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Published online: 17 Oct 2018.

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that militant clients should be understood as a pillar of Iran's grand strategy and an extension of its military power. The article examines why Iran has relied on militant clients since the 1979 revolution and the benefits and costs of its client approach. In evaluating these issues, it identifies five main areas where Iran has gained from its client strategy: 1) maintaining independence from the West; 2) successfully exporting its religio-political worldview; 3) extending its military reach and power; 4) reducing political costs of its foreign activities; and 5) establishing needed regional allies. It further identifies five main dangers that Iran faces by continuing its strategic behavior: 1) increased pressure from the United States and a broader US military regional footprint; 2) more unified regional adversaries; 3) the risk of unintended escalation with the United States and regional adversarial states; and 4) enduring regional instability and insecurity

Introduction

In the 21st century, no state has had more success in utilizing militant clients outside its borders toward strategic ends than the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Iran's clients have blossomed into effective proxy forces that have successfully advanced Iran's interests at the ground level. Iran's relationships with its clients have helped it expand its political influence in those countries, extend its military power beyond its borders, and secure an advantageous position vis-à-vis its regional rivals. Iran's behavior could continue to pay off over the long term, especially should those conflicts eventually resolve in Iran's favor. However, it could also lead to military conflict between Iran and its chief regional adversaries or the United States.

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Iran's reliance on militant clients is not new; rather, it is rooted in the country's post-1979 political orientation.[1] After the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic's leaders adopted a foreign policy that promoted national independence, proscribed alliances with foreign powers, rejected the status quo of the international system, and downplayed the importance of close relations with neighboring states.[2] Since then, in lieu of forging alliances with its neighbors or foreign powers, the Islamic Republic's leaders have continued to place emphasis on the development of militant clients—especially among co-religionist Shiites—in foreign countries at the substate level. At the head of that campaign has been the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—Iran's preeminent military and a powerful voice in its strategic decision-making—whose clients have become some of the most powerful military actors in the Middle East's wars.[3]

Through its support to militants and broader strategic behavior, Iran has remained a perennial, leading policy concern for US administrations. Yet despite its importance to US policy and its growing regional influence, scant scholarly attention has been paid to Iran's use of militant clients as tools of military power and grand strategy.[4] Several valuable studies have focused on Iran's support for terrorism outside its borders.[5] But given the increasingly large role militant groups play in regional warfare, terrorism as a theoretical lens is now too narrow to explain the place of militant clients in Iran's foreign involvement and their centrality to Iranian grand strategy.

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[1]Iran utilized proxies (such as Iraq-based Kurdish groups) toward strategic ends before the 1979 revolution as well. But the centrality of clients in the Islamic Republic's grand strategic approach and the nature of its ties to clients are fundamentally different from those of its predecessors.

[2]The terms Iran, Islamic Republic, Tehran, and the Iranian regime are used interchangeably in this article and mean the collection of leaders and military commanders that influence and decide the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategic policy. Thus, for the sake of clarity, the broader terms above (Iran, Islamic Republic, the regime, etc.) have been favored to describe the authorship of the Islamic Republic of Iran's actions.

[3]On the IRGC, see: Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Bayram Sinkaya, *The Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations* (London: Routledge, 2015); Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards* (London: Routledge, 2015); and Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2013).

[4]Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*; Afshon Ostovar, "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy," in *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, ed. Frederick Wehrey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (May 2016): 647–63; Abbas William Samii, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship," *Middle East Journal* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 32–53.

[5]Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), 79–115; Daniel Byman, "Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 3 (April 2008): 169–81; Shahram Chubin, *Whither Iran? Reform, Domestic Politics and National Security* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015); Bruce Hoffman, *Recent Trends and Future Prospects of Iranian Sponsored International Terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1990); Edgar O'Ballance, *Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism, 1979–95: The Iranian Connection* (London: MacMillan Press LTD, 1997); Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran and Terrorism: The Transatlantic Responses," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 22, no. 2 (1999): 141–52; Alex S. Wilner, "Apocalypse Soon? Deterring Nuclear Iran and its Terrorist Proxies," *Comparative Strategy* 31, no. 1 (February 2012): 18–40.

Analysts associated with think tanks have looked at Iranian strategy more closely,[6] but the issue is deserving of more scholarship and critical attention.

This article argues that Iran's reliance on clients is best understood as part of its approach to grand strategy and national security. Grand strategy encompasses a state's understanding of its national security interests and objectives, the threats to those interests and objectives, and what military instruments should be used to advance those interests and objectives.[7] To that end, the article addresses three crucial questions: why has Iran relied on militant clients since the founding of the Islamic Republic; what has it gained from that practice; and what challenges lay ahead for the continuance of that behavior. It further evaluates Iran's approach by identifying and examining the five main strategic benefits that clients have provided Iran and the five main dangers Iran faces by continuing this behavior.

Overall, Iran's client approach has had mixed results. Neutral observers could easily conclude that its reliance on militants has been more detrimental than positive. Indeed, Iran's militant client policy has had a severely negative impact on its international standing, economy, and relations with foreign powers and neighboring states. Its threats to export the revolution helped unite regional opposition against it—and in support of Saddam Hussein—during the ruinous Iran–Iraq war.[8] The majority of sanctions placed on Iran since that war, while largely directed at its nuclear enrichment program, have been politically undergirded by its continued support of armed groups outside its borders.[9] The intense international pressure placed on Iran over its nuclear program has been also motivated in part by concerns that a nuclear weapons capability would shield its extraterritorial campaign or that Iran

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[6]J. Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Concepts of Warfare: Understanding Tehran's Evolving Military Doctrines," *American Enterprise Institute*, 16 February 2017; Michael Eisenstadt, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion, Expediency, and Soft Power in an Era of Disruptive Change," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, MES Monographs 7, November 2015; Afshon Ostovar, Rebecca Edelston, and Michael Connell, *On Shifting Sands: Iranian Strategy in a Changing Middle East* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, 2013); Frederic Wehrey, et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009).

[7]See Barry R. Posen and Andrew Ross, "Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/97): 5–53; also, S. Paul Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy: Islamist Militancy, National Security, and the Pakistani State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8.

[8]F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 152–57.

[9]On the impact of sanctions, see: Mohammad Reza Farzanegan, "Effects of International and Energy Sanctions on Iran's Informal Economy," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2003): 13–36; Nader Habibi, "The Iranian Economy in the Shadow of Economic Sanctions," *Middle East Brief*, no. 31, Brandies University Crown Center for Middle East Studies (October 2008); Akbar E. Torbat, "Impacts of the US Trade and Financial Sanctions on Iran," *The World Economy* 28, no. 3 (March 2005): 407–34; and Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Economy and the US Sanctions," *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 185–99.

would provide nuclear weapons to its clients.[10] Based on those assumptions, pundits and academics alike call for war with Iran to destroy its nuclear facilities.[11] The Trump administration included Iran among eight other countries in its revised 2017 travel ban and listed the entire IRGC as a specially designated organization due to its support to terrorist groups.[12] In sum, one could argue that Iran's post-1979 development has been severely retarded, and its insecurity exasperated, by its persistent support to foreign militants and thereby its approach to grand strategy.

Such costs make Iran's reliance on militants appear puzzling if not paradoxical. However, as this article argues, from the standpoint of the political and strategic objectives Iran's leaders have championed since the revolution, its client building has been rational and effective. Since 1979, Iran's support for foreign militant groups has been about building relationships with likeminded entities to secure its independence from foreign powers and counter the United States, Israel, and other adversaries. While Iran had modest success through the 1990s, its efforts since the turn of the 21st century have had a more substantial strategic impact. During the post-2003 US occupation of Iraq, Iran successfully developed a network of clients that fought to undermine US influence while also promoting Iran's national security agenda in Iraq. These clients have had an even more impressive run in the post-2011 conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where they have individually and collectively increased in power, helped expand Iran's political and military influence, and been actively involved in countering Iran's adversaries on the battlefield. Altogether, Iran has been able to advance its core strategic objectives primarily through its cultivation of militant clients in the Middle East.

These questions and arguments will be pursued in the following sections. The first section presents the article's theoretical grounding and compares Iran's experience to Pakistan, which has pursued a similar client-based strategy with different results. It further discusses the nature of the groups supported by Iran and Pakistan and why the terms "militant" and "client" are useful descriptors for Iran's client allies. The second section discusses Iran's national security imperatives since the 1979 revolution. The third section illustrates the development of the Islamic Republic's client strategy

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[10]Byman, "Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons"; Ashton B. Carter et al., "Reducing Nuclear Threats and Preventing Nuclear Terrorism," ed. National Security Advisory Group (NASG), Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (October 2007), http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Reducing%20Nuclear%20Threats-FINAL.pdf.

[11]For example, see Matthew Kroenig, *A Time To Attack: The Looming Iranian Nuclear Threat* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014).

[12]US Department of Treasury, "Non-proliferation Designations; Iran Designations; Counter Terrorism Designation Update," 13 October 2017, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20171013.aspx; Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Allows Trump Travel Ban to Take Effect," *New York Times*, 4 December 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/politics/trump-travel-ban-supreme-court.html.

through brief discussions of three crucial periods in its history. In its early foreign activity during the revolution and Iran–Iraq war (1979–1988), Iran helped establish Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraq's Badr, its most important clients and the backbone of its strategic successes in the 21st century. It then honed the strategic use of clients during the US occupation of Iraq (2003–2011), where Iran utilized its clients to weaken US influence in Iraq by directly combating US and allied forces. Finally, Iran's clients blossomed as transnational military actors in the post-Arab Spring wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen (2011–2017), where they have transformed into capable military forces that have effectively extended Iran's military reach and power across the region.

These first three sections provide the context for the fourth section, which: 1) evaluates the strategic logic of Iran's client strategy; 2) identifies and examines the five main benefits militant clients have provided for Iran and the five main dangers that lie ahead; and 3) briefly considers the implications of Iran's strategy for the United States and its allies. The final section provides a summary of the article's main points and proposes avenues for future scholarship.

The Strategic Use of Militant Clients: Pakistan and Iran

Why do states sponsor armed groups when those groups can and often do create serious security problems for the patron? That puzzle is the basis of S. Paul Kapur's and Sumit Ganguly's innovative theorizing on Pakistan's use of militant proxies. Using Pakistan as a case study, Kapur and Ganguly make a convincing argument for why the use of such groups is better understood in terms of grand strategy and national security.[13] Kapur expands upon this thesis in another study that more deeply examines the strategic value of Pakistan's use of militant proxies, the role they play in Pakistan's conflicts and competition with India, the drivers behind Pakistan's decision-making, and the benefits and costs of Pakistan's approach to grand strategy.[14] Kapur views Pakistan's reliance on proxies as a rational strategic choice in the country's ongoing competition with India, but one that has also had both expected and unanticipated outcomes.[15] Drawing on an assessment of the history of Pakistan's strategic behavior, this scholarship proposes a theoretical framework for why countries might pursue a proxy-based strategy. Yet because this framework is derived from a single case study, its ability to explain other cases remains questionable.

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[13]S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, "The Jihad Paradox: Pakistan and Islamist Militancy in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 111–41.
[14]Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*.
[15]Ibid., 2–3.

Testing its applicability through other cases, such as Iran, would therefore enhance its theoretical contributions and expand our understanding of why and how states employ militant clients and how that behavior impacts regional and international security.

Pakistan's use of proxy militant groups goes back to the state's founding.[16] Since that time, Pakistan has relied on militant groups (along with conventional military forces and, eventually, nuclear weapons) as one of its core "grand strategic tools."[17] This reliance stems partly from Pakistan's relative weakness vis-à-vis its more powerful rival, India. India's much larger conventional forces and nuclear arsenal are not something Pakistan can surmount, which has pushed Pakistan's decision-makers toward a reliance on a network of Islamist militant groups. These groups have been used offensively both to initiate and sustain conflict and have operated at times and in areas where Pakistan's conventional forces could not without sparking escalation. This has provided Pakistan with an offensive means that could be plausibly denied by the state, thereby decreasing the chances of escalation with more powerful adversaries. They have been a relatively inexpensive investment compared to conventional military procurement and have proven difficult to counter by Pakistan's adversaries.[18]

Those strategic benefits have come at a steep cost. Although militant groups have helped shield Pakistan from direct blame in certain instances, they have saddled Pakistan with almost perpetual conflict and insecurity. They have eroded the trust of its allies (especially the United States), destabilized its neighbors (especially Afghanistan), and left Pakistan with the reputation of supporting terrorism and extremism. They have spurred arch-rival India to pursue a conventional arms build-up, increasing its military power imbalance with Pakistan.[19] Rogue attacks by militant groups have put it at risk of unintended escalation with India. Pakistan has also increasingly lost control of its proxies, leading to armed conflict and instability inside the country. Finally, and more fundamentally, money spent funding proxies has been money not spent addressing Pakistan's numerous domestic social and political challenges.[20]

On the whole, Kapur's major findings regarding Pakistan hold true for Iran as well, but with some key differences. First and foremost, Iran's militant client program has been ascendant in the 21st century and continues to produce more value than not for Iran's leadership. Comparatively, as Kapur argues, Pakistan's militant proxy effort—which is decades older than

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[16]Ibid., 2.
[17]Ibid., 8.
[18]Ibid., 14–19.
[19]Ibid., 10, 20–21.
[20]Ibid., 10.

the Islamic Republic of Iran's—has exhausted many of the strategic benefits it once produced and is now creating more insecurity than value for the Pakistani state.[21] Further, unlike Pakistan, Iran lacks a nuclear weapons deterrent and its conventional military capabilities are relatively weak compared to Pakistan's. Iran is therefore more dependent on its militant clients to extend its military power and produce both deterrent and offensive capabilities, suggesting that militant clients contain more strategic value and potential for Iran than they do for Pakistan.[22]

More broadly, Iran's motivations and intentions with its clients differ sizably from those of Pakistan. Unlike Iran, Pakistan has not stressed independence from the United States or other foreign powers, allowing it more flexibility in the security domain. Pakistan has maintained productive (albeit at times tense) relations with foreign powers (such as the United States and China) and other regional states (such as Saudi Arabia), whereas Iran has been mostly isolated. Pakistan therefore has had less need for substate allies (as opposed to simply proxies), because its productive relationships with powerful states afford it more in terms of defense and security than Iran has been able to achieve through its more limited state-to-state relations. Nonetheless, Pakistan's motivations for cultivating the Taliban are in many ways similar to Iran's motivations for developing its main clients, particularly as they have been used as a means of managing interests and countering the influence of rivals in a neighboring (or nearby) state—a means that can exist outside of (or augment) the more normative state-to-state diplomatic process.[23]

Iran's deeper alliances with its clients have helped it more effectively navigate what Kapur describes as the principle–agent problem.[24] While Pakistan and its clients share certain political objectives and a certain worldview concerning Kashmir and India, they do not adopt their patron's state interests to the same degree that Iran's clients do.[25] In Pakistan's case, proxies have been developed from militant groups within Pakistan, Kashmir, and neighboring Afghanistan. They have been mostly composed of Pakistani nationals or have come from ethnic communities whose populations straddle Pakistan's borders. The major groups sponsored by Iran, however, operate outside of the country, and most do not share an ethnic or tribal linkage to it.[26] Religious identity and authority have been more central in Iran's ties to its clients, the closest of which

[21]Ibid., 10, 27.
[22]Ibid., 8–9.
[23]Ibid., 79–80, 98–102.
[24]Ibid., 18–20, 27.
[25]By way of comparison, see Ibid., 14.
[26]An exception here would be Iran's patronage of the Persian-speaking, Shiite Hazara organization, Hezb-e Wahdat, and productive ties with other Persian-speaking Sunni Tajik groups in Afghanistan during the 1990s, especially Jamiat-e Islami.

(Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias) not only share the Twelver Shiite religion of Iran's leadership (and the majority of its citizens), they also have adopted Iran's theocratic system as their ideological program and view Iran's supreme leader as their ultimate religio-political authority. The religious and ideological connection between Iran and its clients is significantly different than the political links between Pakistan and its proxies and is perhaps one of the chief reasons that Iran has been able to cultivate closer ties and extract more loyalty out its clients than Pakistan has.[27]

However, because Iran does not have absolute control over its clients, the principle–agent problem still applies, particularly in terms of the risk of unintended escalation by way of rogue or miscalculated behavior by its agent-clients. Further, Iran's alliances are not set in stone, and a number of factors can potentially lead to a distancing between Iran and its clients.[28] For example, unlike Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, the leaders of Yemen's Ansar Allah organization (also known as the Houthis) are adherents of Zaydi (not Twelver) Shiism and do not view Iran's supreme leader as their ultimate religio-political authority. The Houthis and Iran are allied against Saudi Arabia and share major ideological positions (anti-Israel and anti-American policies in particular), but those commonalities have so far been reinforced by conflict and the Houthis' lack of alternative patronage. If conditions for the Houthis changed inside Yemen, or should they find additional or alternative outside patronage, their alliance with Iran could easily weaken.

The nature of these patron–client relationships makes the terminology used to describe them important. Such as with Pakistan, Iran's clients have been widely described as terrorists, nonstate actors, militias, insurgents, and quasi-state or even official state paramilitaries. Those terms describe particular characteristics of different groups; however, none of them sufficiently encompasses the spectrum of characteristics that Iran's clients share. In particular, the terrorism rubric no longer sufficiently explains what these clients have become: militaries that fight wars. Definitions of terrorism center on the targeting of noncombatants and the goal of influencing or instilling fear in target populations toward political ends.[29] Although Iran's clients might engage in terrorism, that is no longer their central strategic value for Iran. Rather, and comparable to Kapur and Ganguly's distinction regarding Pakistan's proxies, Iran's clients are foremost involved

[27]Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 117–21.
[28]Iran's support has not always been sufficient to overcome the independent interests of its clients. For example, Iran lost influence with former Twelver Shiite clients, the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq and Hezb-e Wahdat, when the agendas of those organizations began to depart from that of Iran.
[29]On definitions of terrorism, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 40–41; and Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 8–9.

in battlefield success.[30] For that reason, Kapur's usage of the broader term "militant" is more apt than the alternatives and is consequently used here.

There is also a tension between the terms client and proxy. Kapur favors the term "proxy" to describe the armed groups sponsored by Pakistan. That term works well but can also suggest an inherent lack of agency on the part of the sponsored groups. As Pakistan's case has shown, a core challenge in the principle–agent relationship is that the agent can go its own way for a variety of reasons. These groups might operate as proxies through certain behavior but can also pursue goals independent from their sponsor. In other words, even though a militant group can serve as a proxy, its relationship to a supporting power is not necessarily one of deference or mutual strategic vision. These relationships can be transactional and based on little more than temporarily intersecting political interests.[31] In Iran's case (and perhaps, at certain times, in Pakistan's too), the term "client" better describes the patron–client relationship Tehran has with those groups it is allied with. Here this term is meant to help distinguish transactional proxies from client allies. Transactional proxies might receive support and act at times in ways that help advance some of their patron's objectives, but they do not share all or even most of that patron's agenda, politics, or ideology. That inherent distance makes their relationship based more so on *quid pro quo* support than on the shared pursuit of broad-ranging goals and ambitions.

Because Iran provides support (such as arms) to many groups, it is helpful to further clarify what differentiates a "militant client" from a transactional proxy. In this article, the term "militant" is used to mean specifically any armed group sponsored by Iran that has used armed violence to help advance Iran's strategic goals as an active combatant in conflict or war. The term "client" is specifically reserved for organizations allied with Iran that receive their primary means of outside support from Iran and: a) operate alongside or under the command of IRGC commanders in conflict zones; and/or b) control enough territory (particularly airports and borders) to enable a sustained Iranian ground presence in their areas of operation and direct Iranian military support. These parameters limit the article's focus to Iran's strongest relationships in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The article does not include Palestinian groups (such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad) because Iran has no ground presence in Gaza or the West Bank and neither group is allied with Iran's broader regional

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[30]Kapur and Ganguly, "Jihad Paradox," 111.
[31]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 18–20.

agenda.[32] It also does not include Afghanistan-based groups, because outside of periods in the 1980s and 1990s, Iran has not had a stable client in Afghanistan and the groups that remain friendly with it (such as Jamiat-e Islami and Hezb-e Wahdat) do not actively support its regional agenda, do not broadly share its anti-US policies in Afghanistan, and do not receive their primary means of support from Iran.[33] Similarly, groups that have received some form of support from Iran but are not allied with it or have other major outside patrons, such as the Taliban, Hezb-e Islami, al Qaeda, PFLP-GC, and Bosnian groups, are also not included.

Iran's National Security Imperatives and the Role of Clients

How and why Iran has relied on militant clients is rooted in its post-1979 approach to grand strategy. The 1979 revolution was above all an assertion of Iran's independence from the United States and foreign influence writ large. It was also anti-monarchical and Shia Islamist in political orientation. Those positions put revolutionary Iran at odds with not only America, but all of her regional allies as well—Israel and the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf foremost.[34] Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic's chief national security concerns have remained centered on the United States and her allies.[35] US troops stationed in neighboring countries, the US Fifth Fleet operating out of Bahrain, US maritime operations in the Persian Gulf, and US military cooperation with Israel and Arab states are deemed threats. Western cultural influence—from democracy to secularism—is considered an insidious form of soft war and behind nearly all episodes of domestic unrest and civil disturbance in Iran.[36] Likewise, the rise of jihadist groups (including al Qaeda and ISIS) is seen as a project of the West, Israel, and Saudi Arabia to destroy the Islamic Republic and its allies.[37] As Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, told a crowd of supporters

[32]Iran's disagreements with Hamas and PIJ over regional issues have been well noted. For example, see "Baznegari 'Hamas' va 'jehad-e eslami' dar ravabet-e khod ba iran" [A review of Hamas's and Islamic Jihad's relationships with Iran], *Mashregh*, 26 December 2015, https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/472437/.

[33]For example, see "Iran beh donbal-e gozine'i-ye jadid?" [Is Iran looking for a new alternative?], *Hasht-e Sobh*, 24 August 2015, http://8am.af/1394/06/02/iran-seeks-new-option-mohammad-mohaqeq/.

[34]On the Gulf Arab response, see Gause, *International Relations*, 46–57; and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Iran: Stuck in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2017), 233–50.

[35]Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11–33; Fred Halliday, "Iranian Foreign Policy Since 1979: Internationalism and Nationalism in the Islamic Republic," in *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 88–107.

[36]For example, see this text produced by the Basij popular militia, which has taken the lead in combating soft-war in Iran: Mohammad Javad Akhvan, *'Obur az Fetneh: Bazkhwani-ye Parvandeh-ye Yeksal-e Nabard-e Narm* [Overcoming Sedition: Reviewing the Record of Year One of the Soft War] (Tehran: Markaz-e Motala'at va Pazhuheshha-ye Sazman-e Basij-e Daneshjuyi, 2010).

[37]"Dar khast-e qovveh-ye qazaiyyeh az sepah va vezarat-e ettelaat / jelogiri az vorud-e jariyan-haye takfiri be keshvar" [The Head of the Judiciary Requests the IRGC and Ministry of Information to Prevent the Infiltration of Takfiris Into the Country], *Mehr News Agency*, 15 January 2014, http://mehrnews.com/news/2215145/; also, Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 1 (January 2015): 1–15.

in June 2014: "Our external challenge is the troublemaking by the [global] arrogance. Let's speak frankly; the troubles [are caused] by the United States."[38] Simply put, the United States, together with its actual and perceived mechanisms of influence in the Middle East (including alliances, agreements, military sales, footprint, cultural and political sway, etc.), poses an amorphous, persistent, and omnipresent challenge to the Islamic Republic.

Navigating that challenge has fueled Iran's strategic behavior.[39] It has led Iran into enduring cold wars with the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia and added suspicion, tension, and antagonism to nearly all of its relationships with its more pro-US neighbors (such as Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates [UAE], Bahrain, and Qatar).[40] To deal with outside threats, Iran has invested in three main areas of defense and deterrence (not including its nuclear program).[41] Its ballistic missile program, which includes rockets that can hit its neighboring rivals and Israel, has provided Iran with a stand-off capability. Ballistic missiles are Iran's best form of hard retaliation and a credible deterrent.[42] Iran has also invested in cyberwarfare capabilities, which have been used to target its adversaries' economic interests, infrastructure, and government websites and to harass and intimidate critics abroad.[43] The most important and enduring effort, however, has been the cultivation of foreign militant clients. Unlike the deterrent value of ballistic missiles and the nonkinetic options afforded by cyber, militant clients are the only tool Iran has for extending its strategic footprint and directly countering its adversaries through armed force. For that reason, they have become the centerpiece of Iranian grand strategy and an investment Tehran is not likely to easily abandon.

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[38]"Iran Never Giving in to West: Leader," *Al Alam*, 4 June 2014, http://en.alalam.ir/news/1599907.

[39]Mohsen M. Milani, "Tehran's Take: Understanding Iran's U.S. Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009): 46–62; also see Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *Iran and the United States: An Insider's View of the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 200.

[40]Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors experienced a period of gradual improvement during the 1990s before relations returned to increasing tensions after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. See Mohsen M. Milani, "Iran's Post-Cold War Policy in the Persian Gulf," *International Journal* 49, no. 2 (June 1994): 328–54; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Dynamics of Change in the Persian Gulf: Political Economy, War and Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2013), 25–45; and R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy: Both North and South," *Middle East Journal* 46, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 393–412. On the Iran–Saudi rivalry, see Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016). For a different take, see Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friend or Foes?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

[41]Iran's nuclear program could be included as a fourth area, but because that program has not been successfully militarized and remains in stasis due to the 2015 Joint Coalition Proposal of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, it has not been included here.

[42]Bilal Y. Saab and Michael Elleman, "Precision Fire: A Strategic Assessment of Iran's Conventional Missile Program," *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, September 2016, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Precision_Fire_web_0907.pdf; Farhad Rezaei, "Why Iran Wants So Many Ballistic Missiles," *National Interest*, 5 January 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-iran-wants-so-many-ballistic-missiles-18954.

[43]Collin Anderson and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran's Cyber Threat: Espionage, Sabotage, and Revenge* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018).

Although large, Iran's military is technologically weak compared to most of its neighbors.[44] Enduring sanctions on Iran have prevented it from procuring advanced weaponry on the open market and from modernizing much of its military—particularly air, land, and sea platforms. The 2015 nuclear deal includes provisions that will allow Iran to purchase conventional arms without UNSC approval after 2020 and will lift certain restrictions on non-nuclear missile development in 2023.[45] Even so, its military procurement and spending has long lagged behind that of its neighbors.[46] According to the data collected by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Iran spends far less on defense than its neighboring rivals. As of 2014, Iran's defense spending was around 2.35 percent of GDP. Between 2000 and 2014, Iran's defense spending has averaged just below 2.7 percent of GDP.[47] Since 2014, and perhaps in response to its growing military commitments, Iran's defense spending began to gradually increase.[48] In early 2017, Iran's government committed to raising defense and military spending to "at least" 5 percent of GDP through 2021.[49] By comparison, Saudi Arabia, Iran's chief regional rival, increased its defense spending from 7.24 percent in 2011 (its lowest percentage of spending per GDP since 1988) to 13.49 percent of GDP in 2015.[50] Whereas Iran's defense spending has estimated to have decreased from around \$13.5 billion in 2010 to around \$10 billion in 2016,[51] one estimate placed Riyadh's total military spending at near \$80 billion or 25 percent of the overall Saudi budget.[52] In 2016, Saudi Arabia had

[44]Anthony H. Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance*, (working paper, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, October 2016), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161004_Iran_Gulf_Military_Balance.pdf.
[45]Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "UN Arms Embargo on Iran," SIPRI Arms Embargoes Archive, https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/iran.
[46]See Anthony H. Cordesman, *Military Spending and Arms Sales in the Gulf: How the Arab Gulf States Now Dominate the Changes in the Military Balance*, April 28, 2015 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2015), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150428_military_spending.pdf.
[47]SIPRI's data on Iran is accessible through the World Bank's Open Data website, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=IR.
[48]"Iran to Hike Military Spending Despite Lower Oil Prices, Sanctions," *Reuters*, 7 December 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-economy-idUSKBN0JL0H320141207; Abbas Qaidaari, "More Planes, More Missiles, More Warships: Iran Increases Its Military Budget by a Third," *Al-Monitor*, 13 July 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/07/khamenei-orders-increase-military.html.
[49]This increase is part of the Iranian government's larger five-year development plan. Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran to Expand Military Spending, Develop Missiles," *Reuters*, 9 January 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-military-plan-idUSKBN14T15L. Also see Bijan Khajehpour, "Will New 5-year Plan Solve Iran's Economic Problems?," *Al-Monitor*, 10 June 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/iran-sixth-five-year-development-plan-rouhani-parliament.html.
[50]SIPRI's data on Saudi Arabia is accessible through the World Bank's Open Data website, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=SA.
[51]These estimates are based on SPRI data. See "Iran Military Expenditure: 1988–2017," *Trading Economics*, http://www.tradingeconomics.com/iran/military-expenditure.
[52]Ben Moshinsky and Will Martin, "Saudi Arabia Spends £56 Billion a Year on Its Insane Military—Here's What That Kind of Money Buys," *Business Insider*, 19 February 2016, http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-spends-80-billion-on-its-military-2016-2. A lower estimate is provided by Janes, which draws from Saudi "budgetary documentation" to suggest that 2016 defense spending was projected to be closer to \$54.7 billion. See Craig Caffrey, "Saudi Arabia Reveals 6.6% Defence Spending Rise for 2017," *HIS Jane's 360*, 28 December 2016, http://www.janes.com/article/66555/saudi-arabia-reveals-6-6-defence-spending-rise-for-2017.

the fourth largest defense budget behind the United States, China, and India.[53] Saudi Arabia and the UAE are both expected to increase defense spending even more in the coming years to counter Iran, with a focus on offensive-centric systems such as precision air-to-ground missiles and fighter refueling capabilities.[54] The delta between Iran's military budget and the combined budget of its adversaries is vast.[55]

It is not known how much Iran spends on its foreign clients, and those costs are not likely to be reflected in official Iranian budgetary numbers. In 2016, Lebanese Hezbollah admitted that it receives all of its funding and weaponry from Iran,[56] which in 2010 the US Department of Defense estimated to be worth between $100 and $200 million annually.[57] Were that figure to be similarly illustrative of Iran's financial commitment to its clients (not including government-to-government aid) in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen—or even quadrupled in all countries—it still would not come close to matching the military spending of Iran's neighboring rivals, much less that of the United States. President Barack Obama explained that imbalance in May 2015 like this: "[Iran's military budget is] $15 billion compared to $150 billion for the Gulf States."[58] Given the above data, the assumption here is that Iran spends less—and perhaps far less—on defense than its nearest peer rivals in the region, even including its support for its clients in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. This is not to suggest that funding clients is inexpensive or unburdensome, but rather that it is a cheaper and more effective strategic investment than competing with its neighbors through conventional defense spending.[59] Further, unlike accessing advanced weaponry on the open market as its neighbors can, the client approach is one that has been available for Iran to pursue.

What military value does Iran get for its foreign investments? First, Iran can credibly threaten to strike its opponents through its clients. Hezbollah in Lebanon has targeted Israel with rocket attacks; Shiite militias in Iraq regularly attacked US troops there before the removal of US forces in 2011;

[53]Benjamin D. Katz, "Saudi Arabia on Offensive With Attack-Minded Military Splurge," *Bloomberg*, 16 February 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-17/saudi-arabia-on-offensive-with-attack-minded-military-splurge.
[54]Ibid. Also, Kapur finds Pakistan's actions have similarly pushed India to invest more heavily in offensive conventional military capabilities: Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 27.
[55]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 10.
[56]"Hezbollah to Send More Fighters to Syria's Aleppo," *Al Jazeera*, 24 June 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/hezbollah-send-fighters-syria-aleppo-160624180847854.html.
[57]US Department of Defense figure is cited in: Carla Humud et al., "Iranian Assistance to Groups in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories," Memorandum to Senator Mark Kirk, 31 Jul 2015 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), http://freebeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/20150731-CRS-Memo-to-Senator-Kirk-Iran-Financial-Support-to-Terrorists-and-Militants-1.pdf.
[58]Ilan Dayan, "Obama Talks on Israeli TV About Netanyahu, Israel, and Davit Blatt [Transcript]," *Jewish Journal*, 2 June 2015, cited in Carla Humud et al., "Iranian Assistance."
[59]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 21–22.

and the Houthis in Yemen have attacked Saudi Arabia at sea, on land, and through ballistic missile strikes. The Houthis also launched failed missile attacks against a US naval vessel off the coast of Yemen, triggering US cruise missile strikes against Houthi-controlled coastal radar stations in response.[60] Iran's ability to strike at its opponents through clients provides it a mechanism of retaliation that can have a deterrent effect. Second, clients afford Iran a mechanism of political influence in states in which it has a strategic stake. In places such as Iraq or Lebanon, where Iran's clients have gained political power, Iranian influence can transcend security dynamics and (to differing degrees) impact state-level decision-making.[61] Third, and of increasing importance, clients expand Iran's military reach in regional wars and have become an extension of Iran's military power. Iran's clients have been active in the post-2011 wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where they have fought to advance Iran's interests and counter the interests of Iran's rivals on the battlefield.

Although Iran's relationships with each of its clients is different, and those clients in turn see Iran's patronage through their own unique lenses, in the aggregate these client allies have helped it advance its strategic goals across the region and vis-à-vis its chief adversaries. Clients enable Iran to take, hold, and defend territory by proxy. Even if that territory is not occupied or absorbed by Iran, it is controlled by Iran's allies and not ceded to their adversaries. Altogether, Iran's client network has transformed into a sophisticated system of power projection that has afforded Tehran immense strategic value.

How did Iran achieve this? What circumstances led its leaders to adopt policies and a strategic outlook that increased its regional power but also alienated it from much of the world? The following sections explore the evolution of the Islamic Republic's strategic reliance on militant clients by briefly discussing three transformational periods in its history: the 1979 Islamic revolution through the Iran–Iraq war; the US occupation of Iraq; and the post-Arab Spring wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Revolution and War (1979–88)

The Islamic Republic's reliance on clients is a product of its enduring hostility to the United States and US influence in the Middle East. After the 1979 revolution, instead of acceding to the status quo and building trust

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[60]Phil Stewart, "U.S. Military Strikes Yemen After Missile Attacks on U.S. Navy Ship," *Reuters*, 12 October 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-missiles/u-s-military-strikes-yemen-after-missile-attacks-on-u-s-navy-ship-idUSKCN12C294.
[61]Pakistan has used proxies to similar effect in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and in India proper. Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 10, 22.

with foreign states, Iran's leaders sought to transform their region—and the Muslim world more broadly—by exporting their revolution to like-minded polities outside of Iran. In practice, this meant developing contact with and providing support to foreign liberation movements and Islamist armed groups. At the helm of that project was the IRGC, the Islamic Republic's newly-established military force, which considered developing foreign militant allies to be critical to Iran's national security.[62] As the organization stated in 1980, "We have no recourse … and must, with the mobilization of forces in every region, strike fear in the heart of our enemies so that the idea of invasion and the destruction of the Islamic revolution will exit [their minds]."[63] By pursuing such a strategy, Iran quickly became, by its own doing, a revolutionary island surrounded by an ocean of hostility.[64]

The period of the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) further shaped Iran's client approach. During the war, neighboring Arab states (with the exception of Syria), Western European powers, the United States, and the Soviet Union all backed Iraq. Iraq benefitted from billions in loans from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, US political backing and intelligence support, and military sales from France and the Soviet Union. Iran, on the other hand, had tepid outside support and much less access to outside military procurement and loans.[65] The imbalance confirmed for Iran's leaders that a global cabal led by the United States and supported by regional states would stop at little— even total war—to defeat the Islamic revolution. That alienation and sense of injustice hardened Iranian perspectives toward the international system and reinforced the necessity of self-reliance in military affairs.[66] The legacy of the war continues to shape the perspectives of Iran's leaders and their national security decision-making.[67]

During the war, Iran helped organize Iraqi Shiite expatriates and prisoners of war into its first Iraqi clients: the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its armed-wing, the Badr Corps.[68] Of those two, Badr became the most important. It served as an all-Iraqi division of the IRGC during the war and remained under IRGC command through the 1990s. As part of the IRGC, Badr was involved in military and covert cross-border operations against Iraqi forces at different points in the

[62]Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 102–107; Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled,* 205–206.

[63]*Payam-e Enqelab*, 19 March 1980, 32. Cited in Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 102.

[64]As Stephen M. Walt has argued, revolutionary states often seek to oppose the policies of their former regime, which can create new conflicts with other powers and allies of the previous regime. Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5.

[65]On the imbalance in foreign support during the war, see Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran–Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 213–40.

[66]Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 104–107; Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 292–94.

[67]Ariane M. Tabatabai and Annie Tracy Samuel, "What the Iran–Iraq War Tells Us about the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 152–85.

[68]Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shìite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003), 235–59.

war.[69] Badr had at best a modest impact, but its value skyrocketed after it and SCIRI returned to Iraq following the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (discussed below).

Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon provided the IRGC with another opportunity. During the war, the IRGC helped organize Lebanese Shiite militants into a pro-Iranian armed group later branded Hezbollah. The IRGC helped arm, train, and provide logistics to Hezbollah during the 1980s and continues to do so. Its on-the-ground support linked Iran to vicious terrorist attacks committed by Hezbollah's armed wing, Islamic Jihad, which included the bombings of the US embassy and US marines barracks in 1983 and various kidnappings of American and European officials.[70] Hezbollah gradually grew to become the most powerful political organization in Lebanon, with expansive social welfare, security, and commercial roles. In many ways, it operates as a state within a state.

U.S. Occupation of Iraq (2003–2011)

The US occupation of Iraq was the single most important event in the transformation of Iran's client strategy. During the occupation, Iran's clientage grew from an assortment of allied militant groups to a formidable mechanism of covert and overt influence in Iraq. Iran's clients not only helped facilitate the expansion of Iranian power in post-Baathist Iraq, they did so by directly harassing and fighting US forces in the country. Iraq was a proving ground for Iran's clients, where they grew in sophistication and capability and developed tactics designed to counteract US military forces and political objectives.

The backbone of Iranian influence in Iraq was SCIRI and Badr. Along with the Dawa Party and other Shiite groups, SCIRI and Badr made inroads into the new Iraqi system, helping to advance Iranian interests through elected politics (SCIRI) and the security sector (Badr).[71] SCIRI changed its name to the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq in 2007 to downplay its former embrace of Khomeinist style theocracy, eventually leading to a political split with the staunchly pro-Iranian Badr and a distancing

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[69]Jabar, *Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 253–54.

[70]Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011), 44–48; also, see Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 112–17.

[71]On the political involvement of Badr and SCIRI, see Juan Cole, "Shia Militias in Iraqi Politics," in *Iraq: Preventing a New Generation of Conflict*, ed. Markus E. Boullon, David M. Malone, and Ben Rowswell (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 109–121; also, Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Influence in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means"* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2008), 27.

from Iran. Badr remained closely allied with Iran and expanded its mission beyond the security sector into politics and development.[72]

The IRGC also succeeded in peeling away militants from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army movement, leading to the formation of two major pro-Iran clients: Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous), led by Qais al-Khazali, and Kataib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades), associated with former Badr member Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.[73] These groups received robust training and lethal aid from Iran, and by 2011, with sophisticated IRGC-supplied weaponry such as mortars and armor-piercing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), they had become the primary threat to US forces in Iraq.[74]

After the Arab Spring: Syria, Iraq, and Yemen (2011–2017)

As with the US occupation of Iraq, post-Arab Spring conflicts created opportunities for the further development of Iran's clientage. In the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Iran's clients transformed from militant groups into military forces and moved from operating in the shadows to the open battlefield. Allied clients provided Iran a mechanism to fight against its adversaries on multiple fronts by proxy and in the process became an extension of Iran's military power and the foundation of its growing regional might.

Syria

Iran's leaders considered the Arab Spring unrest in Syria as a threat to Iran's national security. The Assad government was a partner in Iran's support to Hezbollah, shared Tehran's anti-Israel agenda, and was a key node in Iran's ability to put pressure on Israel.[75] Iranian military officials framed

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[72]Mariam Karouny, "Iraq's Top Shïite Party Changes Name, Platform," *Reuters*, 12 May 2007, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-party-idUSL1221651520070512. Also, Mustafa Habib, "Official Split: Shifting Shiite Allegiances Change Political Landscape," *Niqash*, 15 March 2012, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/3011/; and Susannah George, "Breaking Badr," *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/.

[73]Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mahdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 80–81. Also, see Amir Toumaj, "Iraq Monument Underscores Iranian Commander's Role in Qods Force," *Long War Journal*, 24 February 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/iraq-monument-underscores-iranian-commanders-role-in-qods-force.php.

[74]Felter and Fishman, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 55–82. Also, Tim Craig and Ed O'Keefe, "U.S. Military Says Iran Behind Rising Death Toll," *Washington Post*, 30 June 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/3-us-troops-killed-in-iraq-adding-to-deadly-month/2011/06/30/AGrDQprH_story.html.

[75]The Iran–Syria supply network to Hezbollah is longstanding and appears to be on-going, despite interruptions incurred by Syria's civil war. Iran's armed forces chief, Maj-Gen Mohammad Baqeri, admitted that Iran had had a missile factory in Aleppo that was used to supply Hezbollah during the 2006 war with Israel: *Radio Farda*, 10 November 2016, http://www.radiofarda.com/a/f35_bagheri_aleppo_iran_israel_missiles/28107518.html. Also, Nicholas Blanford, "Syria's Secretive Rocket Industry Spotlighted by Israeli Weapons Seizure," *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 March 2014, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Under-the-Radar/2014/0311/Syria-s-secretive-rocket-industry-spotlighted-by-Israeli-weapons-seizure-video; and Yaakov Lappin and Jeremy Binnie, "Israeli General Says Syria Has Resumed Weapons Production for Hizbullah," *IHS Janes 360*, 17 June 2016, http://www.janes.com/article/61491/israeli-general-says-syria-has-resumed-weapons-production-for-hizbullah.

the Syrian conflict as a strategic dilemma. Mehdi Taeb, the former commander of the IRGC's Basij paramilitary division, called Syria "a strategic province for [Iran]" and claimed that Syria was more vital to Iran's security than Iran's southern Khuzestan province, which had been invaded and occupied by Iraqi forces in 1980. On that point he reasoned: "If the enemy attacks and aims to capture both Syria and Khuzestan, our priority would be Syria. Because if we hold on to Syria, we would be able to retake Khuzestan; yet if Syria were lost, we would not be able to keep even Tehran."[76]

The IRGC began providing military aid to Syria in mid-March 2011, soon after protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad began.[77] Regular flights from Tehran to Damascus carried weapons and personnel to assist the Assad regime. Washington sought to discourage Iran's intervention through a series of sanctions, but to little effect.[78] The IRGC initially committed mostly officers to the war—which seemed to follow the organization's claims that its members served as advisors—but expanded its deployment as the war dragged on.[79] As IRGC officers began to die in action in Syria, eventually including several of their highest ranking and most experienced operatives, it became clear that Iranians were serving near or at the front lines.[80] The funerals of Iranian troops killed in Syria revealed a gradual expansion of the IRGC's burden to include a proportion of lower-ranking and noncommissioned officers, as well as specialists from the Basij paramilitary division and the regular military (*artesh*).[81]

[76]"Ra'is-e qarargah-ye 'ammar: olaviyyat-e ma negahdari surieh beh ja-ye Khuzestan ast" [Head of Ammar Base: Our Priority is Defending Syria Over Khuzestan], *BBC News* (Persian Service), 14 February 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml.

[77]*Final Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Resolution 1929 (2010)*, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) S/2012/395, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2012_395.pdf.

[78]See US Department of the Treasury, "Administration Takes Additional Steps to Hold the Government of Syria Accountable for Violent Repression Against the Syrian People," 18 May 2011, https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1181.aspx; US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Iranian Commercial Airline Linked to Iran's Support for Terrorism," 12 October 2011, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1322.aspx; US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Iranian Arms Shipments," 27 March 2012, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx; and US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Syrian Entity, Others Involved in Arms and Communications Procurement Networks and Identifies Blocked Iranian Aircraft," 19 September 2012, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx.

[79]Through 2016, the number of Iranian nationals serving in a military capacity in Syria does not appear to have surpassed a few thousand. See Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad," *Reuters*, 21 February 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221; and Dugald McConnell and Brian Todd, "Iran Steps Up Its Forces in Syria," *CNN*, 28 October 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/27/middleeast/iran-syria-troop-buildup/.

[80]Iran's military role was confirmed in footage taken by an IRGC filmmaker killed in a firefight with rebels near Aleppo: See "Iran's Secret Army," *BBC News*, September 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3cstnps. Also, Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Elite Iranian General Assassinated Near Syria–Lebanon Border," *The Guardian*, 14 February 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/14/elite-iranian-general-assassinated-syria-lebanon; and Parisa Hafezi, "Senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards General Killed in Syria—IRGC," *Reuters*, 9 October 2015, http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-general-idUKKCN0S30MD20151009.

[81]Paul Bucala, *Iran's New Way of War in Syria*, Report by the Critical Threats (CT) Project of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), February 2017, 3–5.

To cope with the manpower shortages—and seemingly in lieu of drawing from its own enlisted ranks or other Iranian forces—the IRGC facilitated the entry of its Lebanese and Iraqi clients into the war. Hezbollah initially entered to sure up critical Lebanese border areas and land arteries to Damascus, but gradually became involved in the fighting across the country.[82] Shiite militias from Iraq (such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah) were brought in by the IRGC to defend the Sayyida Zaynab area, a largely Shiite suburb of Damascus, but similarly expanded operations across the country. New pro-Iranian Iraqi militias with a more Syrian focus were also established (such as Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Liwa Kafil Zaynab).[83]

The IRGC also began developing paramilitary forces among Syrians and noncitizen immigrant populations in Iran. The former, known as the National Defence Forces (NDF), was composed of pro-Assad Alawites, Shiites, Christians, and a smattering of Sunnis. IRGC commanders spoke of the Syrian NDF, which served under IRGC command and alongside Syrian regular forces, as a new Iranian client. In May 2014, General Hossein Hamadani, who headed training operations in Syria for the IRGC before he was killed in action in October 2015, claimed that in the NDF, "Iran [had] established a second Hezbollah in Syria."[84] The latter were auxiliary forces composed of Afghan and Pakistani Shiite immigrants primarily living in Iran. The Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zaynabiyoun brigades quickly became a fixture on the front lines where they served as something akin to a foreign legion for the Quds Force.[85] The development of these brigades seems to have been a measure designed to simultaneously increase the IRGC's contribution to the fight and minimize the casualties of Iranian citizens. Indeed, by late 2016, Iranian authorities announced that the country had lost over one thousand soldiers to the conflict, the majority of which had come from the Afghan and Pakistani brigades.[86]

Iraq

The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS) massive offensive across northern Iraq in June 2014 triggered a quick Iranian response. The IRGC

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[82]See Marisa Sullivan "Hezbollah in Syria," *Middle East Security Report*, No. 19, ISW, April 2014.
[83]Hayder al-Khoei, "Syria, Iraq and the Struggle for Power: Intertwined Futures," Chatham House, November 2016, 11–12, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-11-24-syria-iraq-struggle-for-power-intertwined-futures-al-khoei.pdf; Christopher Anzalone, "Zaynab's Guardians: The Emergence of Shìa Militias in Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, 23 July 2013, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zaynabs-guardians-the-emergence-of-shia-militias-in-syria.
[84]Arash Karami, "Former IRGC Commander's Comments on Syria Censored," *Al-Monitor*, 6 May 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/former-irgc-commander-syria-comments-censored.html.
[85]Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, PolicyWatch No. 2677, 22 August 2016.
[86]Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Death Toll Among Iran's Forces in Syrian War Passes 1,000," *Reuters*, 22 November 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran-idUSKBN13H16J; Thomas Edbrink, "Iran, Once Quiet About Its Causalities in Syria and Iraq, Now Glorifies Them," *New York Times*, 9 July 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/world/middleeast/iran-once-quiet-about-its-casualties-in-syria-and-iraq-now-glorifies-them.html.

sent aid and scores of advisors and troops to assist Iraqi forces. IRGC Quds Force chief, Qassem Soleimani, took an early lead in operational planning against ISIS, working closely with Iranian client bosses Hadi al-Ameri, al-Khazali, al-Muhandis, and other militia leaders. Following Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's fatwa calling for a popular army to defeat ISIS, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, *hashd al-shaabi*), an umbrella organization that brought together various Iraqi militias, was established. Iranian clients—including Badr, Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, and Kataib Imam Ali—comprised approximately one third of the PMF's total forces, which also included al-Sadr's militia, Sunni tribal forces, and other groups.[87] Al-Muhandis, a close contact of Soleimani, was appointed PMF military commander. The IRGC provided training and assistance to the organization. Basij chief Mohammad Reza Naqdi suggested that the training was aimed at shaping the PMF along the lines of the IRGC's Basij militia—a sentiment indicating that the IRGC's intentions for training the PMF could be to develop it into a stable and long-term client.[88]

The collapse of the Iraqi military in Mosul and parts of northern Iraq opened the door to the rapid expansion of the PMF's role and influence in the war. Iranian advisory forces operated alongside PMF militants and (at times) Kurdish Peshmerga forces in battles across the front lines. PMF forces operated parallel to, but generally apart from, US-backed Iraqi governmental forces. US air power and on-the-ground support, combined with the zeal and tenacity of Iraqi forces, led to a gradual success against ISIS through 2016.[89] The PMF's success in the conflict raised its domestic standing.[90] In November 2016, formal recognition was given to the PMF by Iraq's parliament, which passed a law making the umbrella group an official state military force.[91]

Yemen

Compared to the situations above, less is known about Iran's involvement in Yemen. Reporting from the country is limited, and it is difficult to

[87]Al-Khoei, "Syria, Iraq and the Struggle," 16; Abbas Qaidaari, "Comparing Iraq's Shiite Forces to Iran's Basij," *Al-Monitor*, 11 May 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2015/05/iran-iraq-iraq-basij-forces.html.
[88]"Amadegi-e milyun-ha basiji baray-e e'zam beh surieh va gaza" [Millions of Basijis Ready for Deployment to Syria and Gaza], *Nama News*, 17 November 2014, http://namanews.com/News/105938/.
[89]Ahmad Majidyar, "Iran-Backed Militant Groups Make Territorial Gains in West Mosul," *Middle East Institute*, 12 January 2017, http://www.mei.edu/content/is/iran-backed-militant-groups-make-territorial-gains-west-mosul.
[90]Al-Khoei, "Syria, Iraq and the Struggle," 17.
[91]Issam Saliba, "Iraq: Legislating the Status of the Popular Mobilization Forces," *Global Legal Monitor*, 7 December 2016, http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/iraq-legislating-the-status-of-the-popular-mobilization-forces/.

corroborate information emanating from regional media. US officials believe that Iran has provided military and financial support to the Houthis since the early 2000s.[92] Iranian officials have vaguely admitted providing the Houthis aid, particularly since their 2009 conflict with Yemen's government and Saudi Arabia, but routinely reject accusations of providing military assistance.[93] Iran's support to the Houthis has been a subplot of Yemeni security dynamics over that time and is in part what drove Saudi Arabia and its allies to intervene militarily in Yemen in 2015.[94] Although the IRGC appears to have held a lighter footprint in Yemen compared to its engagement in Syria and Iraq, ample evidence suggests it has been involved in a campaign to supply the Houthis with weaponry from small arms to missile technology throughout the war.[95] Indeed, weaponry that in part or whole originated from Iranian stockpiles has been used by the Houthis to attack Saudi Arabian territory.[96]

Unlike Syria and Iraq, Yemen has not been historically central to Iranian regional strategy. However, given Yemen's border with Saudi Arabia, the Houthis likely have grown in importance to Tehran as its competition with Riyadh has increased. Iran and its clients, especially Hezbollah, are the only outside supporters of the Houthi movement. Such dynamics would make Iran a likely beneficiary of a Houthi victory. Some have argued that Iran's long-term intention is to transform the Houthis into a Hezbollah-like force that can be used to gain leverage against Saudi Arabia or potentially threaten US and Saudi ships off the Yemeni coast.[97] Iran has even suggested the desire to have an enduring military presence in Yemen, including a naval base—a sheer impossibility outside of a total defeat of the Saudi-led intervention.[98] Others have made the case that Iran's ambitions in

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[92]US State Department spokesman Marie Harf said of Iran's links to the Houthis: "There is a well-documented history of support for the Houthi [sic], including money and arms, that goes back a long time." See Oren Dorell, "Iranian Support for Yemen's Houthis Goes Back Years," *USA Today*, 20 April 2015, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/04/20/iran-support-for-yemen-houthis-goes-back-years/26095101/.

[93]For example, see comments by IRGC chief Mohammad Ali Jafari: "Farmandeh-ye sepah: iran beh yaman 'komak-e mostashari' mi-konand" [IRGC Chief: Iran Provides "Relief Assistance" to Yemen], *Tasnim*, 24 November 2017, https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/09/03/1582560.

[94]On the Houthi conflict, see Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, "The War in Yemen," *Survival* 58, no.6 (December 2016–January 2017): 157–86.

[95]See Warren Strobel, "Elite Iranian Guards Training Yemen's Houthis: U.S. Officials," *Reuters*, 27 March 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-houthis-iran-idUSKBN0MN2MI20150327; and US Department of Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership," 22 August 2013, https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2147.aspx. Also, see Alexander Corbeil and Amarnath Amarasingam, "The Houthi Hezbollah: Iran's Train-and-Equip Program in Sanaa," *Foreign Affairs*, 31 March 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-31/houthi-hezbollah.

[96]"Iranian Technology Transfers to Yemen,"*Conflict Armament Research*, March 2017, http://www.conflictarm.com/download-file/?report_id=2465&file_id=2467.

[97]Corbeil and Amarasingam, "Houthi Hezbollah."

[98]Nasser Karimi, "Iran Considers Naval Bases in Yemen, Syria," *Associated Press*, 26 November 2016, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/c47327870b6e4efa8859d4b09cd3ddd8/iran-considers-naval-bases-yemen-syria.

Yemen are more limited.[99] Either way, Iran's link to the Yemen conflict has led Saudi Arabia—Iran's chief regional rival—into a complex and expensive war.[100] Beyond developing a proxy on Saudi Arabia's border, distracting its neighbors from other regional conflicts and bogging them down in an expensive war might be reason enough for Iran to maintain Houthi support.

Evaluating Iran's Militant Strategy

Supporting foreign militants has been central to the Islamic Republic's grand strategy since its establishment. That strategy was born out of some of the revolutionary regime's founding assumptions: that Iran and the Islamic world more broadly are in an existential conflict against Western imperialism; and that the United States and its regional allies (primarily Israel and Saudi Arabia) pose an enduring threat to Iran's revolution and the sanctity of its Islamic system. That perspective placed Iran at odds with virtually all of its neighbors and the West. Lacking alliances and friendly relations with surrounding states, Iran's revolutionary leaders sought to develop allies at the substate level. That strategy had limited success through the 1990s, but has paid increasing dividends in the 21st century.

Given its perception of the threat environment and national security imperatives, Iran has achieved a considerable amount through its militant client strategy. Those gains can be boiled down to five main areas. First and foremost, the Islamic Republic has maintained its independence from the West. Second, the regime has successfully exported its worldview to foreign Shiite communities—a foundational goal of the IRGC and the Islamic Republic's clerical founders.[101] Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias all embrace Iran's political ideology and view its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, as their own spiritual and political guide,[102] outwardly adopting the fundamental assumptions of the Islamic Republic's strategic agenda as their own. By sharing Iran's perspectives of the international system, particularly of the enduring and existential threats posed by the United States and its

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[99]The extent of Iran's influence over the Houthis remains a subject of debate. For example, Thomas Juneau, "No, Yemen's Houthis Actually Aren't Iranian Puppets," *Washington Post*, 16 May 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/16/contrary-to-popular-belief-houthis-arent-iranian-proxies; also, April Longley Alley and Joost Hiltermann, "The Houthis Are Not Hezbollah," *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/27/the-houthis-are-not-hezbollah/.

[100]Angus McDowall, Phil Stewart, and David Rohde, "Yemen's Guerrilla War Tests Military Ambitions of Big-spending Saudis," *Reuters*, 19 April 2016, http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/saudi-military/.

[101]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 14.

[102]See comments made by the representative to Iran of the Iraqi militias Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah on those groups' allegiance to Iran's supreme leader: "Nemayande-ye moqavemat-e eslami-e 'asa'eb ahl-e haq-e 'eraq dar iran" [Iran Representative of Islamic Resistance Group Asaib Ahl al-Haq of Iraq], *Tasnim News*, 6 November 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20150619003107/http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/550169; and "Goftogu-ye tafsili-e fars ba nemayande-ye 'asa'ib ahl al-haq dar Iran" [Fars' detailed interview with Iran representative of Asaib Ahl al-Haq], *Fars News Agency*,16 November 2014, farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn =13930824000516. Also, see Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story From Within*, trans. Dalia Khalil (London: Saqi, 2010), 199–223.

regional allies, Iran's clients also inherently share many of its core objectives in the Middle East, especially in the Syrian, Iraqi, and Yemeni conflicts.[103] As the patron, Iran arguably gains the most from such an arrangement, but the clients also gain politically and organizationally from Iran's support.

Third, militant clients have been used effectively to directly and indirectly counter Iran's enemies while distancing it from those confrontations and providing a degree of deniability.[104] Shiite militias in Iraq were used to harass and target US forces militarily and were responsible for hundreds of American deaths in Iraq through 2011.[105] Shiite militia violence in Iraq also coincided with rising American pressure on Iran.[106] That Iran could strike American forces by proxy in Iraq certainly complicated the Bush administration's management of the Iraq war and was likely to have been a factor in the administration's Iran policy.[107] More importantly, Iranian pressure helped scuttle the American agenda for Iraq. The failure of the United States to achieve a Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq in 2011, which led to the removal of US forces from the country by the end of that year, was in part a testament to Iran's ability to influence Iraqi politics at multiple levels.[108] Since the war against ISIS began, Iraqi militias have continued to lob threats at US forces in Iraq.[109] Given the US commitment to the government of Baghdad and the resolve of both the Obama and Trump administrations to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria, it is likely that Iran's militant clients' apparent willingness to strike US forces will remain a complicating aspect of US policy toward Iraq and Iran.

In Syria, Iran's clients have been used to counter the forces supported by the United States, Western European powers, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other Arab states. They have also fought Salafi-jihadist groups (Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, ISIS, and others) that espouse virulent anti-Shiite

[103]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 108–109.
[104]This is a key similarity in the usage of clients in the Iran and Pakistan cases. See Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 22–23.
[105]The precise number of American troops killed by Iran-backed groups in Iraq is uncertain. US defense officials put the number at around five hundred, including both Iraq and Afghanistan. Other former military officers that served in Iraq believe the number is much higher. See Andrew deGrandpre and Andrew Tilghman, "Iran Linked to Deaths of 500 U.S. Troops in Iraq, Afghanistan," *Military Times*, 14 July 2015, http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/capitol-hill/2015/07/14/iran-linked-to-deaths-of-500-us-troops-in-iraq-afghanistan/30131097/.
[106]See Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Scott Ritter, *Target Iran: The Truth about the White House's Plans for Regime Change* (New York: Nation Books, 2006); and David Barsamian et al., *Targeting Iran* (San Francisco: Open Lights Books, 2007).
[107]David E. Sanger, *The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009), 105–106; also, Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 175–76.
[108]Ewen MacAskill, "Iraq Rejects US Request to Maintain Bases After Troop Withdrawal," *The Guardian*, 21 October 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/21/iraq-rejects-us-plea-bases; also, Michael R. Gordon, "In U.S. Exit from Iraq, Failed Efforts and Challenges," *New York Times*, 22 September 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/world/middleeast/failed-efforts-of-americas-last-months-in-iraq.html.
[109]For example, Raf Sanchez, "Iran-backed Shia Militia Says It Will Fight US Marines Deployed to Iraq," *Telegraph*, 21 March 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/12200172/Iran-backed-Shia-militia-says-it-will-fight-US-Marines-deployed-to-Iraq.html.

ideologies. Iran's coalition has benefited from clarity of mission as well as political and ideological unity. By comparison, the rebellion has faltered in both ways and been undermined by the rise of Salafi-jihadist groups, severely constraining foreign state support to the rebels.[110] Further, whereas the rebels' main backers, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have primarily limited their contribution to funds and materiel support, Iran and its clients have maintained a robust ground presence on the front lines since early in the conflict. In addition to the Russian intervention in Syria, which was reportedly instigated by Soleimani, these factors have helped Iran and its clients gradually out-compete their rivals on the ground.[111] Should the Syrian conflict resolve to Iran's benefit, its position in that country will be strengthened, its lines of support to Hezbollah will have been preserved, and it could gain a larger geographic position from which to target Israel.[112]

Similarly, in Yemen, the Houthis have helped create a conflict that has led Iran's chief regional rivals—Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies—into a costly military intervention.[113] Iran has provided the Houthis relatively little in comparison to what the Saudis, Emiratis, and Americans have outlaid to the Hadi government. Iran has sent dhows full of small arms and rockets, whereas the Saudis and Emiratis have provided land forces, expensive air assets and ordinance, and naval vessels as part of their military intervention in Yemen. In other words, whether by its own doing or out of sheer opportunism, Iran has helped stoke—or sufficiently associate itself with—a fire in Yemen that has consumed the attention of its rivals and shifted their focus away from Syria. Further, should the Houthis succeed and the Saudi intervention fail, Iran is set to gain by being the only outside backer of the Houthi movement, potentially giving Iran a geographical platform to credibly threaten the Saudis and maritime traffic in the Bab al-Mandab strait.[114] Even should the Houthis fail, Iran's investment in Yemen has been low-cost and high-reward.[115]

Fourth, by fighting wars through clients, Iran has availed itself deniability and reduced the domestic political costs of foreign adventurism.

[110]Aron Lund, "The Slow, Violent Fall of Eastern Aleppo," *The Century Foundation*, 7 October 2016, https://tcf.org/content/commentary/slow-violent-fall-eastern-aleppo/.

[111]"Iran Quds Chief Visited Russia Despite U.N. Travel Ban: Iran Official," *Reuters*, 7 August 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/07/us-russia-iran-soleimani-idUSKCN0QC1KM20150807; Ian Black, "Wake-Up Call on Syrian Army Weakness Prompted Russian Intervention," *The Guardian*, 1 October 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/syrian-military-weakness-russian-intervention.

[112]Paul Antonopoulos, "Iraqi Shi'a Militia Creates Brigade to Liberate the Syrian Golan Heights from Israeli Occupation," *Al-Masdar News*, 9 March 2017, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/iraqi-shia-militia-creates-brigade-liberate-syrian-golan-heights-israeli-occupation/.

[113]On the size and expense of the Saudi-led intervention, see Hokayem and Roberts, "War in Yemen."

[114]This is something the Houthis have already done. See "Yemen's Houthis Attack Saudi Ship, Launch Ballistic Missile," *Reuters*, 31 January 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-idUSKBN15E2KE.

[115]Juneau, "Iran's Policy," 663.

Iran's approach to the war in Syria is a good example of the latter point, because even as the Iranian regime has emphasized the importance of the war, attempted to normalize it domestically, and nurtured a culture that celebrates its fallen soldiers as heroes and martyrs, the involvement of Iranian nationals in the war has remained limited in comparison to the involvement of noncitizen recruits and non-Iranian clients.[116] To be sure, Iran has incurred political costs at the international level for its client strategy: sanctions, hostility from neighboring states, and Iran's general alienation at the regional and world stages can all be attributed in part to Iran's extraterritorial activities. It has also compromised its independence from foreign powers by partnering with Russia in the Syrian conflict. However, those have been shown to be bearable costs for Iran and ones it has been able to navigate successfully over the years, such as by striking a nuclear deal with the P5 + 1 without compromising its nonnuclear strategic activities.

Finally, Iran's emphasis on building a militant clientage at the substate level has addressed its need for allies.[117] With the rise of its clients in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Iran's network has transformed into a transnational military alliance that actively promotes and defends Iran's regional interests. Retired IRGC Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Falaki spoke on this development in July 2016, claiming that a "Shia Liberation Army" had been formed "under the command" of Soleimani and "obedient to the authority" of Iran's supreme leader. The force is described as being comprised of Iran's allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen and operating as "a single front" across all those countries. Falaki claims that people of other regions could also be brought into the fold if the force was needed in their areas. He further describes the transnational army as being completely united, sharing Iran's strategic goals and fighting for a shared purpose: "with one uniform, under one flag, as one organization, and as one front they fight jihad."[118]

Such statements are no doubt aspirational, but they also speak to a certain truth of what Iran has achieved through its client strategy. It has developed a bloc of allies that can simultaneously be used to assert Iran's interests abroad while countering those of its rivals. To that extent, Iran has been able to realize an international alliance that can effectively

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[116]In May 2016, IRGC regional commander Aynollah Tabrizi stated that 1,200 fighters had been "martyred" in Syria; the majority of these had likely come from Afghan and Pakistani paramilitary units. See "Ravayat-e moshaver-e farmandeh-ye sepah-e karbala'i-ye mazandaran az 'khan tuman'" [Advisor of Commander of Mazandaran Karbala Corps' Account of 'Khan Tuman'], *ISNA*, 9 May 2016, http://www.isna.ir/news/95022012343/. Also, see Bucala, "Iran's New Way of War."

[117]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 79–80, 98–102.

[118]"Sardar falaki, az farmandehan-e jebhe-ye suriyeh dar goftogu ba saiyt-e khabari mashreq" [Sardar Falaki, One of the Commanders of the Syrian Front, in an Interview with Mashregh News], *Bultan News*, 24 July 2016, http://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/385539/.

challenge the dominance of its pro-American neighbors in regional conflicts, if not in regional politics more widely.

By the metrics above, Iran's strategy has proven effective. However, it has also come at steep costs. Iran's international alienation; the extensive sanctions that have negatively impacted its economy and kept it decades behind its neighbors in most areas of military development; the intense outside scrutiny of its foreign, military, and domestic policies; its poor relations with neighbors; and its simmering tensions with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States are all an outgrowth of its strategic choices. From a neutral perspective, Iran's militant strategy appears to have made it weaker and less secure than its neighbors whose grand strategies have more closely adhered to international norms. But within the context of Iranian national security thinking, the militant client strategy has made the Islamic Republic more formidable in the region and better able to counter the United States than at any other point in its nearly forty year history.[119]

Yet a reliance on militant allies poses a number of longer-term problems for Iran. In particular, Iran faces five major dangers should it remain committed to its client strategy. First, Iran's deep involvement in regional conflicts is likely to be considered by the United States as an enduring justification for applying political pressure against the regime, retaining if not expanding its military footprint in the Middle East, and potentially escalating its military role in the region's wars.

Second, Iran's foreign operations have hardened attitudes against it, particularly among the region's Sunnis. Neighboring Sunni states see Iran as a sectarian actor and the single largest threat to peace and security in the Middle East.[120] Iran's role in regional conflicts has galvanized rival Arab states against it and made them more committed to countering Iran and its clients through force.[121] It has also helped unify opposition to Iran in the region, such as by aligning the once conflicting strategic views of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE against Iran and its allies.[122]

Third, the actions of its clients put Iran at risk for unintended escalation with hostile states. Its adversaries perceive the clients to be proxies, so that any act committed by them—whether sanctioned by Iran or rogue—is seen by extension as an act of Iran.[123] An attack by a client against an Iranian

[119]For example, see comments by IRGC chief Ali Jafari on the fall of Aleppo: "Sarlashkar-e ja'afari dar hamayesh-e hefazat-e havapayma'i" [Major General Jafari at Air Defense Corps Seminar], *Fars News Agency*, 24 December 2016, http://www.farsnews.com/13951004000076.

[120]Adel Bin Ahmed al-Jubeir, "Can Iran Change?," *New York Times*, 19 January 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-can-iran-change.html; Ostovar, "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy," 88–92.

[121]Ben Hubbard, "Dialogue With Iran Is Impossible, Saudi Defense Minister Says," *New York Times*, 2 May 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-defense-minister.html.

[122]John Irish and Andrea Shalal, "Saudi Arabia, Israel Present de facto United Front Against Iran," *Reuters*, 19 February 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iran-idUSKBN15Y09R.

[123]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 18–19, 27.

state adversary could lead to escalation against Iran. Suspected Houthi attacks against US and Saudi naval vessels off the coast of Yemen have already led the Trump administration to put Iran "on notice" and impose additional sanctions on the IRGC.[124] Whereas the Obama administration appeared reluctant to punish Iran for the actions of its clients in order to pursue (and later to preserve) the nuclear deal, the Trump administration has taken a stronger line against Iran.[125] Sanctions are an inconvenience, but a military conflict with the United States or Arab neighbors would be far more damaging.

Fourth, Iran risks being trapped by enduring instability and insecurity. Regardless of whether it wins or loses in its region's conflicts, continuing its client strategy could perpetuate instability. Should its clients fail to achieve victory Syria, Iraq, and (to a lesser extent) Yemen, it is more likely that Iran will seek ways to perpetuate conflict in those countries rather than accept a peace settlement that undermines its investments and dilutes its influence. Even if absolute victory was deemed unlikely or impossible, Iran could still encourage instability at a relatively low cost to keep its enemies' attention and resources mired in conflict.

Conversely, should Iran win in any or all of the region's wars, the challenge of enduring instability will still remain. Iran's clients might be strong in war, but for them to be influential in the postwar, their states will need to be weak in peace. In order for Iran and its clients to maximize their influence within the countries where they operate, the governments of those states must be susceptible to that influence. Iran's clients are designed for political conflict and war, not governance. Even those clients that achieve dominance and control will struggle with balancing the necessities of governance with the necessities of political relevance and legitimacy.[126] In order for Syria and Iraq or Lebanon and Yemen to thrive, armed groups will need to be disbanded and absorbed into state militaries or demobilized and disarmed. Such actions could neuter Iran's allies and impede their ability to influence the political and security dynamics of their countries. While Iran might succeed in compelling a future post-conflict Syria or Yemen to accept its strategic agenda—such as it has partly achieved in Iraq—those states are likely to remain internally weak and insecure for decades. An alliance of failed or near failing states will have limited utility and will continue to be costly to Iran in terms of its poor reputation in the international community and financial and military expenditures. Tehran

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[124]Julian Borger and David Smith, "Trump Administration Imposes New Sanctions on Iran," *The Guardian*, 3 February 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/03/trump-administration-iran-sanctions.

[125]Andrew Ward, "BP Opts Out of Iran Deals Ahead of Trump Hard Line on Tehran," *Financial Times*, 2 January 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/b73c0e9e-ce7b-11e6-b8ce-b9c03770f8b1.

[126]Hezbollah is a good example; its enduring conflict with Israel is inexorably linked to its raison d'être as an armed force but not as a political organization. See Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 473.

would arguably gain more by tempering its anti-American and anti-Israel policies and pursuing productive relations with its neighbors and Western powers.

Fifth, Iran's regional focus and involvement in foreign wars could exasperate political tensions domestically. The widespread protests that threatened internal security in late 2017 and early 2018 occurred in provincial areas historically more favorable to the regime's religious conservatism, revealing growing disillusionment with the regime and government policies. Although economic challenges—unemployment, widespread corruption in the banking sector, and increasing disparities in wealth distribution—appeared to be the main galvanizing force behind the protests, a number of other issues were also advanced by the demonstrators. Among them was a condemnation of Iran's regional foreign policy, especially the notion that the regime prioritizes funding for its militant clients while normal Iranians are struggling to get by. A government poll taken after the protests confirmed that Iran's support to foreign groups was a core complaint for some respondents (13.5 percent).[127] If Iran continues to emphasize support to militant clients and an assertive role in regional conflicts without addressing its many social and economic challenges, the issue has the potential to trigger further unrest at home and erode the regime's favorability among its core constituencies: the urban and rural poor.[128]

Finally, it is worth considering the implications for the United States and its regional allies. Of foremost importance is recognition that Iran's support to foreign clients transcends the political and is substantially larger than the terrorism issue. Clients are at the core of Iran's grand strategy and essential to its national security objectives. They are Iran's allies, its levers of influence in foreign countries, and an extension of its military power. Furthermore, Iran's strategy is currently ascendant in the region, and there is little incentive for it to back away from an approach that has brought much success. It should also be recognized that Iran's investments are not all created equal. Syria means infinitely more to Iranian leaders than Yemen, so pushing back in Yemen will have a decidedly small impact on Iran's overall strategic objectives. Yemen is a distraction for Iran's rivals and well removed from the core of its interests. Success for the Houthis in Yemen would of course benefit Iran, but their failure will not dramatically affect its regional aims. Thus, it will be difficult if not impossible to pressure Iran's leaders—through sanctions, diplomacy, or military escalation in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen—to change their approach.

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[127]"Dar neshast-e markaz-e barresi-haye estratazhik-e riyasat-e jomhuri" [Meeting of the Presidential Strategic Research Center], 7 February 2018, http://ispa.ir/Default/Details/fa/1846.
[128]By way of comparison, see Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy*, 10.

Iran's strategy feeds off of regional disorder, Sunni sectarianism, and Washington's inconsistent policies. Those factors have created environments ripe for Iranian exploitation and increasingly helped push Shiite activists into Iran's orbit. Yet Iran's weakness lies in the severe limits of its patronage. It affords its clients little besides opportunity, money, and weaponry. America and its allies have much more to offer. Therefore, the United States should not back away from its support to the Iraqi government nor cede Syria to Tehran and Moscow. Understanding that competition with Iran is a marathon and not a sprint and adjusting American strategy in the region accordingly will better position the United States and its allies to compete in the Middle East. Working to dry up the sources of Iran's political strength (such as regional war, anti-Shia sectarian policies of Arab states, and unclear American objectives) will do more to counter Iran in the region than military force projection or escalation alone.

Looking Ahead

This article has argued that militant clients are a central component of Iran's approach to grand strategy. Cultivating clients has been a rational way for the regime to advance its strategic interests, compete with its adversaries, and achieve success on the battlefield, while navigating the constraints and isolation imposed on it by greater powers. Militant clients afford Iran an offensive tool and a deterrent capability not easily countered by the conventional capabilities of its adversaries. In short, militant clients provide a weak state such as Iran with an effective means of competing with more powerful foes.

Although there are numerous costs associated with this approach, those have been outweighed by the success Iran has been able to achieve: the capability to actively counter America's regional agenda, while expanding its regional political influence and military footprint. Because Iran's other deterrent and offensive capabilities are limited, it has grown increasingly reliant on militant clients to secure and advance its strategic aims. This makes clients both an asset and a liability. If the key to Iran's success has been its clients, then they are also a key vulnerability.

Such a dynamic has important implications for the future of Iran's role in the Middle East and regional security. Should Iran's adversaries ever hope to seriously challenge its regional influence, they will have to co-opt or counter its clients directly or—following Iran's lead—challenge them by cultivating new and more effective proxies of their own. (They could also escalate against Iran directly, but that could lead to a far costlier campaign.) So long as its clients remain resilient, Iran's strategic approach will remain effective. But if its clients were to suffer political or military defeats and

Iran were to lose regional influence as a result, then it could compel Iran to shift its strategic approach. How and to what end is beyond the scope of this article, but future research could examine this issue in the context of Iran's nuclear program. Pakistan, for example, can arguably better withstand a degrading of its client network over time, because it retains a massive nuclear weapons arsenal and robust conventional military capabilities. Those capabilities will continue to serve as credible deterrents. Iran, on the other hand, has limited deterrent options beyond its conventional ballistic missile program, which might make future nuclear weaponization an attractive investment should its client capabilities ever weaken to the point that they no longer hold adequate offensive or deterrent strategic value.

Acknowledgements