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Iran's Transnational Terrorist Networks

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Attached please find the 37th issue of *Persian Gulf Observer*, titled "Iran's Transnational Terrorist Networks" by The Ezri Center's research fellow, Dr. Yossi Mansharof.

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Iran's Transnational Terrorist Networks

Dr. Yossi Mansharof

A worldwide network of terrorist groups and alliances is Iran's strategic weapon for any military escalation scenario. A systematic counterterrorist strategy is necessary to deprive Iran of this powerful tool.

Introduction

IRGC commander Hossein Salami: "Iran is committed to a victory formula over the enemy, in all scenarios. Today, our international strength is valid, recognizable and has exceptional deterrent potential."[\[1\]](#)

The Islamic Republic of Iran considers terrorism an effective tool for promoting its foreign policy. Accordingly, in the forty years since the Islamic revolution, Tehran has diligently established and nurtured a comprehensive array of transnational terror networks. Through this array, Tehran aims to advance its aspiration for regional hegemony and deter its enemies, primarily the US, from advancing a military option against it. This study will analyze Iran's terrorist array, its ideological background, and the dominance of IRGC Quds Forces and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The study also maps the terrorist alliances that Tehran has established and their deployment in the Middle East and in the international arena.

The Transnational Terrorism Array: Iran's Offensive Arsenal against the US and its Allies

Despite Iran's aggressive campaign in the region, US's President Trump seems determined to avoid using military force against Iran, instead focusing on strangling the regime through economic sanctions. Regardless of its intent, the US could inevitably end up in some sort of military escalation against Tehran if the IRGC or one of its proxies kills American troops or diplomats stationed in the region (crossing what Trump seemingly regards as his 'red line') or, alternatively, if Iran takes steps that achieve a breakthrough in military nuclear capabilities.[\[2\]](#) In recent months, two trends have indeed emerged that increase the likelihood of military confrontation against Iran. First, the Trump Administration's maximum pressure campaign has triggered a conceptual shift in the Iranian public, which is then causing the regime growing distress. As a result, for the first time, Iran directly attacked Saudi Arabia (without claiming responsibility) when it attacked Saudi Aramco's key oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais on September 14. Secondly, contrary to the restraint policy following Israeli attacks against Syria, the IRGC began to act against Israel. This was reflected in the multicopter drone attack planned from the village of Akraba, Syria, which was thwarted by the IDF on August 24. As a result of this attack and change in attitude, head of the

Research Division in IDF Military Intelligence, Dror Shalom, warned that Israel is starting to near the threshold of war.^[3] Alongside this, if the Iranian missile project, and at its focus Hezbollah's precision guided missile project (which is located mainly near Nabi Sheet in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon), is not restrained, the chances of a confrontation increase, which may develop into a regional flare since Israel can't accept threats of this level. In any such military escalation, the transnational terrorist array – which Tehran has diligently fostered since the establishment of the Islamic regime – is expected to spearhead Iran's offensive toolbox against the US and its allies in the region, and possibly even extend into the international arena. This research article analyzes the ties and alliances Iran has established over the years, alliances which could be used to attack its enemies, namely the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia in various arenas.

Exporting the Islamic Revolution: The Use of Terrorism as a Tool to Promote Foreign Policy

The sponsorship of terrorism is anchored in the vision of exporting the Islamic Revolution, one of the pillars of the Iranian foreign policy since the establishment of the Islamic regime in 1979. The constitution of the Islamic regime and the establishment document of the IRGC authorize the latter to support "freedom-seeking movements" in order to export the Islamic Revolution outside Iran.^[4] Although Tehran has aspired to export its revolution to the entire Islamic world, in one of the occasions after the establishment of the revolutionary regime Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared that Tehran would export its revolution with preference to Shiite communities because their social composition, religious and historical symbols make them more attentive to the revolutionary message. However, Iran has never restricted the exportation of its revolution to Shi'a, partly because it has favored national interest over religious affiliation. Through exporting the revolution, Iran has supported political Islam circles around the world, regardless of their weight in the population, promoting an agenda close to its revolutionary and anti-American view.

Although Tehran outwardly claims that it respects the sovereignty of Sunni regimes in the Middle East, it has actually subverted them to install Islamic regimes (see, for example, the failed coup attempt in Bahrain in 1981 and Kuwait in 1985). Alternatively, Iran has strived to strengthen anti-American governments or tendencies (see, for example, its meddling in the political arenas in Iraq, Yemen, Nigeria and Lebanon). Accordingly, as Khomeini did at the time, the current Iranian leader Ali Khamenei also referred to the Sunni regimes, Iran's rivals in the region, as "the little devils in the region."^[5] As Khamenei stated, Iranian support is not limited to Shiites alone, but to any anti-American element.^[6] To that end, Iran offers financial assistance, training, and arming of Shiite and Sunni political Islam groups alike, and even some secular terrorist organizations. On the one hand, this is expressed through its support for the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, the mostly Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and the secular-oriented Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command of the Palestinians. On the other hand, Iran expressed its readiness to overcome the conceptual and religious divide and ignore complicated past resentments (like the persecution of the Hazara Shiites in Afghanistan) and assist even the Sunni al-Qaeda and Taliban organizations, as discussed below.

As early as 1987, the CIA stated that the Khomeini-led Iranian leadership considers 'terrorism by proxy' an effective tool for exporting the Islamic Revolution.^[7] During Khamenei's leadership, since 1989, Iran has enhanced and developed the operation of terrorist networks. These networks have progressed to become the spearhead of Iranian aggression, to be used on any chosen command day. The great weight attributed by Khamenei to the promotion of the pro-Iranian

terrorist network was evident on November 20, 1989, about six months after he took office as Leader, when he commissioned Quds Forces “to establish popular and armed units of Hezbollah worldwide.”^[8] In light of this order, headed by Ahmad Vahidi (1990-1997/8) and, since then, Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force has made extensive efforts to establish and foster transnational terror networks. The Iraq War (2003-2011), the Syrian Civil War (2011 and forward), and the ISIS crisis have created a political vacuum that has accelerated the establishment and nurturing of terrorist networks. The Iran nuclear deal of 2015, which directed billions of dollars toward Iran, also helped them meet the multiple expenses involved in operating these networks. The Quds Force Command, which is responsible for the weapons smuggling and assistance of these networks, is Unit 190. Answering directly to Khamenei, the Quds force is assisted by Iran’s diplomatic missions and numerous civilian, religious, economic, and humanitarian companies which smuggle arms, financial aid, and even various militia operatives into target countries.^[9] As a direct result of these subversive activities, in March 2018, Morocco’s Foreign Minister declared that Hezbollah had smuggled Strela, SAM-9, and SAM-11 anti-aircraft missiles through the Iranian embassy in Algeria as part of its assistance to the National Liberation Movement in the Western Sahara, the Polisario Front (further evidence that Iran is supporting a Sunni-secular and even a radical-leftist provided its subversion is in line with its broader ideological goals).^[10]

Another feature of the pro-Iranian terrorist networks doctrine is the principle of flexibility, which allows Tehran to shift its proxy organizations from one country to another, depending on its changing needs. Iran integrated Hezbollah in the Iraq war (2003–2011) and, at its request, the terror organization dispatched its elite unit to form Shiite militias, guide them, and even plan attacks against Coalition Forces (see below). Based on that success, Tehran subsequently sent Hezbollah on a similar mission in Yemen. Although Iraqi and Afghan Shiite militants are labeled by Iran as the “defenders of the holy shrines” (*Modafean-e Haram*, due to their apparent role in defending Zaynab shrine of Damascus, Najaf, Karbala, Samara, and al-Kazimayn), these militiamen are, in fact, mercenaries willing to obey the Iranian patron’s instructions and act in any arena and against any enemy whom they are asked to attack. In 2017, Iran sent a group of operatives from the Afghan militia Fatimiyoum (after gaining experience in Syria) to train Yemeni Ansarallah militia operatives and provide them with logistical assistance.^[11] Anti-Saudi statements by senior people in the Popular Mobilization Forces, the umbrella of the Iraqi Shiite militias, reflect their ambition to prove their loyalty to Tehran and their commitment to directly attack Saudi Arabia. In this context, one should see threats such as that of Qais Khazali, head of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq militia, as decisive retaliation against Saudi Arabia for what he describes as “its support for terrorism in Iraq,” and should take seriously his warnings that the kingdom is “weaker than a spider web,”^[12] as well as the promise of Ayyub Faleh al-Rubaie (a.k.a. Abu Azrael), a senior commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces, to release Mecca from the rule of the House of Saud. ^[13]

Hezbollah: From an Iranian Proxy against Israel to a Central Player in Operating Iran’s Terrorism Network

Since its founding in 1982, Hezbollah has been the most successful model of the vision of ‘Exporting the Islamic Revolution.’ Hezbollah has managed to take over the political and security arena in Lebanon and considers itself committed to Iran’s orders. This deep commitment was illustrated in statements by senior Hezbollah officials, including Nasrallah’s March 2018

declaration that, “our belief of the Rule of the *Jurisprudent* is greater than of many Iranians... the obedience to the ruler-jurist is like obedience to the infallible [Imam] Hussein... The commitment to him surpasses the commitment to the [Lebanese] constitution.”^[14] Hezbollah is now operating worldwide, per Nasrallah’s statement, “Hezbollah has now become an international force,”^[15] and it is ready to act in the service of Iran in any arena or country that Khamenei finds appropriate. Accordingly, the deputy of Hezbollah’s liaison in the Amshit region (forty kilometers north of the capital Beirut), Jamal Kan’an, declared, on 10 September 10, 2019, that Hezbollah is marching after Nasrallah and is ready to operate anywhere, whether it be in Syria, on the [Syria-Lebanon] border, in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains [close to the southern part of Israeli Mount Hermon], or anywhere else Nasrallah will direct him.”^[16]

Hezbollah’s growing motivation to act in the service of Iran against the US was conveyed in Nasrallah’s Ashura speech in which he stated, “Our camp commander is Imam Khamenei and the center of the camp is the Islamic Republic of Iran. America is trying to besiege it ... We tell Imam Khamenei, the son of Imam Hussein, we will not leave you alone in front of America and Israel.”^[17]

Hezbollah serves as one of the key factors in advancing the Iranian ambition to achieve regional hegemony, and later – to change the basic world order. As part of the process of its transformation from a mere proxy to a key element in the operating of pro-Iranian terrorism in the global arena, Hezbollah has taken on the role of the intermediary in the service of the IRGC. Thus, it has trained, recruited, and funded Shiite militias supported by Quds Forces and has even participated in planning their attacks.^[18] As Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Force and the right hand of Qassem Soleimani, revealed, Hezbollah planned attacks for Iraqi Shiite militias against US targets during the Iraq war.^[19] Alongside this, senior Hezbollah commanders, including then-chief of staff Imad Moughniyeh, his deputy Talal Hamiyeh, and Ali Musa Daqduq, played key roles in cooperation with Deputy Qods Force commander, Abdul Reza Shahlai, in the establishment of Iraqi Shiite militias (such as Jaysh al-Mahdi) which also fought against the Americans.^[20] Hezbollah’s role stood out when it participated in training Iraqi Shiite militias during the Iraq war. This mediation role of Hezbollah became especially necessary in cases where ethnic debates broke out between the IRGC’s guides and Arab trainees of the Shiite militias, as some operatives of these militias testified during their interrogation by the US military.^[21] Today, Hezbollah continues to serve as the long arm of Tehran in Africa, among other regions. In Nigeria, it is training operatives of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, a pro-Iranian Shi’a network that relies on the presence of Lebanese Shiites in Nigeria and other West African countries.^[22]

Nasrallah declared that Hezbollah considers itself obliged to join Iran if war breaks out with the US^[23] Hezbollah’s commanding framework, designed to plan, coordinate, and attack US and Israeli interests around the world, is Unit 910, also known as Hezbollah’s external operations unit, led by Talal Hamiyeh and his deputy Fuad Shukr, who is wanted by the US for his senior role in the 1983 bombing of a Marine compound in Beirut, which killed 241 US service personnel. Hamiyeh’s son reportedly testified to his friends, other sons of senior Hezbollah officials, that his father stopped meeting senior members of the organization for fear that Israel had infiltrated the organization’s ranks and such meetings would endanger his life.^[24] In light of the close cooperation between his predecessor in office, Moughniyeh, Soleimani and Khamenei, as

illustrated in pictures published after Moughniyeh's assassination,^[25] it can be concluded that Talal Hamiyeh also has close working relationships with Khamenei and Soleimani. Unit 910 has demonstrated that it has terrorist infrastructures in diverse arenas around the world and it has committed, or intended to carry out, terror attacks against Israeli, American, and Jewish targets on many continents and regions. Given the many terrorist infrastructures it has set up in various destinations around the world, Hezbollah seems to be able to carry out a terrorist attack almost anywhere in the world, as the Trump administration has realized and stated.^[26] Hezbollah's foothold is evident across many continents, at the very least, where terrorist activities or terrorist plots of Hezbollah have been identified. These regions include Europe (Germany, Italy, UK, France, Greece, Cyprus, Bosnia and Herzegovina), the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Palestinian Territories in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco), Africa (Nigeria and Uganda), Latin America (Bolivia, Peru, Panama, and Argentina); the Caucasus (Azerbaijan), Russia (Palestinian students were recruited to Hezbollah and instructed to gather intelligence on US, Jewish, and Israeli targets), and Southeast Asia (Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and the Strait of Malacca).^[27]

In recent years, the arrests of three Unit 910 operatives in the United States demonstrated Hezbollah's efforts to gather intelligence on strategic targets for possible terrorist attacks in the homelands of US and Canada. Ali Kourani, recruited to Hezbollah in 2002, received US citizenship in 2009 and was arrested by US authorities in 2017 after gathering intelligence for possible terrorist attacks on JFK International Airport in New York, Pearson International Airport in Toronto, intelligence and military facilities in New York, and senior IDF officials in the New York area – all under Hezbollah's guidance.^[28] Investigation into Kourani revealed that these terror networks are expected to carry out attacks on American soil during a war between the US and Iran.^[29] Not surprisingly, Kourani himself underwent military and weapons training in a Hezbollah training camp in Lebanon in 2011.^[30] Another operative of Unit 910 was Samar el-Debek, a Michigan resident. He was recruited to Hezbollah in late 2007/early 2008 and arrested by the Americans in 2017 after undergoing intensive training on sabotage and weapons training, detection and evasion of tracking, assassinations, terrorist attacks against buildings, and religious-ideological guidance that included martyrdom lessons. Among other missions, el-Debek was dispatched to Panama to identify possible US, Israeli, and Panamanian targets for attacks, and to Bangkok to conceal Hezbollah explosives abandoned by other operatives when they discovered they were under surveillance.^[31] The third operative of Unit 910 operating in the US, Alexei Saab, was recruited to Hezbollah in 1996. He underwent military training in Lebanon in 1999 and again in 2004-2005 which included weapons and sabotage training. Saab identified possible targets for Hezbollah in Boston, New York, and Washington D.C. and was arrested in New York in July 2019 after receiving citizenship eleven years earlier. Among the targets inspected by Saab were the George Washington Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Herald Square in New York, the Washington Monument in Washington, and Fenway Park in Boston.^[32] In light of the information that emerged from the Kourani investigations in December 2017, Nicholas Rasmussen, then-National Counterterrorism Center Director, warned that Hezbollah is determined to give itself a potential homeland option as a critical component of its capabilities.^[33]

In the Middle East, Hezbollah apparently lost all its border-crossing tunnels following the IDF's "Northern Shield" operation in December 2018-January 2019. These tunnels were the strategic

approach through which the group intended to invade Israel and occupy a strip of land in northern Israel during the next war at the Israeli northern front. Despite their setback, Nasrallah said the organization still intends to implement the “Occupation of the Galilee” program. To that end, Hezbollah is practicing ground combat games in the Bekaa Valley.^[34] According to Nasrallah, Hezbollah has upgraded its ability to invade the Galilee by utilizing its experience in the Syrian war.^[35] Hezbollah’s current operational plan is, most probably, to invade Israel via ground raid under cover of a massive artillery strike along the border.^[36] In light of Iranian strategy (backed by Nasrallah’s declarations),^[37] during an Iran-US war supposedly instigated by America, when Iran wages retaliatory attacks (including attacks against Israel), Hezbollah is also expected to attack Israel and conquer territory in northern Israel. In addition to Hezbollah’s cooperation with Iran, deputy head of Hamas’ political bureau Saleh al-Arouri, responsible for Hamas terror attacks in the West Bank, in a meeting with Khamenei in July 2019, stated that “Hamas considers itself Iran’s first line of defense,”^[38] thus demonstrating Hamas’s willingness to attack Israel if Iran is attacked. The very stage on which that statement was made, in a meeting with Khamenei, displays Iran’s expectation that Hamas, in addition to Islamic Jihad, must actively participate in such an escalation scenario in exchange for the military and financial assistance it receives from Tehran.

Afghanistan

The Iranian foothold in Afghanistan, mainly through its aid to the Taliban, gives Tehran the opportunity to attack US forces directly or through an Afghan militia. Iranian support for the Taliban is well known to the Trump administration, which has imposed sanctions against senior IRGC Quds Force officials responsible for providing aid to the Taliban.^[39] US Secretary of State Pompeo accused Iran of involvement in a May 31, 2019 Taliban attack which wounded four US troops in Kabul.^[40] Although they were on the brink of war in the late 1990s due to the brutal persecution of the Shiite Hazara *community* by the Sunni majority in Afghanistan, Iran and the Taliban overcame the resentments of the past and reached an unwritten alliance in late 2001 following the US invasion of Afghanistan. Senior Taliban official, Khairullah Khairkhwa, who fulfilled senior role in the initial negotiations with Iran, was arrested in Pakistan in 2002. During his interrogation by the Americans in Guantanamo, Khairkhwa testified that since 2001, Iran has responded positively to the Taliban’s request for military aid for use against the US.^[41]

The Quds Force unit in charge of Taliban support is the Ansar Corps, which is based in Mashhad and Zahedan (near the border with Afghanistan). As such, Ansar Corps is responsible for providing training, financing, and arming the Taliban and even providing safe spaces for its commanders in eastern Iran.^[42] Since 2017, the Quds Force and Taliban have implemented an agreement which states that the Taliban will receive military and financial aid from the Quds Forces in exchange for attacking the Afghan government in the heart of its Western Province.^[43] Although the Taliban are also supported by the Pakistani ISI, the support that Iran provides is critical. So much so that the Afghan authorities have blamed Iran for the spread of the Taliban and its attacks and accused the Quds Forces of infiltrating the Farah Province (in the western part of the country, bordering with Iran) as part of its significant assistance to the Taliban in their fight against the central government.^[44] As part of the Taliban support, the Quds Force established a presence in the Afghan city of Herat, also near the Iranian border, and maintains a front headquarters there. Due to that local presence, three Quds Force operatives were killed in

US attacks against the Taliban in 2016.^[45] According to Afghan media, Quds Force operatives take part in battles of the Taliban, and therefore, in January 2019 two additional Quds Force operatives who fought alongside the Taliban in battles against the Afghan forces at Faryab Province northern of Kabul, Afghanistan, were killed.^[46] The key role Quds Force plays today in shaping Iranian policy in Afghanistan was also reflected in the participation of deputy Quds Force commander, Esmail Qaani, in talks between the Iranian delegation (led by the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani) and the Taliban in Kabul during December 2018, as was leaked by the Iranian media.^[47] Alongside the Taliban channel, there is a reasonable possibility that Iran can also use its Afghan proxy, Fatimiyoun militia, which it set up to protect the Assad regime.^[48] Many of its operatives returned to Afghanistan, where their number was estimated by the Afghan authorities to be approximately 10,000 people by April 2019.^[49] After Soleimani's declaration of victory over ISIS in November 2017, Fatimiyoun militia published a statement expressing its readiness to take part in any battles, in every arena, in which Khamenei orders it to act.^[50]

Al-Qaeda

Despite their ideological and religious differences, Iran and al-Qaeda have succeeded in ignoring the Shiite-Sunni conflict in order to concentrate on the fight against the common enemies: the Western countries (first, and foremost, the US) and Saudi Arabia. Although Iran vehemently rejects accusations that it cooperates with al-Qaeda, former IRGC commander, Saeed Qassemi, revealed in an April 2019 interview with the Iranian media that as part of its assistance to Muslims in Bosnia during the Bosnian War (1992–1995), IRGC troops operating there (under cover of the Iranian Red Cross) gave military training to al-Qaeda operatives.^[51] The first milestone in the deadly and complex cooperation between the two sides (who knew some ups and downs) was the al-Qaeda bomb attack against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7, 1998. Iran was charged by a US court in 2011 to pay compensation to the families of the injured in line with its responsibility for the attack.^[52] Another landmark in the Iran-Al-Qaeda cooperative was achieved during the Iraq War (2003-2011), when, in parallel with its support of its Iraqi Shiite proxies, Iran financed and armed Al-Qaeda in Iraq to kill US troops by using the Iranian Intelligence Office (MOIS).^[53] As part of its cooperation against the Coalition Forces in Iraq, senior Hezbollah commander, Talal Hamiyeh, was charged with smuggling al-Qaeda activists from Syria to Iraq.^[54]

The cooperation between the two parties began in the early 1990s in Sudan with the encouragement of local security services, which hosted al-Qaeda's leader bin Laden who temporarily resided in the country from 1991. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (i.e., the 9/11 Commission) stated in its report that senior al-Qaeda operatives underwent sabotage training in Iran in 1992 and in the Beqaa Valley of Lebanon the next year, following an unofficial agreement reached in discussions between Iran and al-Qaeda in Sudan earlier.^[55] Ali Muhammad, an al-Qaeda operative who participated in the al-Qaeda attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on 7 August 1998, testified in a US court during his sentencing that he had arranged a meeting between bin Laden and Imad Moughniyeh^[56] and that bin Laden was particularly interested in Hezbollah's 1983 Beirut barracks bombing.^[57]

Iran has consistently rejected the US request to extradite the al-Qaeda operatives who have taken asylum in Iran. Among those operatives is Sa'ad bin Laden as well as a network of operatives

through whom Al-Qaeda has transferred money and Middle Eastern operatives to South Asia as part of a secret agreement between Iran and al-Qaeda.^[58] Iran insists on keeping them under “house arrest,” but these Al-Qaeda officials have still carried out terror attacks under Iranian sponsorship. In this manner, al-Qaeda launched an attack in Riyadh in 2003 that killed thirty-five people, including eight American civilians. Following US intelligence interceptions of talks between Iran-based al-Qaeda operatives and their Saudi counterparts who later perpetrated the attack, US diplomat, Ryan Crocker, met before the attack the Iranian delegation in Geneva that demanded that Tehran would not allow the attack, but to no avail.^[59] Al-Qaeda documents seized by the Americans in the 2011 raid on bin Laden’s Pakistani camp in Abbottabad (the raid in which bin Laden was assassinated) prove that Iran offered al-Qaeda weapons and money to attack American interests in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf.^[60]

Iran can also attack US interests in the Red Sea and Africa through its direct relations with Al-Qaeda’s offspring, the Somali Shabaab al Mujahideen Movement, which previously passed Iranian weapons shipments to the Palestinians in Gaza.^[61] As a UN expert team has asserted, Iran is helping the Somali Shabab launder coal exports, a process that generates millions of dollars per year for the Shabab.^[62] It seems that aside from the terrorist cooperation between the two parties, Iran also has leverage to push the Shabab into attacking American interests. Such relations between Iran and Somalia were already traced to the Second Lebanon War of 2006, when in exchange for Iranian weaponry and funds, the Shabaab dispatched 720 operatives to Lebanon to fight with Hezbollah.^[63]

The Arab World

Iran’s branches across the Middle East are fertile ground from which Tehran can attack American interests in the region in contrary to the policies of various governments in those countries. Apparently, from Tehran’s perspective, Iraq is supposed to be the first line of fire against the United States. Iranian ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, who is also deputy Quds Force Chief, explicitly expressed this strategy during an interview in late September with the Iraqi media. Specifically, he threatened that the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, Ansarallah in Yemen, and Lebanese Hezbollah will join the Iranian offensive against the US if Tehran is attacked.^[64] In direct opposition to this statement, Iraqi Defense Ministry spokesman, Tahsin al-Khafaji, then said that the Iraqi government would not allow Iran to attack Americans in Iraq.^[65] However, a series of threats by senior commanders of the Shiite militias in Iraq, who are subordinate to Tehran and not Baghdad (including Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada,^[66] Badr Organization,^[67] Al-Nujbaa’^[68]), as well as explicit orders by Soleimani to his Iraqi proxies (most probably Kata’ib Hezbollah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq)^[69] to attack US targets, reflect the high motivation of Iraqi Shiite militias to deviate from official Iraqi governmental policy and instead attack the US across Iraq should Soleimani order them to do so.

Bahrain is another arena in which Iran is expected to attack American interests, either directly against US bases in the country, as it has stated, or through its Shiite proxies. As the interrogation of Shiite Bahraini operatives show, Shiite Bahraini militias have been trained in IRGC training camps in Iran, with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and also with Shiite militias in Iraq; training includes weapons smuggling.^[70] An indication of Iranian motivation to use a local proxy against US naval facilities in Bahrain (first and foremost, the US Fifth Fleet) can be found in the tweet of Iranian journalist, Hossein Dalirian, who is close to IRGC circles. In March 2017, he uploaded a photo of a

Western warship docked in Bahrain and wrote, “In a reality where Bahraini revolutionaries approach US warships and take a picture of it, if they hold heavy weapons, it will be very simple to attack them.”[\[71\]](#)

The main proxy through which Iran is working to undermine stability in Bahrain is the Saraya al-Ashtar militia (established in 2013). The leader of the militia, Murtada Al-Sanadi, who has been in Iran since 2011, openly calls for a violent revolution to oust the al-Khalifa regime.[\[72\]](#) Some of its top operatives, such as Ahmad Hasan Yusuf, are operating from Iran to evade verdicts issued by Bahraini authorities.[\[73\]](#) Another example of the Iranian and Hezbollah direct connection with the Saraya al-Ashtar militias was illustrated, according to Bahraini authorities, in a visit by senior officials to the militia in 2011 to plan terror attacks. and in a 2012 meeting they held with Nasrallah and his deputy Na'im Qassem in Beirut in 2012, the militia received \$20,000 from Nasrallah to continue launching attacks in Bahrain, and in 2015, the militia sent another delegation to Iran and Beirut for the same purposes.[\[74\]](#)

Saraya al-Mukhtar, founded in 2013, is another Shiite militant organization supported by Iran. Like Saraya al-Ashtar, it, too, seeks to oust the al-Khalifa regime and establish a country that is protected within Iran's shadow. The connection between the militia and Iran was proven, among other examples, in the burial of its Shiite operatives in Iran's Qom.[\[75\]](#) The Bahraini government has attempted to protect itself and its country from this threat; it has applied preventive measures which have thwarted some arms smuggling to Bahrain.[\[76\]](#) As a result, it seems that these militias possess less significant weapons than that of their Iraqi and Yemenite counterparts. However, some of their weapons, especially Iran-made explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), well known to the US and Israeli armies from Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, as well as RPGs and sniper rifles,[\[77\]](#) still appear to be rather deadly.

The Yemeni arena, specifically Sana'a (the capital) and large parts of the country, is controlled by the Shiite Ansarallah movement, supported by Quds and Hezbollah forces. This region serves as fertile ground for pro-Iranian terrorist activity against American interests there, especially around the Red Sea. Qassem Soleimani already openly bragged about Iranian missiles capabilities in the region of the Red Sea, declaring that, “the Red Sea is not safe anymore for an American presence.”[\[78\]](#) Soleimani's statement came a day after Ansarallah's missile attack on two Saudi oil tankers west of the strategic Hodeidah Port in the South of the Red Sea, which forced Saudi Arabia to halt oil exportation there for twelve days.[\[79\]](#) Iranian guidance of Ansarallah attacks was publicly revealed with the August 2018 declaration by senior IRGC commander Nasser Sha'bani that the IRGC had ordered the Houthis to carry out the July offensive against the two Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea.[\[80\]](#)

Iran has significant political-religious influence on Ansarallah despite the fact that they allegedly belong to two different streams of the Shi'a (the Iranians belong to the twelver Shi'a, and the Houthis – the Zaidi Shi'a). At his Tehran meeting with Khamenei in August 2019, Ansarallah spokesperson, Muhammad Abdul Salam, stated, “We see your rule a continuation of the path of the Prophet of Islam and the rule of the Commander of the Believers [a title exclusively attributed by the Shiites to Ali ibn Abi Talib].”[\[81\]](#) In April 2019, the US Secretary of State Pompeo stated that following its Iranian directive, Ansarallah refused to implement the Stockholm Agreement it signed and under which it has pledged to withdraw from the Hodeidah Port, the main hub of Iranian arms smuggling.[\[82\]](#)

Apparently, senior Quds Force commander Abdul Reza Shahlai is in command of the Quds Force operations in Yemen.^[83] As Quds Force deputy commander, Esmail Qaani, admitted in March 2015, the Quds forces were operating in Yemen in a 'humanitarian aid mission' in the form of giving aid to wounded people.^[84] Despite Nasrallah's denials, Hezbollah's presence in Yemen is also documented, though limited, compared to its presence in Syria. Saudi television channel Al-Hadath reported that Hezbollah operatives – Abu Salah, Sheikh Jawad and Mehdi – deliver guerrilla training, including suicide attacks, to Ansarallah operatives in Yemen.^[85]

The US did impose sanctions on Haytham Ali Tabataba'i (a.k.a. Abu 'Ali Al-Tabataba'i), a senior Hezbollah operative dispatched to Yemen in 2015 to head Hezbollah's training team in the country.^[86] The Saudi Arabia-led coalition claims Hezbollah operatives take part in Yemeni fighting which is how eight Hezbollah operatives were killed in June 2018 during fights against coalition forces.^[87] In accordance with their physical presence in Yemen, Quds Force and Hezbollah forces suffered losses in Yemen,^[88] including – according to the Yemenite Defense Ministry – missiles experts.^[89] Tehran has officially denied its military meddling in Yemen. Yet, in September 2019, head of IRGC Aerospace Force Hajizadeh explicitly acknowledged the direct military aid of Tehran to Ansarallah by taking pride of the interrelated relations between the IRGC, Ansarallah, Hezbollah, declaring that they compose one coalition. Admitting the military meddling of the IRGC in Yemen, Hajizadeh further said that Iran is assisting the oppressed in Yemen, just as it does in Lebanon and Palestine.^[90]

In light of this cooperation, the statement of deputy Quds Force chief Qaani, that the Ansarallah possess missiles with a range of 400-500 kilometers with a deflection range of 10-12 meters,^[91] seems to rely on his personal knowledge of smuggling these weapons from Iran to Ansarallah while empowering the dangerous potential of the Yemeni arena for American interests. Of all the weapons systems of Ansarallah, it seems that the arms which have been are shipped by Iran – especially the drones, Chinese-made C-802 shore launched anti-ship missiles (the same model that sunk the INS Hanit during the Second Lebanon War), and explosive boats (which are also likely to be supplied from Iran) – adds to the weapons in the possession of Ansarallah a distinctly deadly strategic dimension to the threats against American and Israeli vessels in the Red Sea and the Straits of Bab al-Mandab.^[92]

Conclusion

Since its inception, the Islamic revolutionary regime of Iran has gradually and diligently established an array of pro-Iranian transnational networks made up of its allies and proxy terrorist organizations. This array enables Tehran to own a world-wide terrorist platform and maintain a significant and comprehensive global terrorist presence. There is a strong basis for stating that Iran is the world leader in sponsoring terrorism, as defined by the current US administration. Iran has gained considerable experience in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Iraq War (2003–2011), ISIS crises, and the Syrian civil war. These four historical intersections have served as significant factors in the development of activating of the transnational terrorism array. Learning from each lesson, Iran owns this upgraded comprehensive array, which will be at its disposal and used to whatever extent the Iranian leadership decides.

Based on the operating theory which Tehran formulated, the Iranian end goal is for Quds forces to be present in target countries, whether they end up acting independently against Iran's enemies or

to closely assist proxies in carrying out terrorist activities.^[93] The array is made up of both Shiite and Sunni organizations, and they will act on Iran's intent to establish hegemony in the Middle East and to strengthen its foothold around the world so that it can appreciably jeopardize the US and its partners in any war scenario. This coordinative, global effort is how Iran attempts to deter the US from promoting any offensive initiative against it. Apparently, this is what the IRGC chief Salami meant in his statement, "we are committed to forming a victory formula over the enemy, in all scenarios. Today, our international strength is valid, recognizable and has exceptional deterrent potential."^[94]

Accordingly, US and Israeli military plans for a campaign against Iran (if required, in view of Iran's escalating provocations) must consider the dangers posed by Iran's terrorist networks and allies around the world. A multinational effort will be necessary to deny Iran use of these powerful networks. The American and Israeli governments in particular will need to preempt and take preventive counterterrorism actions in order to neutralize the capabilities of Iranian and pro-Iranian terrorists around the world.

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