Samarra, al Muthanna	Sistani	
45	Hezbollah Brigades of Iraq (KH)	اللواء 46 (سرايا الدفاع الشعبي)	al Muhandis	Anbar, Salah al-Din, Nukhayib, Syria	Khomeini	Iran
46	Hezbollah Brigades of Iraq (KH)	للواء 47 (سرايا الدفاع الشعبي)				
47	Hezbollah Brigades of Iraq (KH)	اللواء 50 (بابليون)				
50	Babiliyun Battalion	اللواء 51 (حشد صلاح الدين)	Rian al Kidani	Baghdad Belt	Chaldeon	Badr
51	Salah ah-Din Brigade	اللواء 52 (لواء الحسين)				Sunni

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
52	Fawj Amerli	اللواء 53(بدر الجناح العسكري)				Badr
53	Liwa al -Hussein	اللواء 55 (بدر الجناح العسكري)				Badr
55	Tashkil Malik al-Ashtar	اللواء 56 (حشد الحويجة)				Badr
56	Liwa Hashd Shuhada Kirkuk	اللواء 66 (انصار العقيدة)	Hussein Ali Najm al-Juburi			
66	Saraya Ansar Al-Aqeeda (Supporters of the Faith)					
86	Quwat Ahrar al-Iraq					
88			Sheikh Wanas al-Jabara		Salah al Din	
90	Fursan al-Jubur					
91	Nawader Shammar				Sunni	
92	Sunni Hashd				Sunni	
99	Jaysh al-Mu'ammal (Army of the Hope)	اللواء 99 (جيش المؤمل)				
110	Fayli Kurdish (Elephant Kurds)	اللواء 110 (الكورد الفيلية)				Badr
313	Peace Brigades (Saraya al Salaam)	اللواء 313 (سرايا السلام)	Kazem Hussein al-Issawi	Samarra	Sadiq al-Sadr	Sadrist Movement

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
314	Peace Brigades (Saraya al Salaam)					
	Badr Organization		Hadi al-Amiri	Salah al-Din, Diyala, Syria	Khomeini	Badr
	First Martyr Brigades		Wathiq al Fartusi	Nukhayib (Western Anbar)	Khomeini	Dawa
	Elite Brigades, Al-Ghaith Alhaidara		Karim Anzi; Munaf al-Husseini	Anbar	Khomeini	Iran
	Abdaal Movement		Jaafar al-Moussawi	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	All of the Brigades of God		Mustafa al-Obeidi	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Argument Support Brigade		Mohammad Kanani	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Brigades of God		Dawa Party Leaders	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Brigades of the Hand of God		Ahmed al-Saadi	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Husseini Brigades		Mohammed al-Khafaji	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Imam Brigade		Alaleaa	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Imam Brigade 2		Mohammed al-Iami	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Imam Hussein Brigades		Hassan al-Rubaie	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Kazem al-Fath		Ali	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Loyal Supporters of God Movement		Haidar Ghraoui	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Malik Ashtar Brigades		Jaafar Abbas al-Musawi	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Saraya PDF		Mazhar al-Khafaji	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Society House Brigades		Musa Al-Hassani	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
	State Shield Battalions		Alla Rattay	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	The Islamic Youth Brigades		Mustafa al-Musawi	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Touf Brigade		Mustafa al-Musawi	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Zainab Brigade Oqaila		Hassan Alchukrgi	Baghdad Belt	Khomeini	Iran
	Master of Martyrs Brigades		Abu Ala	Baghdad Belts/ Salah al-Din	Khomeini	Iran
	Abu Fadl Abbas Brigade		Aws al-Khafaji	Baghdad Belts/ Syria	Khomeini	Iran
	Imams of Baqi Brigades		Jihad al-Tamimi	Basra	Khomeini	Iran
	Hope to Allah		Saad	Iraq	Khomeini	Iran
	Missionary Battalion		Adnan Ormad Lipodeca	Iraq/ Syria	Khomeini	Iran
	Mukhtar Army		Battat	Iraq/ Syria	Khomeini	Iran
	Jabarin Brigade		Mohammaed al-Musawi	Nukhayib (Western Anbar)	Khomeini	Iran
	Starter Retribution		Abdullah al-Lami	Samarra	Khomeini	Iran
	Fulfilled Promise Legion		Ammar al-Haddad	Syria	Khomeini	Iran
	God Lion Brigade		Suhail al-Araji	Syria	Khomeini	Iran
	The Islamic Movement of Iraq		Jamal	Baghdad Belt	Sadiq Shirazi (Qom-based Cleric)	Iran—Qom
	Supporters of Ashura Brigades		Kazem Jabri/ Abu Ahmed Jabri	Nukhayib (Western Anbar)	Sistani	ISCI
	Ali Brigade		Ali Al-Hamdani	Nukhayib (Western Anbar)	Sadiq Shirazi (Qom-based Cleric)	Islamic Action Organization

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
	Iraqi Hezbollah—Imad Mughniyeh Battalion		Saad Afattlao/ Abu Khaled	Anbar	Hassan Nasrallah	Lebanese Hezbollah
	Hezbollah Insurgents		Rahman	Baghdad Belt	Hassan Nasrallah/ Mohammad Alcauthrana	Lebanese Hezbollah
	Qamar Bani Hashem Brigades		Abu Talib Mayahi	Anbar	Kamal al-Haydari	Qom-based 12'er
	Youth Battalions		Wissam al-Haidari	Baghdad Belt	Kamal al-Haydari	Qom-based 12'er
	Sadr Youth Brigades		Mohammed Hussein al-Sadr	Samarra	Kazem Haeri	Sadrist Movement
	Brigades of God's Promise		Sami al-Masoudi/ Shi'ia Waqf	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Brigades of Muslim bin Aqeel		Ahmed Fartusi	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Calamity Brigades		Ahmed Zamili	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Great Relief Brigade		Firas	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Justice Brigades		Sheikh Samir Ali	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Pure Blood Brigades		Ali al-Hakim	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Saraya al-Zahra Brigades		Haidari	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Saraya Brigade		Abdul Mahdi Karbalai	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Saraya of Chosen Althagafi		Abdul Mahdi Karbalai	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Supporters of the Mahdi Brigade		Naji Hilfi	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	

LIWA	NAME	ARABIC NAME	COMMANDER	AREA OF OPERATIONS	RELIGIOUS REFERENCE	PATRONAGE
	Zulfikar Brigade		Hussein al-Tamimi	Baghdad Belt	Sistani	
	Husseinya		Abdul Mahdi Karbalai	Baghdad Belt/ Baiji/ Kirkuk/ Anbar/ Qayyarah	Sistani	
	Youth Missionary Brigade		Maitham al Alliq	Karbala	Yacoubi	

Acronyms

AAH	Asa'ib ahl al-Haqq
EFP	Explosively Formed Penetrator
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GPC	General People's Congress
Hamas	Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah (Islamic Resistance Movement)
HHN	Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba
HKB	Haidar al-Karar Brigades
IGC	Iraqi Governing Council
INA	Iraqi National Accord
INC	Iraqi National Congress
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force
IS	Islamic State
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State of Syria and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JAM	Jaysh al-Mahdi
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KH	Kata'ib Hezbollah
LAFA	Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas
MOI	Ministry of Interior

NDF	National Defense Force
PDRY	People's Democratic Republic of Yemen
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PMU	Popular Mobilization Unit
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SOF	Special Operations Forces
STC	Southern Transitional Council
UN	United Nations
YAR	Yemen Arab Republic

Endnotes

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