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THESIS

THE FUTURE OF IRAN'S INFLUENCE THROUGH PROXY EMPLOYMENT

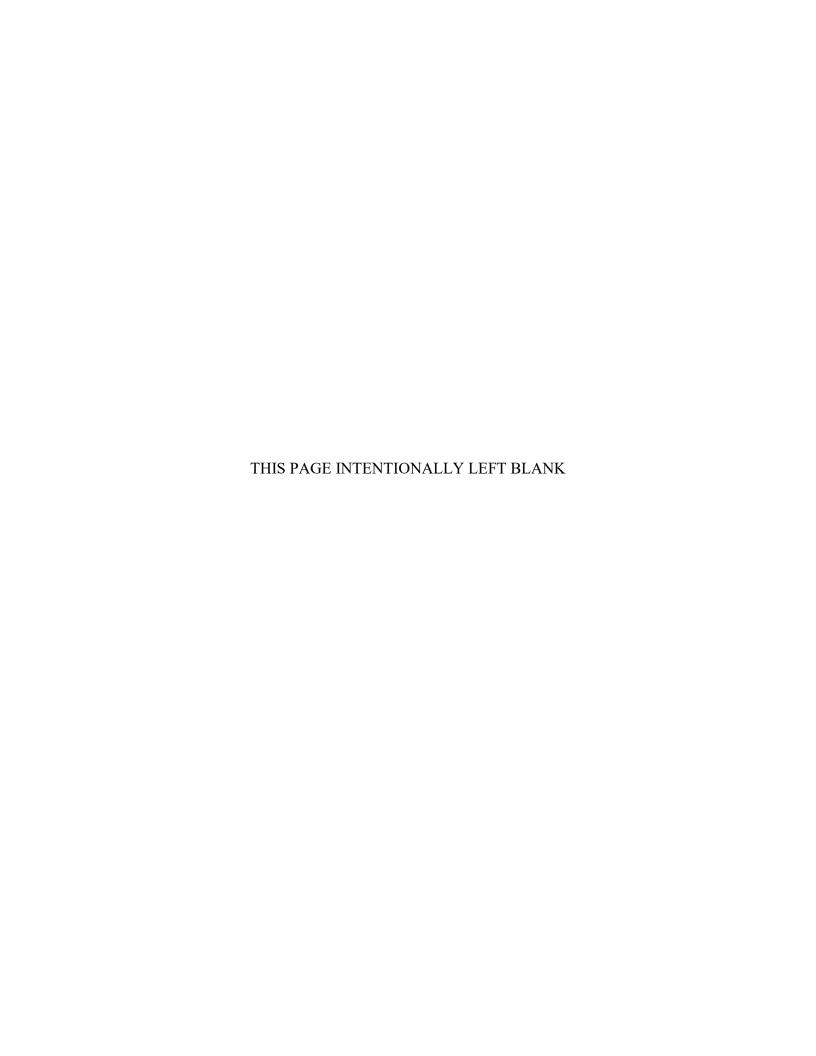by

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13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)

Iran has been expanding its influence globally by utilizing a large network of proxy organizations outside of the state's borders. These various proxy networks have been successful in implementing Iranian foreign policy while maintaining a distant relationship to the state. The use of proxy networks is not a new concept, yet Iran has had long-term success while other states within the region have had difficulties with proxy employment. This thesis examines whether Iran's effectiveness in utilizing proxies through the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is a sustainable foreign policy option to promote Iranian regional interests.

This thesis finds that Iran thus far has been successful with managing the balance between proxy clients and the relationships of political leaders, especially within the Iraqi state. It is ascertained that Iran's employment of proxy clients will continue to remain a cost-effective means of expanding its influence and implementing Iranian foreign policy goals while retaining the ability to distance itself from the client as needed. Furthermore, the large-scale success that the Iranian-backed organizations have seen while fighting under the PMF, and the independent military status the Iraqi government granted to the PMF, have solidified political representation from organizations such as Katai'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) for the foreseeable future.

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THE FUTURE OF IRAN'S INFLUENCE THROUGH PROXY EMPLOYMENT

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
KH	Katai'ib Hezbollah
NSS	National Security Strategy
PMF	Popular Mobilization Force
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Iran has been expanding its influence globally by utilizing a large network of proxy organizations outside of its borders. These various proxy networks have been successful in implementing Iranian foreign policy while maintaining a distant relationship to the state. The use of proxy networks is not a new concept, yet Iran has had long-term success while other states within the region have had difficulties with proxy employment. How has Iran been successful in utilizing proxies as a key means of implementing foreign policy and promoting the state's interests, and why have certain factions continued to side with Iran? These questions will be explored through a case study and descriptive analysis. This thesis will examine whether Iran's effectiveness in utilizing proxies, specifically the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), is a sustainable foreign policy option, and if the future of Iran's grand strategy through a proxy militia is a sustainable option to promote state interests.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The United States has an enduring regional interest in the Middle East. The most recent U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) highlights the focus to disrupt financing and discredit extremism that currently resides within the region.[1] Therefore, it is important to examine what factors influence a state to utilize militant proxy clients, and the challenges they face with employing proxy clients to advance state interests outside of their borders. Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been successful in expanding its influence throughout the Middle East through a broad network of proxy organizations. However, even though proxy warfare is not a new term, security studies have tended not to focus on proxy war as this style of warfare has been conducted in the background of foreign diplomacy.[2]

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[1] "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," The White House, March 3, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/.

[2] Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, *War and Conflict in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 2.

The dawn of the nuclear age resulted in states seeking out a different means for extending their political influence outside of their defined borders with a return on political gains and little risk of conflict. From the mid twentieth century onward, conventional state-on-state warfare has diminished. This demise combined with the lingering conflicts of Afghanistan and Iraq have left a lasting impression on both American and European powers with their keenness to mobilize large forces against an "asymmetric enemy."[3] When looking at the various states that have relied on proxy clients as a tool of foreign policy or national security, their employment has become a hybrid threat that is nestled within other elements of a state's political and security goals.[4]

The utilization of this hybrid threat, incorporating unconventional tactics such as the targeting of terrorism and criminal networks, is now nestled within a conventional military strategy of a uniformed force.[5] Are these methods sustainable as a state further develops, such as in the case of Iran? And what factors cause certain factions to support Iran's interest from a far?

Iran continues to face growing challenges to its own state security with international sanctions imposed and growing environmental concerns about water scarcity and resource mismanagement.[6] This, combined with a growing civil unrest and economic decline, has stressed Iran's ability to maintain its independence within the Middle East. Perhaps as a result, Iran has moved closer both politically and strategically with Russia and China, suggesting a shift in its anti-great power revolutionary ethos: "neither East nor West."[7] The assumption can be made that Iran will be included in U.S. security strategies for the foreseeable future and will be the primary adversary of Middle Eastern neighbors. The

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[3] Ibid., 5.

[4] Ibid., 5.

[5] Michael A. Innes, ed., *Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates & the Use of Force*, 1st ed (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2012), xiv.

[6] Ahmad Majidyar, "Growing Environmental Problems Strain Iran's Ties with Its Neighbors," Middle East Institute, July 5, 2017, https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-environmental-problems-strain-irans-ties-its-neighbors.

[7] Clement Therme, "Iran's 'Neither East Nor West' Slogan Today," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, February 8, 2019, https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/irans-neither-east-nor-west-slogan-today-22234.

examination of the factors that allows Iran to utilize proxies as an instrument in foreign policy, promotion of states interest, and national security may provide answers on Iran's strategic conduct in the future.

C.   DEFINITIONS

The term "proxy war" has been defined in multiple contexts and can becoming confusing at time due to the ability to view a proxy war as a stand-alone conflict. In this thesis, proxy wars will follow the definition Mumford states is an "indirect engagement in conflict by third parties wishing to influence is strategic outcome."[8] This definition is relevant when discussing Iran as it defines proxy war as a component of modern war pursuing an outcome through a means that balances "interest, ideology, and risk."[9]

The term "client" will be utilized in describing actors that are associated with the "state." When the term client is referenced, the relation to the state is associated with the definition deemed by Max Weber. A state is "a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."[10] The clarification of the term state is imperative as a "client" has the ability to employ force at the direction of what it deems to be a legitimate governing body.

D.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories on the employment of proxies have not been studied as a standalone element within warfare until recently. As described by Andrew Mumford, security studies have not tended to focus solely on proxy war, as this style of warfare had been conducted in the background of foreign diplomacy during the Cold War.[11] As studies progressed after the Cold War, there has been a rise in "collective proxy strategies," a term used to describe either mutual support to one organization either by mutual corporations or informal

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[8] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, I.

[9] Ibid., 2.

[10] Ariel I. Ahram, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, 2011), 7.

[11] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 2.

alliances.[12] The involvement in achieving a common goal has shifted from the traditional view of collective security that involves traditional diplomacy to what is now an informal method of promoting a state's interests through an informal collective providing support to proxies from afar.

The literature concerning proxy employment can be divided into two main schools of thought, a state centric approach and a non-state centric approach. When analyzing a state centric view, Ray Cline and Yonah Alexander offer a candid definition of terrorism that includes the state which is defined as "the deliberate employment of violence or the threat of use of violence by sovereign states or sub national groups encouraged or assisted by sovereign states to attain strategic and political objectives by acts in violation of law."[13] On the contrary, to understand proxy operations, Idean Salehyan argues that a non-state-centric view must be analyzed. His belief is that civil wars are non-isolated events due to direct association that both the government of a state and an opponent are tied to the much larger picture of conflicts between states.[14] This literature review will look at both approaches to proxy employment, and further review what causes a client to support a state actor.

1.   State Centric Approach

Between 1970 and 1980, almost all the large-scale terrorist organizations had direct state backing. The most prevalent examples are Lebanese Hizballah supported by Iran, India's backing of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, and multiple Arab states supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). According to Jeffrey Bale, the current theory on proxy utilization is based around personal biases that are politically influenced and can be linked back to state intelligence agencies.[15] From the international relations camp, the

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[12] Ibid., 103.

[13] Innes, *Making Sense of Proxy Wars*, 6.

[14] Idean Salehyan, *Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 165.

[15] Innes, *Making Sense of Proxy Wars*, 4.

main actors is a nation-state, where culture and politics merge as one.[16] Due to this perspective taking on a strong view from a realist approach, this theory would focus on the direct actions of the state, but not that of the non-state actors.[17] This left a gap in the comprehension of their "nature, ideologies, motivation and objectives," a understanding that is needed in order to properly understand its "role" in international affairs.[18] This state centric view draws upon the Cold War roots that believed the Soviet Union was behind terrorist activities taking place globally.

A second theory that is proposed evolved from a leftist approach to the state centric view. It contradicts the thought that the Western governments are not the innocent targets of attacks by terrorists' regimes or state sponsored proxies. Instead, Bale states that "right-wing governments and papa-state apparatuses" that are backed by U.S. and the West are the main culprits of terrorism.[19] This view highlights a state sponsor arming a proxy to promote its security interests within a region, and the U.S. is a case study according to Mumford. The U.S. has provided aid to Israel that has averaged $2 billion per year since 1971, with two-thirds towards military assistance.[20] This does not include an additional $2 billion for the development of modern tanks and aircraft.[21] The U.S. has not been directly involved in a conflict in which Israel has fought.[22] However, the U.S. has used Israel as a proxy to reinforce its security interests within the region, and a means to prevent future conflicts in line with its own security agenda. The link between both schools of thought described is the nation-state, which causes a lack of review on the non-state actor.

State sponsorship is seen present day in the theories defined by David Wurmser, a foreign policy analyst describing the war of terrorism is "an epic struggle between a whole

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[16] Ibid., 3.

[17] Ibid., 3.

[18] Ibid., 5.

[19] Ibid., 4.

[20] Clyde R Mark, "Israel: U.S. Foreign Assistance," *CRS Issue Brief for Congress*, Israel: U.S. Foreign Assistance, April 26, 2005, 4.

[21] Ibid., 3.

[22] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 40.

category of nations…the seven state sponsors of terror and us."[23] Bale uses this to describe the theory that if these state sponsors did not exist, then Islamist terrorism would not be a threat to the West.

As with state sponsorship, Daniel Byman suggests there is a lack of comprehension as to what defines a sponsor of terrorism. He describes the process as political, which leads to a gap in actually understanding the effects of a state sponsor.[24] This further is broken down in the terms "terrorism" and "state actor," as both must be defined. Byman agrees that if all actions of a state are described as terrorism, then one can no longer clearly identify the link and further complicating any type of actionable solution.[25]

When describing the range of support a state can provide, Byman expands the spectrum to include non-deliberate government action as seen in Thailand.[26] Groups such as the Karen National Union in Myanmar, have set up bases in neighboring Thailand. This has placed Thailand in the spectrum of support described by Byman, as Thailand has neglected to secure its borders with Myanmar, allowing guerillas to have access to support from Karen refugee camps within Thailand's borders.[27] This has led to border disputes and diplomatic friction between both countries as cross border "hot pursuit" raids take place and further strain relations between both countries.[28]

This range of support is seen in case studies in regions across the globe. In Sudan, Darfurese rebels carry out operations and have base camps in eastern Chad leading Sudan to openly accuse Chad of harboring rebels who share the same ethnicity within these regions.[29] In the Middle East, Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants have enjoyed the haven of neighboring Pakistan, which has strained the relationship of the Afghanistan and Pakistani

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[23] Innes, *Making Sense of Proxy Wars*, 10.

[24] Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

[25] Ibid., 7.

[26] Ibid., 10.

[27] Ibid., 11.

[28] Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders*, 3.

[29] Ibid., 5.

governments.[30] However, a gap in these theories is that they fail to address the groups that have their own political agenda and agree to side with a state sponsor.[31]

2. Non-State Centric Approach

To understand proxy operations, Idean Salehyan states that a non-state centric view must be analyzed as to counter future proxy threats, as an understanding of the organization and its desired outcome is needed. His belief is that civil wars are non-isolated events due to direct association that both the government of a state and an opponent are tied to the much larger picture of conflicts between states.[32] He provides quantitative studies that armed conflict both in a state, and between states has a correlation to transnational involvement.[33] Specifically, a weak state does not have the ability to maintain peace within their own borders and becomes susceptible to influence from outside actors.

Iraq has experienced the trouble of maintaining peace within its own borders as seen with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and its ongoing conflict with the Turkish government. However, the PKK has reached out to disrupt Turkish interests abroad with support from as far away as Europe.[34] The PKK is a non-state actor who has ties to land within the Iraqi state and has been allowed to operate freely. Turkey continues to conduct cross-border attacks on sovereign Iraqi soil without authorization, escalating tensions within the region.

A new theory for viewing the use of proxies as described by Mumford is through the eyes of religion. The theory became relevant with Osama Bin-Laden's Fatwa declaring Jihad against "Jews and Crusaders" in 1998.[35] This view changes the concept of the relationship that a proxy is to a sponsor, as now the relationship it tied to a religious figure.

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[30] Ibid., 5.

[31] Innes, *Making Sense of Proxy Wars*, 6.

[32] Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders*, 165.

[33] Ibid., 166.

[34] Ibid., 1.

[35] Fred Halliday, *Two Hours That Shook the World: September 11, 2001: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi, 2002), 217.

These proxy organizations are interpreted as "proxy clients of God," and not of a state, in their actions of taking arms against those who threaten Islam.[36]

3. Why Do States Employ Proxy Clients?

When reviewing the general theories on proxy studies, the reasons why a state would employ a proxy client are further debated. These reasons are broken down into employment cost and deniability, low risk, and a lack of a nuclear deterrent. As described by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1955 regarding the use of foreign assistance programs during the Cold War as a form of proxy, they are "the cheapest insurance in the world."[37]

A proxy client provides an option that is less costly than a modernized military, that includes reduced risk to the supporting state to achieve a desired end state. The funding of a proxy client can often cost less than the development and build-up of a conventional military force. The proxy client option allows for state support to come in both the form of overt and covert form. For example, Iran and Afghanistan have taken a public view and openly stated they support terrorist actions.[38] For Iran, Hizballah has been operating against Israel and now receives hundreds of millions of dollars directly from Iran annually and is public with the support it receives from the state.[39] This is often not the case though. As Mumford describes, the use of proxies enables an outcome when direct involvement risks the consequences imposed by "interest, ideology, and risk."[40] This empowers weaker states to overcome the reach of more powerful states that a conventional military response would not facilitate.

After 1945 and the advancement in nuclear weapons, the desire for direct state on state conflict was lessened with the risk of mutually assured destruction. Further, at the conclusion of World War I and World War II, major powers saw the consequences of a

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[36] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 105.

[37] Ibid., 100.

[38] Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 10.

[39] Shannon W. Caudill, "Hizballah Rising: Iran's Proxy Warriors" (National Defense University Institution for National Strategic Studies, January 2008), 128, https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA516517.

[40] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 2.

state-on-state war with the gruesomely high death tolls that affected all social classes. This is seen currently between India and Pakistan and ongoing tensions which include sporadic kinetic actions. Pakistan has employed a robust network of proxy clients as part of its own approach to national security. This is nestled within its strategy for conventional military forces and a nuclear deterrent.[41] Both states possess nuclear arms, and a nuclear response from either could kill more than five hundred thousand people with more than one million casualties from a 50-kiloton weapon over New Delhi or Islamabad.[42] When a country lacks a nuclear capability as a deterrent, a proxy client can provide both an offensive and defensive capability that again is a cheaper cost than a conventional force, or can further offset a underdeveloped conventional military in achieving strategic goals.[43]

Proxy groups and their actions are not restricted by defined state borders. Governments have difficulty defeating these types of organizations even when they have the upper hand on modern military equipment. Proxies can break defined state borders and operate outside of their opposers' reach in regions that are unstable and provide protection. These regions further allow a group the ability to gain support from regional ethnic ties. This provides a proxy organization the upper hand as they now seek to avoid their opposition's authority which is often defined by sovereign space with defined borders.[44] The ability to transcend borders allows the conduct of offensive operations in areas that a conventional, uniformed force cannot operate without severe consequences. As Kapur describes in his study of Pakistan, the use of militant proxies has allowed Pakistan to slowly drain India's financial resources at a minimal cost to Pakistan. Further, Pakistan has used its proxies to support its states interests in challenging control of the Kashmir region, and in more recent times, Pakistan militant policy has been used to secure relations on its border

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[41] S. Paul Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy: Islamist Militancy, National Security, and the Pakistani State* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8.

[42] Ibid., 2.

[43] Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2019): 7, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862.

[44] Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders*, 7.

with Afghanistan by promoting the Taliban and promoting a friendly government on its Wester border.[45]

4. Iran's Iraqi Clients

When viewing why a Shiite movement or organization would continue to back Iran, or begin distancing themselves from them, Ostovar describes three conditions. These are that the client must share the Islamic Republics interpretation of Shi'a Islam, Iran is the main supporter of monetary and material support, and the client supports Iran's political agenda not just locally to the client, but within the region.[46] If these three ties are not met, the client is susceptible to finding the need to distance itself from Iran or seek support elsewhere. This thesis enhances on Ostovar's theories by narrowing the scope to the Iraqi Shiite organizations under the umbrella of the PMF. Ostovar's criteria will be applied to the Badr organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Katai'ib Hezbollah (KH) and their relationship to the Iranian state and current political movements.

When analyzing Iran's employment of proxy clients and the causes that stimulate an organization to side with Iran, both a state and non-state centric approach are relevant. Iran has overtly supported specific proxy clients since 1979 and has taken a hard stance in moving away from relations with foreign powers. However, a non-state centric approach is relevant in this thesis, specifically for analyzing why a certain Shiite faction would continue to support Iran.

E. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Why a state utilizes a proxy force, and what has allowed Iran to continue to utilize proxies as a key tool in its foreign policy will be examined through a case study analysis. Further, the causes for certain factions to side with Iran as a state sponsor under an independent security institution to the Iraqi military will also be reviewed through a descriptive study as this will provide a metric for Iran's future successes of retaining proxy

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[45] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 10.

[46] Afshon Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion," *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1239, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy185.

clients. For this, the area of focus will be on the Iraqi Shiite factions of the PMF, and the causes that have driven Shiite political parties and populations to outsource the Iraqi security institution to an independent institution with ties to the Iranian state.

1. First Argument

As Iran continues to strive for independence of foreign influence, the use of proxy clients will continue to be a cost effective and low risk option, especially in neighboring countries that border the state. Iran will continue to exert its influence through a network of proxy clients while maintaining and continuing to modernize its unformed military for defense of its borders.

2. Second Argument

Iraq has experienced two influential events in recent history that have affected the Iraqi Shiite view on Iranian backing. The first was the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the second, the movement to expel ISIS from its borders. For influential Shiite leaders, the potential of integrating the PMF into the Iraqi military is seen as a means of walking back support to Iran, a move to take a non-sectarian approach to unify the state and integrate Iraq into regional affairs that will bring eventual stability and removal of U.S. intervention.

F. RESEARCH DESIGN

A case study review will be used to examine the means and outcomes of proxy employment due to the availability of historical examples. Two general case studies will be included. In the review of each case study, the arguments regarding Iran's future employment of a network of proxy clients will be compared to previous successes and failures within the study.

In addition to the works depicted in the literature review, research will comprise of secondary works and primary source material. Examples of secondary works include professional journal articles, textbooks, and scholarly articles. Primary sources will include news reports, government websites, and speeches by regional leaders and religious figures.

G. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter focuses on the introduction and definitions. The second dissects the PMF's dominate Shiite organizations that are associated with Iran. Within this chapter, the Shiite organizations discussed will include the Badr Organization, AAH, and KH. The third is comprised of a case study review and comparison of Pakistan to Iran, and the similarities each state had with proxy employment. This chapter is dived into four sections, focusing on the conditions that allowed for proxies to flourish, the subversive approach, factors that hindered proxy employment, and the connection to Iran's sustained proxy employment. The final chapter concludes with Iran's ability to continue to retain and employ proxy clients. The implications of integrating the PMF under the Iraqi military or the disbandment of the umbrella organization, and the effects this decision will have on the future of Iraq and U.S. Middle East involvement are discussed.

II.   IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

When the U.S. entered Iraq in 2003, Iran seized the opportunity to advance its strategic objectives in the war-torn country.[47] The void left by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein allowed for pre-existing armed Shia organizations to operate with little impediment during this period. Iran sent military aid, troops, and advisors to support Iraq in the defeat of Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) through pre-existing Shia organizations which compose a portion of the clients operating under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF). With Iraq granting formal recognition of the PMF in November 2016 as an umbrella group of the official state military force, Iran gained a strategic foothold in Iraq through these Iranian backed clients of the PMF.[48] This placed Iran in a power position to influence and have a direct voice in Iraqi government decisions.

The use of proxy militias, or clients, is not a new concept within the Iraqi state construct. Iraqi political leaders have had a history of employing their own loyalist militias to support their political agenda, and this history can provide context to the rise of such umbrella organizations as the Popular Mobilization Forces.[49] Cases involving loyalist militias have been seen dating back to Iraq-Iran War in which Jaysh al-Sha'abi were employed and later, groups such as Jaysh al-Quds and Fedayin Saddam were heavily involved in both the Gulf War of 1990-1991 and later during the United States and coalition forces combat operations of 2003.[50]

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has been the main controller of Iran's proxy clients in carrying out the militant actions associated with Iran's foreign policy and interests outside of its state borders. In Iraq, the fall of Mosul by ISIS provided a means forward in Iran's promotion of state's interests through its use of proxy clients as a part of

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[47] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 4.

[48] Ibid., 20.

[49] Inna Rudolf, "The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalization* (blog), November 21, 2019, 16, https://icsr.info/2019/11/21/the-hashds-popular-gambit-demystifying-pmu-integration-in-post-is-iraq/.

[50] Ibid., 16.

its "grand strategy and national security" as described by Afshon Ostovar.[51] The void left by the failures of Iraq's government and military against ISIS provided a means for the increase in armed movements within Iraq's Shiite population, especially post 2014 when Ayatollah Ali Sistani issued a fatwa calling for "armed resistance" against ISIS.[52]

A.   POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES

Iran has capitalized on the development of proxy clients with strong ties to the local political structure. The is displayed with the construct of the PMF acting as an umbrella for multiple proxy organizations in which many have pledged their allegiance and support to Iran's theocratic government and version of Islam. The method of utilizing a proxy client to directly influence a state's political apparatus is described by Ostovar as part of Iran's use of proxy clients within its grand strategy as a means of promoting Iran's own state interests.[53] The rise of the PMF in 2014 and its establishment as an umbrella organization that included Iranian backed clients is reflected by this practice. The PMF quickly achieved legitimacy in Iraq by further uniting the multiple Shiite militias across the state with the threat of ISIS.

In June 2014, Nouri al-Maliki the Iraqi Prime Minister endorsed the creation of the PMF even though the Iraqi constitution does not allow the creation of "militia entities" that are not a part of the armed forces.[54] The non-traditional creation of the PMF and the nationwide support it received with its creation would not have been possible if it were not for the religious endorsement from Ayatollah Ali Sistani.[55]

Sistani's "Wajib al-Kifai" fatwa was unique as it was directed at all Iraqi citizens, not just a particular sect or religion to join the Iraqi security forces. This included Christian

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[51] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 4.

[52] Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises," August 14, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-24/irans-axis-resistance-rises.

[53] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 4.

[54] Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalization* (blog), 2018, 11, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ICSR-Report-From-Battlefield-to-Ballot-Box-Contextualising-the-Rise-and-Evolution-of-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Popular-Mobilisation-Units-1.pdf.

[55] Rudolf, "The Hashd's Popular Gambit," 20.

and Sunni members, further contributing to the image of inclusivity in the subsequent formation of the PMF. However, due to the state of disarray of the uniformed military, Sistani's call to arms increased the numbers of new recruits primarily for the non-state militias that would go on to become a part of the PMF instead of volunteers for Iraq's beleaguered security forces.[56]

In November 2016, Iraq granted formal recognition to the PMF through the Hashd Law. Hashd Law legally integrated the PMF into the Iraqi security forces construct as a "multi-layered paramilitary body."[57] However, the PMF still retained the title of an "independent" element within the Iraqi Security Forces.[58] This allowed the Iranian backed factions within the PMF to operate under the identity of both a state or a non-state actors depending on the optic required to support the current political and strategic objectives.[59] If the PMF were to lose the independent label, the construct would become disbanded with the integration into traditional Iraqi Security force units. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) spokesman Naeem al-Aboudi publicly stated that this type of integration would dissolve current groups such as AAH within the umbrella of the PMF.[60]

Iran utilized the PMF independent structure to send military aid, troops, and advisors to support Iraq in the defeat of ISIS.[61] Adil Abdul Mahdi, the Prime Minister of Iraq made a decree in July of 2019 that formally set the precedence of the PMF assimilating into the Iraqi security forces.[62] The PMF, since its assimilation into the Iraqi military forces, has been attempting to shed the image of being associated with the term "militia"

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[56] Ibid., 20.

[57] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 12.

[58] Ibid., 12.

[59] Ibid., 12.

[60] Ibid., 21.

[61] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 20.

[62] Rudolf, "The Hashd's Popular Gambit," 3.

under the Iraq military, instead focusing on an optic that the PMF is now a "state-sanctioned security institution."[63]

From an institutional standpoint, Iraq is utilizing Iranian backed paramilitary forces to coup proof current standing authorities and protect its status as a state. Coup proofing is seen with Iraqi political figures often creating their own militias of loyal followers to protect their interest and could be viewed as setting the precedence for the PMF and the argument that Iraq has now begun to outsource its own security institution.[64] This is described by Rudolf as taking a "battlefield authority" and transitioning it into "post-war institutional leverage."[65] However, the PMF is unique to the Middle East in its early stages as it held a position of power as a security institution. The PMF is unlike other organizations such as Hezbollah and the IRGC operating within the region. The PMF does not have physical "control" of Iraq as Hezbollah does with portions of Lebanon, nor does the PMF serve as the primary military element for Iraq as seen with the IRGC serving as Iran's primary state's defense force.[66]

1. Badr Organization

Operating as a de facto arm of Iran since 1980, Badr has publicly pledged its support to Qassim Soleimani and its operational agenda has been openly controlled by the IRGC.[67] Labeled as the oldest Iranian proxy in Iraq, Badr has been operating as the militant arm for the largest Shiite political party in Iraq, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in

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[63] Ibid., 3.

[64] Ibid., 16.

[65] Ibid., 12.

[66] Ibid., 15.

[67] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 17.

Iraq (SCIRI). [68] The Badr organization can be described as the most powerful organization under the umbrella of the PMF with an estimated strength of over 20,000 fighters.[69]

Badr has remained devoted to both Iran's theocratic system and Supreme Leader, to include supporting the "regional strategic goals" of Iran within the Middle East.[70] Further, as Badr shares the same religious belief as Iran, it has solidified their synchronization with Iran on "domestic and regional agendas."[71]

Badr has taken on the Iranian theocratic Islamic system as the "religio-political ideology" of the Badr organization with their allegiance to the Iranian Supreme Leader.[72] Badr's embracement of this interpretation of Shi'a Islam in that any action against the Iranian Supreme Leader is a "sin" sets the foundation for a relationship that takes priority over Iraqi state political alliances.[73]

For Badr, the SCIRI relationship with the Iraqi Shiite population appealed to the United States government to such an extent that monetary support was offered in 1998. However, Badr declined due to the United States foreign policy moves of "isolating Iran and Iraq."[74] Badr receives its primary financial backing solely from Iran. More importantly, there are no other viable options for financial stability with the regional and global influence that Iran possesses.[75]

When the United States called for the disarmament of the Badr organization, Badr successfully reimaged itself as the Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development

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[68] Mapping Militant Organization, "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development," Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation, accessed February 2, 2021, https://stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/print_view/435.

[69] Andras Derzsi-Horvath, Erica Gaston, and Bahra Saleh, "Who's Who: Quick Facts About Local and Sub-State Forces," Global Public Policy Institute, August 16, 2017, https://www.gppi.net/2017/08/16/quick-facts-about-local-and-sub-state-forces.

[70] Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East," 1240.

[71] Ibid., 1246.

[72] Ibid., 1238.

[73] Ibid., 1239.

[74] Mapping Militant Organization, "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development."

[75] Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East," 1249.

to avoid intervention and appear non-militant 2003.[76] Due to the weakened state of the Iraqi security forces at this time, Badr has been cited with 16,000 of its members joining the uniformed Iraqi Security forces between 2003-2005.[77]

In 2007, Badr further solidified its relationship with Iran. The SCIRI attempted to reimage itself as a non-Iranian backed organization that no longer aligned itself with Tehran by changing its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).[78] In a move to maintain its relationship and preserve its loyalty to Iran, Badr dislodged itself from the ISCI and became both a political and military organization.[79] As the new Badr Organization, the group focused on achieving a strong political footprint within Iraq along with expanding Shiite power.[80] Hadi al-Amiri, the leader and secretary general of the Badr Organization called Ali Khamenei "the leader not only for Iranians, but the Islamic nation."[81]

It has been argued that the Badr Organization ascended into political positions such as those in the Ministry of Interior in 2014 and holding 22 seats in parliament during the same period due to Badr's collaboration with coalition forces after the fall of Saddam.[82] This collaboration during the early 2000's was not seen with other Shiite factions such as Sadr's Mahdi Army.[83]

The Badr organization enjoyed a series of victories fighting against ISIS starting in 2014 with notable victories flighting side by side with Iraqi security forces in Mosul and Fallujah.[84] During the battle of Tikrit in 2015, Reuters reported that both Badr fighters and

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[76] Mapping Militant Organization, "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development."

[77] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 18.

[78] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 16.

[79] Mapping Militant Organization, "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development."

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 18.

[84] Mapping Militant Organization, "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development."

the Iraq Army utilized the same model tanks with the logo on the side serving as the only difference between forces.[85]

2.   Asa'ib Ahl ah-Haq: League of the Righteous

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) was seen originally as a member of the Mahdi Army prior to 2006. As an Iranian backed militant group under the PMF, AAH has moved into the political realm of Iraqi politics with its membership into the Fatah coalition. [86] Prior to AAH splitting from the Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi forces, the followers under Qais al-Khazali began attacking United States and coalition forces even after Sadr gave the order to cease offensive operations.[87] These events led to the IRGC recruiting Khazali in 2006 under Qassim Soleimani, and the rise to what is now known as the present day AAH who receives its financial and logistical support openly from Iran.[88] As a member of the PMF since 2014, AAH has now enjoyed funding from both Iraq and Iran. [89]

With the rise of ISIS, AAH has imaged itself as a nationalist political actor and has used the Sistani's call to arms as a means to "re-legitimize its armed resistance."[90] The fight with ISIS has put AAH in a unique situation as the group claimed over 6,000 attacks against United States and coalition force between 2006 and 2011, and has now put AAH on the same side as their enemies enemy.[91] Even as such, AAH's anti-American rhetoric has not changed. AAH under Khazali was responsible for the 2007 Karbala attack in which

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[85] "Badr Organization," Counter Extremism Project, accessed April 6, 2021, https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/badr-organization.

[86] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 18.

[87] Mapping Militant Organizations, "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," Stanford University, July 2018, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/asaib-ahl-al-haq.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 19.

[91] Ibid., 19.

five American soldiers were killed, to include four who were captured and executed.[92] It is argued that the AHH raid was carried out by the direction of the IRGC.[93]

Following the Karbala attack, Khazali was captured by United States forces but was released in a prisoner exchange in December 2009. During Khazali's detainment, many AAH members fled to Iran and during this time received training and support from IRGC.[94]

With the American withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, AAH began to reimage itself as not an "anti-Western Islamist Militia," but a nationalist political party with an agenda to maintain a Shiite run Iraqi government and increase Iranian influence within Iraq.[95] In 2015, a spokesman for AAH announced that AAH is "willing to accept a U.S. military presence in Iraq, under the supervision of the Iraqi government."[96] However, in 2016 along with Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), AAH has called upon the Iraqi parliament to implement an immediate withdrawal of United States and coalition forces, threatening a military uprising and action against coalition forces if not.[97]

Created in 2018, AAH was one of eight groups that formed the Fatah Alliance who all had ties to Iran for monetary and logistical support in funding their militant operations.[98] AAH won 15 of the 48 seats held by the Fatah Alliance in parliament, the largest of the eight members. Iran's direct backing of groups such as AAH in Fatah has

[92] Bill Roggio, "The Karbala Attack and the IRGC | FDD's Long War Journal," January 26, 2007, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/01/the_karbala_attack_a.php.

[93] Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Ties Iran to Deadly Iraq Attack," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2007, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/02/world/middleeast/02cnd-iran.html.

[94] Mapping Militant Organizations, "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq."

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 19.

[98] "Iran's Roster of Influence Abroad | Wilson Center," accessed March 28, 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-roster-political-influence-abroad-0.

furthered Iranian national security goals as seen in the parliamentary vote of 170–0 to expel U.S. forces from Iraq in January 2020.[99]

3. Katai'ib Hezbollah

Originally established in 2003 serving as an umbrella for multiple Iraqi Shiite militant groups, KH has had direct ties to Iran since its inception due to the linage of KH's founder. KH was founded and led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and later led by Ahman al-Hamidawi after Muhandis was killed in a U.S. drone strike. The drone strike which took place in January of 2020, targeted, and killed IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani, in which Muhandis was also present resulting in his death.[100] KH members swear an oath of loyalty to Ayatollah Khamenei, which includes accepting Khamenei as their own spiritual leader.[101]

Muhandis has identified as an Iraqi nationalist who seeks to unify the countries "ethno-sectarian identities" under a government whose system is inclusive of all.[102] Prior to his death, Muhandis served as the deputy to Qassem Soleimani for Iraqi operations, the Iraqi deputy national security advisor, and the operational leader of the PMF.[103] Prior to the creation of KH, Muhandis has had early roots to Iran with the Iran-Iraq war fleeing Iraq to fight for Iran in the 1980s. Dating back to 1984, Muhandis played a direct role in vetting and recruiting Iraqi Shiite volunteers to form what was the first Badr battalion composed of Iraqi Mujahideen Forces and Iraqi Shiite prisoners of war.[104] The membership of

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Mapping Militant Organizations, "Kata'ib Hezbollah," Stanford University, September 2020, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/kataib-hezbollah.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 20.

[103] Amir Toumaj, "Iran's Qods Force Chief Calls Iraqi Militia Commander a 'Living Martyr,'" FDD's Long War Journal, July 13, 2017, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/07/irans-qods-force-chief-calls-iraqi-militia-commander-living-martyr.php.

[104] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 17.

Muhandis within the creation of Badr led to his direct relationship with both the Iran backed Hezbollah operating in Lebanon and IRGC.[105]

With the establishment of KH by Muhandis, he utilized these relationships with Iran to establish a network of smuggling routes to receive weapons and logistical aid directly from Iran that are still employed today.[106] The lethality of KH was on display between 2003 and 2011 with the U.S. and coalition military involvement in Iraq. Ali Khendery, the U.S. ambassador for Iraq stated that KH was responsible for "some of the most lethal attacks against U.S. and coalition forces."[107] During this period, KH abstained from direct targeting of the Iraqi government and forces. However, KH refused Iraqi government requests to disband after the coalition withdrawal stating the instability of Iraq did not allow this.[108]

With the withdrawal of coalition forces post 2011, KH began focusing its efforts on supporting the Assad regime in Syria at the direction of Soleimani along with countering the rise of ISIS in Iraq.[109] This event supports the growth of Iranian influence to promote its own political and security agenda within the region through non-state actors. Even though there is confirmation that KH has sent fighters to Syria, Muhandis has publicly countered such actions and stated that these individuals are volunteers and are doing so under their own accord, removing the PMF, KH, and Iran from accountability.[110]

With KH officially becoming a part of the PMF in 2014, Muhandis utilized his influence to expand upon KH within the umbrella of the organization. Muhandis successfully used KH's growing influence by becoming the "de facto" leader of the PMF.

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[105] Mapping Militant Organizations, "Kata'ib Hezbollah."

[106] Ibid.

[107] "Kata'ib Hezbollah," United Against Nuclear Iran, accessed March 30, 2021, https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/report/kataib-hezbollah.

[108] Mapping Militant Organizations, "Kata'ib Hezbollah."

[109] "Kata'ib Hezbollah."

[110] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 20.

KH was a key player with the retaking of key areas captured by Iraq, to include Samarra, Tikrit, Fallujah, and Mosul.[111]

As an independent element to the Iraqi security construct, KH has been able to openly defy orders and government officials when actions would go against their stance on U.S. involvement to retake ISIS controlled territory. In an act that is not observed by Iraqi army or Federal Police units in the fight against ISIS, Kataib Hezbollah has openly disobeyed orders from the Iraqi prime minister. This has included KH spokesman Jafar al-Husseini threatening against any participation by U.S. aircraft in the 2015 battle of Tikrit. Husseini stated that KH possesses "the capabilities to shoot them down" when the Iraqi PM requested U.S. air support assistance to break a deadlock in the fighting.[112]

As the second strongest member of the Fatah party behind AAH, KH can sway the Iraqi government and export the Islamic ideals of Iran. KH has continued to defy decrees from the Iraqi government to disband and lay down its arms, with KH stating to the media "it will never give up its weapons."[113] Further, according to a spokesman for KH in December 2019, "kicking the Americans out of Iraq remains the key demand and parliament must approve a law in this regard."[114]

B. SUPREME COUNCIL FOR ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAQ

Unique to Iran that is not apparent in other states or studies of state-proxy client relationships is the fact that many of Iran's proxy clients share both a religious and ideological identity. This is described by Ostovar in Iraq with clients following the Twelver Shiite religion that composes the majority of the state of Iran, and further adopting the ideological devotion viewing Iran's supreme leader as the "ultimate religio-political authority."[115] While Iran prefers groups that align with the theocratic interpretation of

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[111] Mapping Militant Organizations, "Kata'ib Hezbollah."

[112] Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Honored, Not Contained," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 2020, 104.

[113] "Kata'ib Hezbollah," Counter Extremism Project, accessed March 31, 2021, https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/kata%E2%80%99ib-hezbollah.

[114] "Iran's Roster of Influence Abroad | Wilson Center."

[115] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 9.

Shi'a Islam, this preference has not prevented Iran from supporting Sunni factions that have overlapping domestic interests. Ostovar highlights Iran has seen broader success in retaining long term loyalty of its clients when the client aligns with Iran's religious practices, Iran is the primary supplier of material goods, and domestic and regional goals align with Iranian interests.[116]

The Iranian Shiite backed organization called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), eventually renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) was a Shia Iraqi organization that fought against Saddam during the Iran-Iraq War through its military wing, the Badr Brigade, which was trained and armed by the IRGC.[117] Iran utilized SCIRI to lay a foundation for its future involvement and direct influence of Iraqi Shia political parties and the development of militant groups that were able to carry out actions to achieve political influence over its Iraqi neighbor.[118] According to Mumford, SCIRI's militant actions were a means for Iran to affect the current conflict in Iraq and the presence of U.S. forces, without becoming overtly involved.[119] Badr continued to serve under the IRGC and remained as a militant arm and eventually separated from SCIRI to form its own political organization after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Upon the fall of Saddam Hussein, SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and began to distance itself from its former Iranian ally. The removal of the term "revolution" in 2007 by the ISCI signifies the move to support Iraq's new order, and no longer supporting Iran's Islamic revolution.[120] The move of aligning with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as the senior cleric further diluted the political and ideological linkages between the party and Iran.[121] The deliberate distancing of the SCIRI from Iran can be explained by Salehyan's theory that actions taken between proxies and regional neighbors are not independent of each other, and the SCIRI actions of non-compliance

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[116] Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East," 1239.

[117] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 51.

[118] Ibid., 52.

[119] Ibid., 52.

[120] Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East," 1245.

[121] Ibid., 1245.

signaled a loss of influence from Iran with the organizations movement away from armed Islamic revolution.[122] The separation signaled that the SCIRI is no longer a revolutionary arm of Iran, but instead, emphasizes the SCIRI desire to showcase its legitimacy as a Iraqi political party.

Ostovar describes how the Iraqi Shi'a political groups returning from Iran had difficulties not siding with the U.S. involvement of the time, and their ability to reach the Shi'a population further resulted in this move away from Iran.[123] Ammar al-Hakim, the Supreme Council's leader continued to distance his political project from Iran, when in 2017 he split from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq completely and formed a new, nominally secular political party called the National Wisdom Party.[124] The party's platform clashed with Iranian views as it was based on "non-Islamist, non-sectarian political ideals" that are in stark contrast with political Islam from Iran.[125]

C.   CONCLUSION

The evidence presented with the current breakdown of the PMF will present many long-term challenges. As an Iraqi "independent" security institution, the PMF incorporates multiple organizations that do not necessarily have an allegiance to the Iraqi state. The observations on the origins, allegiances, and leadership of the PMF provides context in understanding Iran's future goals of broadening its national security agenda by utilizing its influence established through this parallel institution to the state.

The argument is proposed that the origins of the PMF's leadership and foundation for a trans-national relationship with a state sponsor are directly correlated to the long-term allegiances established with Iran prior to the Iran-Iraq War. The hybrid threat that the PMF presents, described by Innes as incorporating unconventional tactics within a uniformed force has been sustainable and flourished to date.[126] However, with the rise of nationalistic

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[122] Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders*, 166.

[123] Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East," 1245.

[124] Ibid., 1245.

[125] Ibid., 1246.

[126] Innes, *Making Sense of Proxy Wars*, xiv.

ideals amongst the Iraqi Shiite population and leadership of the PMF, the influence that Iran poses may become contested. This leads to the challenges associated with Iraq sticking with the current organizational construct of the PMF, and the dangers associated with an independent organization that has a competing agenda to the state government.

In a statement made by Sistani on the security status of Iraq, Sistani stated "the victory over Daesh doesn't mean the end of the battle with terrorism."[127] This choice of words by Sistani implies the Iraqi army still requires the assistance of the PMF for the foreseeable future. Further, Sistani would not risk a hostile response to Iraqi Shiites and clergy if a move were made to dissolve the PMF units.[128] The lack of stability with the current security situation of the Iraqi state forecasts the decision point on whether to integrate the PMF into the Iraqi Security forces construct or allow the PMF to remain an independent affiliation is volatile.

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[127] Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," 13.

[128] Ibid., 13.

III. PAKISTAN CASE STUDY

The examination of Pakistan and its use as a case study in its comparison to Iran will show that there is a similarity in their use of proxy militias as part of a national strategy in achievement of a strategic outcome while avoiding direct military action. To better understand Iran's future strategic conduct, analyzing a state with a similar proxy employment is beneficial. As Iran currently does not possess a nuclear deterrent, the same can be said about Pakistan prior to its nuclear program in the 1980s and the necessity of its use of proxy clients for security and as an approach to its national security goals. Pakistan's proxy clients support the national strategy by countering regional rivals who possess conventional military forces of similar or greater strength, without the inherent risk of a conventional military conflict.

A. CONDITIONS FOR PROXIES TO FLOURISH WITHIN THE STATE

When looking at the various states that have relied on proxy clients as a tool of foreign policy or national security, their employment has become a hybrid threat that is nestled within other elements of a state's political and security goals.[129] This use of proxy clients is further complicated with states such as Pakistan and what actions by the state are categorized as "terrorism" and what are actions of a "state actor." As Byman states, one cannot describe all actions of the state as terrorism as it would make it difficult to understand the state's motives behind its actions.[130] Pakistan has capitalized on "cost, operational and bargaining" benefits from employing a strategy that incorporates proxy clients using Islamic militants, similar to what is seen in Iran to achieve its national security goals.[131]

The appeal of a proxy war over other conventional means of fighting a conflict is rooted within the level of risk that Pakistan is willing to take with direct involvement,

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[129] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 5.

[130] Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 7.

[131] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 21.

particularly the cost that affects the state "politically, financially, or materially."[132] The cost is a driving factor in policy decisions and the low cost of proxy clients off-set a weaker and undermanned uniformed force. As Kupar highlights, cost is a difficult metric to evaluate as states do not normally disclose financial dealings in total amounts spent in support of militant organizations.[133] However, this recurring benefit is seen in states that have employed proxy clients such as Pakistan has done. Proxies are relatively cheap and have a minimum overhead in operations, arms, training, and recruitment when compared to a conventional military force.[134] For example, Pakistan's defense budget was a reportedly $7.8 billion in 2019.[135] Pakistan's most notable and reliable militant proxy, Lashkar-e-Taiba, is believed to have an annual operating budget of $50 million and enjoys a steady income from other sources outside the state of Pakistan in forms of donations and revenue from legitimate businesses.[136] With this figure, even if Pakistan were to fund the entire Lashkar-e-Taiba budget, a $50 million investment only constitutes .65% of Pakistan's current defense budget.

An example is Pakistan's successful use of proxies in the opening days of the first two Kashmir Wars prior to the involvement of its conventional military.[137] This effective use of proxies was evident in the successes of the Pakistani backed militants in Kashmir. As described by Kapur and Ganguly, the successful proxy use highlighted two critical findings. The first critical finding was the realization that a militant group could provide the means to counter India without Pakistan committing its conventional forces and the liability associated with a military blunder.[138] The second was that Pakistan realized that

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[132] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 30.

[133] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 21.

[134] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 14.

[135] "Pakistani Defense Market Expected to Spend US $48.5 Billion on Defense During the Forecast Period, 2020-2024 - ResearchAndMarkets.Com," AP NEWS, January 23, 2020, https://apnews.com/press-release/Business%20Wire/7e1039b21b684c959601c0475e68b069.

[136] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 21.

[137] Ibid., 22.

[138] S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox: Pakistan and Islamist Militancy in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 120.

even though the conflict officially reached a cease fire in Kashmir, militant groups could continue to operate against India within Kashmir to further national strategic goals.[139] Pakistan was successfully able to confront India during the first Kashmir war that ended in a cease-fire in 1949. This led Pakistan to realize the benefits of minimum conventional military involvement and the benefits of utilizing militants. To Pakistan, this was the most sensible way to regain territory that was lost to India in Kashmir.[140]

Another cost benefit of utilizing militant groups is the return that Pakistan receives with the ability of these groups to operate where conventional forces cannot, or where losses to a conventional military would be unacceptable. This benefit can be observed with Pakistani clients' ability to operate almost unimpeded and navigate India's federal forces and emplaced physical barriers. The clients' freedom of movement has been an on-going challenge for India. Further, India's international criticism for its "heavy handed" response within Kashmir, combined with its difficulty countering them has propped up these groups with an image of legitimacy.[141]

An analysis of the 1971 Bangladesh war revealed that Pakistan relied mainly on its conventional military force which resulted in 95,000 Pakistani prisoners.[142] The effect of this costly Pakistani defeat may still be seen in Pakistan's desire to employ militant forces over its conventional military with successes that have been seen within the Kashmir region. The cost of the Bangladesh war on Pakistan's conventional forces will continue to resonate with Pakistani planners in future strategic planning. This costly defeat strengthens Pakistan's reliance on militant groups for its security strategy.

Another factor that has appealed to the use of proxy clients is the social issues within Pakistan's conventional military force that have stunted the professional development of its officer corps. Within the uniformed military, religion has become a contributing factor for officer promotions and career advancement. Officers that were

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[139] Ibid., 120.

[140] Ibid., 120.

[141] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 23.

[142] Ibid., 22.

lacking in a religious foundation based in Islam were not competitive for advancement as Islamic teachings were included in promotion exams.[143] Domestic policies that focused on Pakistani "state building" through a dependency on religious factors have hindered the growth of a professional uniformed military which further drives Pakistan's reliance on proxy militants.[144]

B.   SUBVERSIVE APPROACH TO CONFLICT

Pakistan has taken a subversive approach in dealing with India to destabilize and oppose its influence within the region. Frederic Pearson's six reasons for state involvement can be applied to why a state such as Pakistan would engage a state sponsored client: territorial acquisition, protection of social groups, protection of economic interests, protection of diplomatic or military interest, ideology, and regional power balance.[145]

Ultimately, Pakistan is financially, militarily, and economically weaker than India. However, Pakistan's strategic use of militants over the years has been costly to India by eroding the state both from an economic and material standpoint. Kupar's theory of a "punishment base response" is seen in Pakistan's militant use. Pakistan does not perceive sustaining a conventional conflict with India as a realistic means to achieving its national security goals. Instead, by using proxy clients it can slowly inflict a detrimental cost on India by targeting assets from within the Kashmir region.[146]

Between 1988 to 2010, Pakistan's slow attrition in Kashmir cost India roughly 6,000 deaths within its security forces' ranks. This cost is higher than the combined death total of both the first and second Kashmir wars for India. Further, India's constant employment of security forces in Kashmir to counter Pakistani militants has taken a toll economically for India. The continual deployment of security forces in Kashmir has directed much needed funds from other sectors and has drawn harsh criticism from the international community with India's use of kidnapping and torture to counter the militant

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143 Kapur and Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox," 123.

144 Ibid., 123.

145 Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 31.

146 Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 15.

occupation of Kashmir.[147] Further, these militant groups give Pakistan an option to denounce any action that may draw it closer into a conventional conflict with India.

On the border with Afghanistan, Pakistan has taken a similar approach to border security and has utilized this region as a part of its larger state strategic strategy to counter India's move to regional dominance. With conflict in Afghanistan comes opportunity, and Pakistan indirectly utilized funding received from the United States to fund militant operations within Kashmir. The United States provided materialistic support to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to counter the Soviet Union directly through Pakistan, which allowed Pakistan to stockpile resources and divert efforts to Kashmir in support of its on-going strategic goal of countering India through militant proxies.[148]

When the Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, Afghanistan quickly became plagued with an internal civil war. Pakistan sought out a "stabilizing force" within Afghanistan, which drove Pakistani support for the Taliban's rise to power.[149] Pakistan used the Taliban to stabilize its northwest border with Afghanistan. The support to the Taliban is viewed as part of Pakistan's national security goal of achieving "strategic depth" within Afghanistan to prevent cross border support to the Baloch and Sandhi movements to support India's regional reach into Pakistan.[150] Pakistan's use of the Taliban to secure its border is comparable to the promotion of its strategic goal of "formalizing" the eastern border between India and limiting its reach in the region.[151] Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban was seen directly after 9/11 as Pakistan's president General Pervez Musharraf allowed key Taliban officials to be relocated from Afghanistan to Pakistan.[152]

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[147] Kapur and Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox," 133.

[148] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 79.

[149] Kapur and Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox," 131.

[150] Sahar Khan, "Double Game: Why Pakistan Supports Militants and Resists U.S. Pressure to Stop," Cato Institute, September 20, 2018, https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/double-game-why-pakistan-supports-militants-resists-us-pressure-stop.

[151] Kapur and Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox," 124.

[152] Khan, "Double Game."

With the entrance of the United States into Afghanistan, Pakistan became crucial to the United States operations within the theater due to its physical location. Afghanistan is a landlocked country, and Pakistan's Port of Karachi was a critical access point to the overland supply lines into Afghanistan. Further, the United States saw the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan as a threat due to the sanctuary for Taliban operations which strained United States and Pakistan relations.[153] This relationship was further stymied when the United States under President Obama began UAV strikes within the Pakistani border region.[154] Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's first Governor-General, possibly forecasted Pakistani mindset regarding international assistance and its security goals from the early days of its independence. The phrase "America needs Pakistan more than Pakistan needs America," could explain Pakistan's capitalization on what could be viewed as the United States' narrow scope and short-term solutions within the region driving Pakistan to continue to see the benefits of a proxy militant strategy.[155]

C.   FACTORS THAT HINDERED PROXY EMPLOYMENT

Contemporary scholars view the current approach of utilizing militants in support of Pakistan's national security goals as a short-term strategy that will have long-term consequences.[156] A theory proposed by Benowitz and Ceccanese is that providing military assistance may extend a regional conflict, or more specifically to Pakistan, provide increased risk of domestic instability due to the liability of its militant clients' actions.[157] The increased risk is due to the inability of Pakistan to control its militant clients that it provides arms and logistical support to, thereby extending the duration of internal conflicts within its state borders and further diverting funds away from other sectors that could stimulate economic development for the state.

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[153] Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History*, First edition (New York: Random House, 2016), 333.

[154] Ibid., 333.

[155] Husain Haqqani, "Breaking Up Is Not Hard to Do: Why the U.S.-Pakistani Alliance Isn't Worth the Trouble," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2013): 67.

[156] Kapur and Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox," 112.

[157] Brittany Benowitz and Alicia Ceccanese, "Why No One Ever Really Wins a Proxy War," Just Security, May 11, 2020, https://www.justsecurity.org/70093/why-no-one-ever-really-wins-a-proxy-war/.

Militant groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed have no social ties to the Kashmir region, which allows them to operate violently and often with a heavy-handed response on the regional population. Both groups have demonstrated this heavy-handed response with instances where they have violently targeted Muslims who do not abide by conservative Islamic followings.[158] After years of steady funding from Pakistan, the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed now possess the strength and ability to carry out and enforce their own "agenda" and have moved to become self-sufficient from Pakistan as their primary supporter.[159]

Militants that can be traced back to Pakistan are no strangers to high profile terrorist incidents which have continued to strain Pakistan's international relations. These militants were involved in the attacks against the United States on 9/11, the 2005 London subway bombing, and on-going attacks within Afghanistan against the standing government.[160] A proxy may support securities in achieving a strategic strategy but can become exhausting and draining and move to be more of a burden for the state. Although the militants Pakistan has employed are either Pakistani nationals or individuals that are tied to the state, this does not mean that they identify with the "state interests" of the Pakistani government and can quickly become a liability.[161]

Another factor involves dependency. When a client is supported by a state, they become less dependent on the local population in which they live amongst for support.[162] This loss of dependency can have a negative effect on the population and the client can become more violent and forceful in acquiring needed resources. This is further tied to criminal acts as a client may attempt to expand its funding through black market trade. As these criminal networks expand, the difficulty of maintaining control of a client is increased especially after the conclusion of a conflict.[163]

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[158] Kapur and Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox," 128.

[159] Ibid., 134.

[160] Ibid., 111.

[161] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 8.

[162] Benowitz and Ceccanese, "Why No One Ever Really Wins a Proxy War."

[163] Ibid.

Pakistan has been deemed as a state who harbors terrorists by key international backers, specifically the United States.[164] Unlike Iran, who has taken a stark isolationist approach to regional politics and foreign support, Pakistan still relies on foreign support for critical areas and internal stability. The United States has had diplomatic relations with the state since its formation in 1947 and is the key contributor of foreign assistance to Pakistan through grant-based assistance, providing over $5 billion in civilian assistance and over $1 billion for emergency humanitarian response since 2009 alone.[165] The United States sees Pakistan as playing a "constructive role in the region" and acknowledging that it will continue to support the state for the foreseeable future.[166] However, the United States recently suspended security assistance in 2018 until Pakistan takes a "decisive and irreversible action" against terrorists identified by the United Nations who operate within the state.[167] The extended history of not just backing militants as part of Pakistan's security strategy, but not countering militant groups as they carry out actions outside of the state's borders has now threated Pakistan's funding from its largest source of foreign investment and export market.

Pakistan has yet to close training locations for Kashmiri militants or severed its connection with the Afghan Taliban.[168] This relationship has the potential to negatively affect Pakistan who receives foreign security assistance within the region. In June of 2020, the United States State Department sent notification to Congress of a potential military arms sale to India valued at 180 million.[169] This sale would include Stinger missiles, which could ironically counter Pakistani F-16s which were purchased from the United States.[170]

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[164] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 6.

[165] "U.S. Assistance to Pakistan," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Pakistan, accessed November 21, 2020, https://pk.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/us-assistance-to-pakistan/.

[166] Ibid.

[167] "U.S. Relations with Pakistan," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed November 21, 2020, https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-pakistan/.

[168] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 128.

[169] Jeff Abramson, "U.S. Arms Deals Continue During Pandemic | Arms Control Association," Arms Control Association, June 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-06/news/us-arms-deals-continue-during-pandemic.

[170] Benowitz and Ceccanese, "Why No One Ever Really Wins a Proxy War."

D. CONNECTIONS TO IRAN'S SUSTAINED PROXY EMPLOYMENT

The similarities between Iran and Pakistan of utilizing proxy militants as part of a national strategy are similar with avoiding a direct conventional regional conflict. Both states have taken on a "oppositional approach" to state building.[171] As evidenced in Pakistan, it has focused on targeting the "status quo" of the region, specifically India when possible.[172] The use of proxy clients is nestled within its strategy of achieving influence outside of Pakistan's defined state boundaries, especially with its ability to counter India who possesses a larger and more modern conventional army.

Iran has taken a similar approach to regional instability and has targeted the United States and its regional allies, including Israel whenever possible. Just as Pakistan has seen success in achieving state interests in the Kashmir border region and Afghanistan through militant groups, Iran has seen great success with its own approach to its militant strategy in neighboring Iraq.

When analyzing Iran's future conduct within the region, Pakistan serves as a case study postulating what may possibly happen with Iran's future intent to acquire a nuclear capability and incorporate it into its national security goals. Iran does not possess a nuclear capability to date and the reliance on its proxy clients as a critical piece to its security strategy may provide a greater return than currently seen within Pakistan and the domestic instability and liability it faces.[173]

Iran's move to acquire a nuclear weapon could spark a Middle Eastern arms race that could be compared to what was seen between Pakistan and India beginning in 1998.[174] Currently, Israel and Pakistan are the only states in the broader Middle East region to possess a nuclear capability.[175] If Iran were to acquire a nuclear capability, Saudi Arabia

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[171] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 126.

[172] Ibid., 126.

[173] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 7.

[174] "Pakistan Nuclear Weapons Program | Pakistan Nuclear Technology | NTI," November 2019, https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/pakistan/nuclear/.

[175] "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, August 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat.

would likely move to follow as remarks have already been made by key figures within the Kingdom.[176] Further, it has been acknowledged that Saudi Arabia may fear the United States will not provide security for the region.[177] This may further drive Saudi Arabia, and perhaps other states, such as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Turkey, to evaluate and seek out a nuclear option to counter a nuclear capable Iran.[178]

Even with India and Pakistan acquiring a nuclear deterrent, kinetic conflicts have still taken place in both states with the conduct of limited military attacks. However, neither side has been willing to initiate a campaign that includes large scale attacks or provocative operations that may push a state to employ a nuclear response.[179] As proposed by Batcher, a nuclear war is even more catastrophic within the Middle Eastern region that other areas. This thinking was based on an assessment from the unclassified Fallout Assessment System/Civilian Vulnerability Indicator Code (FAS/CIVIC), a scientific program produced to predict fallout and radioactive damage post nuclear conflict. The devastating effect on the Middle Easter region is due to the high density of populations at city centers, infrastructure that cannot withstand a blast, limited medical services and first responders to counter the incident along with the slow economic recovery that would follow.[180]

If Iran were to acquire a nuclear capability in the future, the proposed statement that armed conflicts from its militant proxies would continue can be argued. This is due to Glenn Snyder's Stability-Instability Paradox that two nuclear powers can still "skirmish at a lower level" without the apprehension of nuclear conflict.[181] This theory could also prove

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[176] Robert Einhorn and Richard Nephew, "The Iran Nuclear Deal: Prelude to Proliferation in the Middle East?," *Foreign Policy at Brookings* Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Series, no. 11 (May 2016): vii.

[177] Ibid., 33.

[178] Ibid., vii.

[179] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 25.

[180] Robert T. Batcher, "The Consequences of an Indo-Pakistani Nuclear War," *International Studies Review* 6, no. 4 (2004): 137.

[181] Caitlin Talmadge, "Are Nuclear Weapons Keeping the India-Pakistan Crisis from Escalating—or Making It More Dangerous?," *Brookings* (blog), March 8, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/08/are-nuclear-weapons-keeping-the-india-pakistan-crisis-from-escalating-or-making-it-more-dangerous/.

that Iran may increase its regional influence through proxy clients due to regional neighbors fearing that a heavy-handed response could spark a nuclear retaliation option from Iran.[182]

E.   CONCLUSION

Pakistan's use of proxy clients as a strategy to achieve influence outside of its borders has been rooted within Pakistani history. To date, Pakistan has constantly challenged India using proxy clients while successfully avoiding the consequences that an Indo-Pakistani conflict would entail.

The argument has been made that Pakistan's prolonged use of a proxy strategy has been beneficial to the state and its rivalry with India but may now show signs of transitioning with a negative return.[183] These indications are currently evident with Pakistani backed militants gaining a level of power that has allowed them to move away from the state and become difficult for Pakistan to control.

With Pakistan declaring itself a nuclear weapon state in 1998, Pakistan has moved into a new realm of risk with the employment of a proxy strategy that has proven the ability to operate unilaterally.[184] The benefits seen to date of a proxy strategy successfully countering India in the Kashmir region without the involvement of conventional forces may not be a sustainable option. This proxy-client relationship issue is not a new phenomenon within Pakistani history; however, previous risks associated with the concern of a proxy client turning on the state were outweighed with Pakistan's focus on its clients' successes.[185] The violent actions of clients such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed on the population within the Kashmir region, and militants attacking government infrastructure and leaders are now highlighting the trade-offs made for what is viewed as a cost beneficial strategy.[186]

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[182] Ibid.

[183] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 7.

[184] "Pakistan Nuclear Weapons Program | Pakistan Nuclear Technology | NTI."

[185] Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 132.

[186] Ibid., 133.

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IV. CONCLUSION

A. FINDINGS

The conclusion will review the two arguments proposed in this thesis and their direct application to each of the case studies. It is ascertained that Iran's employment of proxy clients will continue to remain a cost-effective means of expanding its influence and implementing Iranian foreign policy goals while retaining the ability to distance itself from the client as needed. This argument was expounded upon in the case study relating to Iran's influence in Iraq, and the inroads paved through the influence of specific organizations that now fall under the PMF and their move into the Iraqi political construct.

The Pakistani case study highlighted the critical point at which a proxy strategy may no be longer beneficial to a state because the client obtains an increased level of autonomous power. In terms of the case of Iran, it is already posed to counter this threat and distance itself from organizations such as KH, AAH, and Badr if this shift were to happen. Iran thus far has been successful with managing the balance between proxy clients and the relationships of political leaders within the Iraqi state.

The two arguments within this thesis have direct implications on the PMF with Iran's ability to continue to influence foreign policy and promote its state's interest from abroad. As seen with the shift in Iraqi leadership, the topic of disbanding or integrating the PMF in the Iraqi military construct is gaining traction.

B. PROXY CLIENTS REMAIN A COST EFFECTIVE AND LOW RISK OPTION

Iran's use of proxy clients as noted in Iraq is not employed to incite fear or terror amongst the populace. Instead, the client is aligned with Iran's grand strategy and is a means of implementing and achieving the sponsor's regional political agenda. The status that the Iraqi government will grant to the PMF will continue to be critical to Iran's ability to have political influence within the Iraqi state.

The large-scale success that the Iranian backed organizations have seen while fighting under the representation of the PMF has solidified the political representation that

the PMF leadership from organizations such as KH and AAH have come to enjoy within Iraqi. This political representation and independent military status that the PMF currently holds will cause any move made by the Iraqi parliament to reduce the power or disband the PMF and its umbrella organizations to be met with fierce resistance from those that currently hold their power through the PMF.

Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, the current Iraqi Prime Minister experienced the PMF attempt to thwart his candidacy for prime minister as the PMF and Fatah Alliance saw him not only as willing to halt their expansion of power, but more importantly, having the determination to move in a direction that openly opposes the actions of those Iranian backed organizations.[187] Kadhimi's initiatives to reduce the influence of Iranian-backed organizations under the PMF such as KH and AAH is not new as both his predecessors attempted to but failed to make any strides within the Iraqi government; setting an example for future moves to discredit the Iranian backed organizations.[188] KH has even openly accused Kadhimi as enabling the killing of both al-Muhandis and Soleimani.

With the deaths of al-Muhandis and Soleimani, a major blow to the construct of the PMF was dealt that could have long-term political considerations. Both individuals were well versed in the domestic politics of Iraq and maintaining unity amongst the various organizations under the PMF umbrella.[189] Abdulaziz al-Mohammadawi, the former secretary general of KH, replaced Muhandis as the deputy chairman of the PMF. In the wake of the death of both influential figures, it is argued that KH has been maintaining an inobtrusive quiet platform to alleviate the threat of additional kinetic actions against KH organizations operating under the PMF while other Iranian backed proxy clients can still maintain their current agenda regarding an anti-West stance.[190] As Kadhimi continues to receive international pressure to disband or reduce the strength of the Iranian backed

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[187] Chrispin Smith, "What's next for Coalition Forces in Iraq?," Middle East Institute, March 10, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/whats-next-coalition-forces-iraq.

[188] Eli Manaker, "This Time Is Different: Can Iraq Rein in the PMF?," Georgetown Security Studies Review, October 2, 2020, https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2020/10/02/this-time-is-different-can-iraq-rein-in-the-pmf/.

[189] Smith, "What's next for Coalition Forces in Iraq?"

[190] Ibid.

organizations, Iraq's ethnic and sectarian division within parliament may benefit from how ISIS has brought mutual agreements between Sunnis and Shiites. Instances of this are on display with Ayatollah Ali Sistani publicly insisting that "competition between parties and election candidates must center on economic, educational, and social service programs that can be realistically implemented; to be avoided are narcissism [and] inflammatory sectarian and nationalist rhetoric."[191] The current Iraqi political realm is moving in a direction that is less sectarian, to include the PMF, as seen with other elements such as Sunni, Christian and Kurdish organizations under the PMF umbrella. However, this poses an additional question for future scholarship as to will the political pacts that formed along a non-sectarian line between Sunni and Shiite survive a future post ISIS Iraq?

A complete shift away from an Iranian influence in Iraqi through its influence of Iraqi politics may never be possible, but more importantly, also may not be desired. Iran sees Kadhimi as an individual that will strive for a reduction in U.S. presence in Iraq. More so Kadhimi has openly addressed Iran in July 2020 that Iraq wants a relationship that is grounded on "the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of both countries" signaling that Kadkimi will not allow the U.S. to use Iraq as a proxy to stage any military attacks on Iran.[192]

With Kadhimi, and Iran not openly opposing his appointment, it suggests that Iran has been successful with its goal of using its political reach through proxy clients to shape the nature of Iraqi politics and promoting Iran's state interest of not allowing a security threat to immerge from Iraq. Kadhimi has gone as far as stating to the U.S. ambassador to Iraq that "Iraq will not be a ground for settling accounts and launching attacks on any neighboring or friendly country," a stance that nestles within Iran's grand strategy for the region.[193]

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[191] Borzou Daragahi, "Welcome to Iraq's First Post-Sectarian Election," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed May 7, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/10/welcome-to-iraqs-first-post-sectarian-election/.

[192] Reuters Staff, "Iraq PM Says Won't Allow Threats to Iran from Iraqi Soil," *Reuters*, July 21, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-idUSKCN24M1E9.

[193] Hassan Ahmadian, "Why Did Iran Back Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as Iraqi Prime Minister?," *Atlantic Council* (blog), July 24, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/why-did-iran-back-mustafa-al-kadhimi-as-iraqi-prime-minister/.

C. IRAN'S ABILITY TO CONTINUE TO RETAIN AND EMPLOY PROXY CLIENTS

Utilizing Pakistan as a case study, the argument has been made that Pakistan's prolonged use of a proxy strategy has been beneficial to the state and its rivalry with India but may now show signs of transitioning to a negative return.[194] These signs are currently evidenced in Pakistani backed militants gaining a level of power that has allowed them to move away from the state and that is difficult for Pakistan to control. This observation may provide a better understanding into Iran's future proxy employment.

The correlation can be made to the current events taking place in Iraq between Shiite factions that once were armed and trained by Iran and fought against Sandam during the Iran-Iraq War. Specific Shiite factions are now beginning to distance themselves from relations with Iran and aligning with individuals such as the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani whose political views are non-Islamic and non-sectarian.[195] Iran's proxy clients are not rooted in the traditional terms of "terrorism" by targeting a population with a goal of installing fear.[196] As seen in Pakistan, the employment of a proxy client is focused on achieving the sponsor's political agenda and state objectives that are similar to Iran's grand strategy. If all of Iran's proxy clients were viewed with the label of "terrorist" and not as "state actors," then identifying the link to Iran's political motives would be difficult and a foreign policy response problematic. [197] Further, the U.S. has limited successes in countering Iranian proxies that would not climax into a conventional state on state conflict as seen with the escalation of tension after the drone strike killing Soleimani in 2020.

As seen so far in Iran, even as the state moves towards the acquisition of nuclear deterrent capabilities, there may be a point in which Iran's proxies may depreciate in value and become a determinant to its national security. If this shift does begin to occur, Iran could easily distance itself from its clients. Iran is already posed to counter this threat. In

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[194] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 7.

[195] Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East," 1246.

[196] Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients," 8.

[197] Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 7.

the case of Pakistan, the state has maintained a more traditional "collective proxy strategy" as previous described by Mumford with managing proxy clients.[198] Iran, however, has moved to a more informal method by managing proxy clients from a far. This may allow the state to easier distance itself from a previous client when it becomes a liability. This support can become dialed back when Iran must balance the support for its proxy clients under the PMF, and support for political leaders that align with Iranian interests.

For Iran, the future of its state support to KH, AAH, and Badr under the PMF umbrella will remain bounded. This relationship is due to their efficiency to navigate the consequences imposed by Mumford's theory of "interest, ideology, and risk" and the ability to have offensive and defensive capability that is cheaper than a conventional force.[199]

D.   IMPLICATIONS TO THE PMF: DISBAND OR INTEGRATE?

The question to disband or integrate the PMF into the Iraqi military institution is rooted within the lessons learned from the U.S. disbanding the Iraqi Army after the Gulf War and the gap that the loss of employment created. The current documentation available reflects approximately 135,000 personnel incorporated under the PMF, with an authorized manpower of 160,000. Using the standard that an Iraqi household is comprised of six members, this employment data reflects that approximately 800,000 Iraqi's are reliant on survivability of the PMF as a source of income.[200] Given the societal norm of monetary support to extended families, this number may even be much larger. The result, if the PMF were disbanded, is that a large percent of the current Iraqi population will become directly affected.

Due to the economic and employment factors that the organizations under the PMF provide, there are few viable options for the future context of these organizations. As proposed by Knights et al, "the reality is that there is no politically viable alternative to an

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[198] Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 103.

[199] Ibid., 2.

[200] Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, "Honored, Not Contained," 143.

evolutionary, patient, but determined approach."[201] This means that the future of the PMF is not a short-term solution, but one that begins to address the long-term issue of defining the organization's role as a military organization and furthering the professionalization and accountability of the forces. This is associated also with the international policy and assistance given to Iraq, in that the PMF has successfully cemented themselves into the Iraqi security construct.

When considering the benefits of ether disbanding or integrating, the matter of the mission of the PMF must be taken into account. As described by Knights, Malik, Al-Tamimi, the organization itself lacks a clearly defined role or mission even though it has been established and acknowledged by the host nation's governing body but the PMF still lacks being a permanent ministry and having a set budget.[202] The argument that the PMF is lacking a defined role within the Iraqi state construct means there is no formal training standard or accountability which leads to outside influence such as seen with Iran. If integration into the Iraqi Army were to take place, the proper vetting of the solders under the PMF must be upheld. By vetting individuals and utilizing the Iraqi legal system to hold a standard to individuals who have committed human rights abusees, this will not only give the current Iraqi government long-term stability and credibility, but further the start of discouraging future criminal activities amongst the ranks.[203]

E.   POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis proposes four policy recommendations that are associated with addressing the future of the PMF:

1.   Disbandment of the PMF should not be a viable option. The disbandment would lead to the organizations under the PMF becoming sectarian militias with no state control. The vacuum created by a large population of unemployed armed individuals may led to what occurred after the fall of

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[201] Ibid., 168.

[202] Ibid., 148.

[203] Hassan Abbas, "The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, September 2017, 13.

Sadam in 2003 with the disbandment of the Iraqi Army, and not restructuring the Iraqi military to maintain stability. This decision limited the ability of coalition forces to maintain security and the Iraqi government to maintain functionality after the U.S. invasion. In a study published in the Times Magazine, it is believed that 25 of the 40 top commanders within ISIS served previously in the Iraqi Army.[204] Individuals within the PMF should be vetted and integrated into the Iraqi Army so that accountability and standards can be maintained.

2. The organizations under the PMF can also become integrated into the Iraqi Police force. It is assessed that the number of PMF members actively participating in combat is at minimum, an estimated 30,000 with the other members taking on a combat service support role and rear area security.[205] In areas such as Diyala, Samara, and Tikrit which felt the effects of a ISIS occupation, a new void for security has been created that if left gapped, Sunni-led militias will develop that may not already exist under the current umbrella organization.[206] There is currently a gap that requires security support before ISIS influence can reemerge.

3. As seen with Israel's "mabam" campaign against ISIS in Syria, the end-states for a military campaign should be re-evaluated. Operation objectives that only require minimal coalition military involvement should be considered, which includes realist expectations set for both policy and decision makers on the attainable achievements of such a strategy.[207] For

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[204] Mark Thompson, "How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS," Time, May 28, 2015, https://time.com/3900753/isis-iraq-syria-army-united-states-military/.

[205] Michael Knights, "How the U.S. Government Should Think About Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," The Washington Institute, May 9, 2019, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-us-government-should-think-about-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces.

[206] Abbas, "The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward," 14.

[207] Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas Heras, and Kaleigh Thomas, "Countering Iran in the Gray Zone," Center for a New American Security, April 14, 2020, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/countering-iran-gray-zone.

the U.S. and coalition support to Iraq, the development of both stability and legitimacy with the military forces must be achieved to bring credibility to the Iraqi state and leadership in Baghdad. Further, when the tactical objectives become unattainable, operations should be reduced.[208]

4. An understanding by both decision and policy makers on the various elements that encompass the PMF is required to identify the separate organizations objectives, ideology, and the linage of the element to its leaders. When countering the different organizations backed by Iran, it is difficult to identify which organization may have conducted an attack within the region as seen with rocket attacks on U.S. installations and even the embassy in Baghdad.[209] By understanding the political stance of organizations such as KH, AAH, and Badr organization, responses to future attacks can be formulated that take full advantage of the political ideology and current stances of the various organizations under the PMF umbrella.

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[208] Ibid.

[209] Smith, "What's next for Coalition Forces in Iraq?"

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