

THE FUTURE OF **IRREGULAR WARFARE** BETWEEN NATION-STATES: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM IRAN'S SUCCESS IN YEMEN

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The world is changing and with it the threats to US national security. For nearly two decades, the Department of Defense (DoD) has been primarily concerned with counterterrorism. Now the focus has shifted to competition with near-peer nation-states, and DoD priorities for resources and training guidance have changed accordingly: more emphasis is being put on large-scale combat operations involving the deployment and maneuver of complex joint forces. While this is necessary to maintain a qualitative edge, deter foes, and prepare for contingencies, it is important to recognize that three of the four primary adversaries of the United States are nuclear powers (Russia, China, and North Korea, with Iran being the non-nuclear fourth), thus making the risk calculus for engaging in conventional warfare exceptionally difficult. I contend that future struggles between the United States and its nuclear-armed opponents will mimic conflicts of the Cold War, with most conflicts falling

The purpose of this article is to present innovative ideas for the conduct of IW against a near-peer adversary, as one or both actors seek to achieve their national security objectives abroad without escalating to conventional armed conflict.¹ I begin by defining IW according to doctrine and evaluating the unclassified IW annex to the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), and then present a case study regarding Iran's IW campaign in Yemen against its peer adversary, Saudi Arabia, and Saudi allies, including the United States. This case study demonstrates the possibility of competing violently with an enemy state while keeping the conflict from turning into a traditional war. Traditional warfare is defined by US doctrine as

force-on-force military operations in which adversaries employ a variety of conventional forces and special operations forces (SOF) against each other in all physical domains as well as the information



Left to right: 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, North Korean Propaganda, Russian Coat of Arms

within the realm of irregular warfare (IW). These conflicts are characterized by violent and non-violent confrontations between limited conventional forces, proxies, and special operations forces, and activities in the information and cyber domain. It is essential that DoD does not repeat the mistakes of the post-Vietnam era, when the hard-won lessons of counterinsurgency and IW were lost in favor of returning to a sole focus on large-scale combat operations. DoD must be prepared for irregular threats and be ready to innovate if it hopes to compete with revisionist states—states that seek to change the geopolitical status quo—that will seek to circumvent the conventional strength of the US military.

environment. . . . Traditional warfare is characterized by a series of offensive, defensive, and stability operations normally conducted against enemy centers of gravity. Traditional warfare focuses on maneuver and firepower to achieve operational and ultimately strategic objectives.²

Finally, I summarize lessons learned from the conflict that military planners should consider when examining future options and risks for conducting IW against adversaries.

The US Approach to Irregular Warfare

In the summary of the 2018 NDS, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis notes that revisionist powers will seek ways to subvert the conventional military and diplomatic strength of the United States and coerce others through intimidation to counter US objectives, without risking conventional armed conflict.³ All four of the United States' primary adversaries utilize some form of IW against US interests. China, Russia, and North Korea use cyber tools for political disinformation, espionage, and the theft of intellectual property. Russia and Iran regularly support and employ proxy forces in conflicts abroad to maintain deniability of their involvement.

Joint Publication 3.05, *Special Operations*, defines IW as

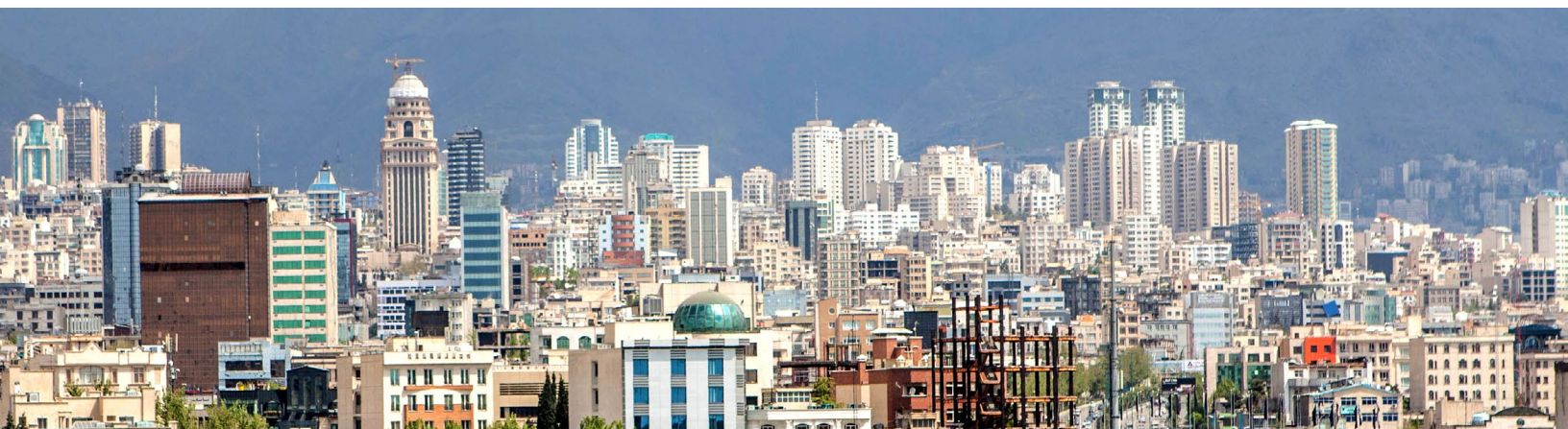
a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Non-state actors often seek to create instability and disrupt and negate state legitimacy and governance to gain and maintain control or influence over and the support of a

relevant population. Non-state actors use political, psychological, and economic methods, reinforced with military-type activities that favor indirect approaches and asymmetric means. Countering these methods requires a different mindset and different capabilities than traditional warfare methods.⁴

The issue with JP 3.05's definition is that it appears to limit the adversary to a non-state actor, traditionally seen as terrorists or insurgencies. However, other doctrine makes clear that the less powerful participant can also be a state.⁵ Although IW is not included in Mattis' summary

of the 2018 NDS, the NDS does not ignore it, and an unclassified annex for IW was released in October 2020. The summary of this annex, which covers the future of IW while admitting to previous failures in conducting and countering IW in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, emphasizes making the study and practice of IW a core competency for conventional forces and SOF.⁶

The authors of the summary also note that adversaries with significantly weaker militaries and resources favor the IW approach because it circumvents traditional military strength.⁷ Traditional militaries rely on the ability to locate an adversary's uniformed military force and then use firepower and maneuver to overwhelm that enemy. In traditional warfare, the military with greater strength in military hardware, technology, and manpower is typically the victor. In today's world, the US military is by far the strongest when it comes to weaponry, technology, and a large professional fighting force. This traditional dominance was demonstrated in the Gulf War, where firepower and maneuver devastated the Iraqi military that was occupying Kuwait. US power was also demonstrated in 2003, when the US-led coalition quickly overwhelmed the Iraqi military once again and overthrew the Iraqi regime



Tehran

in less than two months. The Iraqi military's primary error was that its uniformed military, although significantly handicapped, sought to take the US mobile units and airpower head-on in a conventional fight. In IW, the enemy is not easily identifiable, and uses tactics that avoid taking on an opposing force directly. The less powerful enemy will use proxies where possible, as a way to disavow blame, making direct retaliation more difficult to justify. The less powerful enemy will also compete for influence over the local population using tools such as news media and social



US Navy Battle Force Zulu, Gulf War, 1991.

media to further its narrative and sabotage the opponent's efforts to win the hearts and minds of the relevant population. In the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union and China fought the United States through an IW strategy that used the North Vietnamese as a proxy force, knowing that direct involvement by their own militaries likely would have escalated the guerilla fight into a larger war, in which the United States' economic and military might would be brought against them. Therefore, they indirectly fought the United States through mechanisms that included supplying the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong with weapons and materiel, and providing intelligence and advisors.

To avoid repeating past mistakes and remain primed to react to unconventional actions, the authors of the 2018 IW unclassified annex's summary advise that DoD must be creative as it institutionalizes and operationalizes IW:

It is in this competitive space that the Department must innovate. We must creatively mix our traditional combat power with proactive, dynamic, and unorthodox approaches to IW that can shape, prevent, and prevail against our nation's adversaries and maintain favorable regional balances of power alongside our key partners and allies.⁸

As DoD develops models for conducting IW, researching the successes and failures of adversary states like Iran is prudent. Iran makes up for its handicaps in resources, allies, and military power by taking unconventional approaches to competition with its adversaries. Every conflict Iran's

forces have taken part in since the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 has been conducted in the realm of IW. The study of Iran's operations in Yemen, presented below, is meant to highlight innovative methods that can be replicated by the US joint force as it seeks to compete. The extraterritorial SOF unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is known as the Quds Force (QF; "al-Quds" is the Arabic name for Jerusalem). QF operatives undertake a host of operations, including subversion of Middle Eastern governments, assassinations, illicit financing, and the arming and training of ideologically aligned proxy forces. The QF represents how SOF can be used to conduct IW in pursuit of a nation's national security objectives, while keeping conflict below the level of traditional war.

Yemen as a Case Study in the Conduct of IW

The principal goal of this article is to examine how the US military can plan for future irregular wars with hostile nations when the United States' primary objective is to defeat the hostile nation or prevent it from achieving its primary goal(s). One could argue that the Yemeni Civil War is a limited conflict that lacks relevance for the US military's competition with adversarial nations like Russia. It is reasonable to think that the conflict in Syria between the United States and Russia may hold better lessons: the two powers compete for influence with several populations in the country, and their irregular and regular forces have exchanged direct fire, something that has not happened against the QF in Yemen.

However, the Syrian Civil War is outside the scope of this article for several reasons. First, the war is overt; it involves the deployment of thousands of soldiers and extensive military hardware by both the United States and Russia. These forces are focused on defeating third-party actors like ISIS, not one another; outside of a clash in 2018, neither side has targeted the other's forces with the intent to inflict casualties, knowing that to do so risks starting a larger war.⁹ Most important, the only goal of the United States in Syria was and is the enduring defeat of ISIS. If Russia succeeds in keeping the Syrian regime intact, the US mission has not failed. If ISIS reconstitutes in Syria, Russia may have a propaganda win by demonstrating the failure of the US mission, but it would then have to take up the fight against ISIS itself. In Yemen, by contrast, the objectives of Iran and the Saudi-led alliance are in direct competition with each other.

Background to the Conflict in Yemen

As happened in many Middle Eastern countries in 2011, the Arab Spring movement in Yemen led to large-scale protests and popular uprisings calling for reform. The authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was forced from power, but the Saudi-backed regime of his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, found itself unprepared to deal with the systemic issues the country faced.

Sometime in 2012, a marginalized Zaidi Shi'a Muslim group called the Houthis, under the religious leadership of Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, took advantage of the

government in Yemen as an existential threat, began a campaign in 2015 to defeat the Houthis and reinstall a regime in line with their interests. The United States began supporting the Saudi coalition with intelligence, advisement, and military aid, but did not become directly involved in the fighting.¹⁰ The conflict has now dragged on for over seven years and devastated the country both politically and economically. The people of Yemen have suffered catastrophe after catastrophe in a conflict that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and left millions in danger of famine. As of August 2022, a ceasefire has survived for several months, but the competition for control of Yemen's future continues, and the possibility of an end to the civil war remains far from certain.

Why Iran got Involved in the Yemeni Civil War

Iran, a fundamentalist Shi'ite country, and Saudi Arabia, which is Sunni and Wahhabist, are archrivals. One of Iran's goals in supporting the Houthi forces in Yemen is to establish a foothold on Saudi Arabia's southern border. Iran has followed an IW strategy there, because, according to Nader Uskowi, a former senior policy advisor to US Central Command, the lack of a shared border and efforts by the anti-Houthi coalition to blockade sea and air infiltration have prevented Iran from deploying its expeditionary force into Yemen.¹¹ According to Uskowi, this forced Qassem Soleimani, the QF commander at the time, to limit the campaign to a minimal deployment of forces for training and advising, along with the covert delivery of weapons and aid.

Former Canadian defense analyst Thomas Juneau contends that Iran's ambitions in Yemen were limited: a controlled investment in the Houthis that would aggravate Saudi Arabia.¹² Juneau posits that Iranian leaders believed significant intervention in Yemen would likely lead to conventional conflict between Iran and the Saudi-led coalition, and that this would be an unacceptable outcome. Alex Vatanka, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, points out that countering the possibility of regime change in Syria and ISIS's activities in Iraq in 2015 likely overextended Iran's expeditionary capabilities, and that winning in Yemen was low on the priority list for Iran's leadership in comparison.¹³ I contend that the model the QF utilized in Yemen reflected a combination of these reasons; limited resources, blockades, and the possibility of escalation to traditional warfare were all likely factors in the minds of Soleimani and Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The reason, however, is not quite as important as what transpired as the war dragged on. The irregular war that the QF waged via the Houthis has eroded the Saudi-led coalition without garnering a significant direct response,



Qassem Soleimani in 2019

weakened government and began a violent uprising; in 2015, President Hadi was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia. The Houthis, while not fully aligned ideologically with the Iranian regime, were open to receiving Iran's support in their efforts to take over Yemen's government. Saudi Arabia and several of its Gulf State allies, including the United Arab Emirates, viewing the possibility of an Iran-allied

despite escalating attacks into Saudi territory. Recent events demonstrate that its innovative approach may be successful pending ongoing ceasefire negotiations in 2022.¹⁴

Quds Force Operations in the Yemeni Civil War (2014-2022)

The QF campaign in Yemen has been built around investing in the Houthi rebellion to maintain pressure on Saudi Arabia and gain influence in the event of a Houthi victory, while managing risk to avoid an escalation to conventional war with nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Iran's level of support to the Houthi rebellion is modest compared to what it gives to other non-state actors, but this is because it recognizes the consequences of escalation. The QF's activities are about gaining spoils during and post-conflict, such as access to ports, lines of communication, and an ally on the southern border of Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ Iran was also initially limited in the support it could provide due to its inability to move personnel and equipment freely into Yemen as it had into Iraq and Syria.



Gulf of Aden coastline, Yemen

Iran does not share a border with Yemen, and the GCC coalition quickly closed air and sea access in early 2015 as the coalition sought to stop the QF's efforts to support the rebellion.¹⁶ Because the expeditionary model the QF had utilized in Iraq and Syria was not an option, the QF shifted its approach to more covert training and financial and material support, including weapons, ammunition, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and ballistic missiles.¹⁷ This support increased over the years both in quantity and sophistication, based on the actions and inactions of the Saudi-led coalition.

To smuggle these items into Yemen, Iran has taken advantage of the 2,700 kilometer-long Yemeni coastline by disguising naval vessels as commercial or local vessels. The GCC's blockade efforts have proved largely ineffective over time due to several factors, including the long coastline and the difficulty of identifying suspect vessels in an immensely busy shipping lane. A 2015 UN

report concluded that Iran began sending arms to the Houthis in 2009, in defiance of a 2007 UN resolution forbidding Iran from shipping arms. The report cited six incidents, including the February 2011 seizure of an Iranian fishing vessel that was loaded with 900 Iranian anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets.¹⁸ By March 2012, US intelligence recognized the QF's widening outreach to the Houthis. QF operatives were delivering rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and IEDs, among other weapons, primarily smuggled via small boats and freighters.¹⁹

As external entities sought to stop the flow of Iranian support to the Houthis, the delivery methods and types of ordinance changed. Ships disguised as commercial vessels began delivering increasingly destructive weapons.²⁰ Beginning sometime in 2016, coalition navies began finding long-range ballistic missiles hidden on vessels, and by 2017, the Houthis had Iranian Qasf-1 UAVs, which were primarily used to target coalition air-defense infrastructure.²¹ The Houthis also began using a type of unmanned boat filled with explosives to attack coalition ships, including a Saudi frigate in January 2017, and have retaliated against Saudi strikes by launching attacks on the Saudi-Yemeni border and firing missiles into Saudi territory.²²



**Saudi Air Force General
Turki Maliki**

By January 2018, the Saudis had evidence, in the form of recovered ballistic missile pieces, that Iran was supplying the Houthis with missiles that could be launched into Saudi Arabia. The recovered pieces demonstrated the apparent lengths being taken to hide their origins: welded segments suggested that the missiles were being shipped in parts to avoid detection.²³ In a January 2018 interview with CNN, Saudi Air Force General Turki Maliki refused to delineate Saudi Arabia's "red line" for retaliation after the reported 88th ballistic missile was intercepted near the capital of Riyadh.²⁴ Facing no retaliatory targeting by the Saudis, the QF appeared to feel safe in enabling the Houthis to continue targeting Saudi soil and pushing the line of provocation.

In 2019, the Houthis, with an unknown level of guidance from Iran, claimed responsibility for more prominent attacks, including a strike on the Abha airport in southwestern Saudi Arabia in June 2019 that injured 26 people, and a drone-swarm attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.²⁵ Again, the attacks brought no escalation from the Saudis or other coalition members, despite threats from the Saudi government and the Trump administration. Since early 2021, the tempo of drone and missile attacks against targets inside Saudi Arabia has increased, but the Saudi-led coalition's responses have not kept pace.²⁶ The covert delivery of material support for these attacks has allowed the QF and Iran to maintain plausible deniability, even as Houthi attacks increased in destructiveness and sophistication between 2015 and 2022.

Complementing the delivery of materials and finances to the Houthis, QF operatives have trained and advised the rebel forces. It is unclear when the QF began training Houthi rebels, but by 2014, open-source reporting suggested it was ongoing inside and outside of Yemen. According to an Iranian source for Reuters, the QF had a few hundred training personnel in Yemen, and about 100 Houthis had traveled to Qom, Iran, for training at that time.²⁷ By 2015, US intelligence had concluded that, although Iran's direct involvement in the civil war was limited, IRGC personnel were training and equipping Houthi fighters.²⁸ After Houthi forces captured Sana'a in 2014 and took control of the Yemeni Army's missile units, the QF provided technical help to extend the range of these systems up to 400 miles.²⁹ Training and technical assistance from QF operatives

appear to remain unimpeded, with the anti-Houthi coalition members focusing primarily on interdicting material and financial deliveries to the rebels.

The QF's training support and inventive methods for delivering equipment to Houthi rebels via intricate smuggling schemes were devastating to the Saudi campaign. When one route was blocked, the QF found another by consistently innovating. Most important, these methods prevented any nation from definitively laying blame at Iran's feet, thereby preventing any escalation against the Iranian homeland or its interests.

The Saudi Coalition's Reaction to Iran's Yemen Campaign

Due to its covert nature, the QF's campaign in Yemen has not resulted in any significant reaction from Saudi Arabia, its allies, or the Iranian population. During the initial phases of the coalition's intervention, Yemeni airspace was declared restricted and the coast was blockaded. In April 2015, Iran sent naval vessels to challenge the blockade, but ultimately reversed course when challenged by the US Navy. Iran next tested the air restrictions by sending civilian Mahan Air airplanes to the Sana'a airport under the guise of providing humanitarian aid; the Saudis responded by bombing the airport's runways.³⁰ The covert smuggling routes via sea and land that the QF developed, however, were harder for the Saudi-led alliance to find, fix, and finish.



**Saudi Crown Prince
Mohammed bin
Salman Al Saud**

When the Saudi coalition's strategy of severing major lines of support to the Houthis proved unsuccessful, it escalated its air campaign in an effort to bomb the Houthis into submission. Several observers have suggested that Saudi Arabia's King Salman and his son Mohammed bin Salman, the current Crown Prince, intended to send a message about Iranian influence by subduing the rebellion in several months.³¹ In the minds of Saudi leaders, the Houthi rebellion represented a potentially vital security threat

to Saudi Arabia that required an exceptionally forceful response. The result on the ground, however, was only stalemate, and the air campaign has hurt the coalition in international public opinion because it has appeared to be indiscriminately harming civilians. Iran's calculus at first





Houthis protest against airstrikes by Saudi-led coalition.

likely included risk mitigation against a Saudi response, and Tehran may also have wanted to deploy greater forces and support than it ultimately was able to send. Time has shown that the covert nature of the campaign has kept the QF and Iran from receiving significant blowback.

As the war continued, the QF increased the sophistication of the weaponry it delivered to the Houthis, while taking care to disguise the materiel's Iranian origin. A 2020 US congressional report on Yemen, however, cited several pieces of evidence from ship seizures and debris analysis over the past several years that linked weapons used by the Houthis to Iran.³² Despite numerous findings by UN and US experts that strongly indicate Iranian involvement in the civil war, none of the evidence is clearly marked "Iran," nor have any Iranian operatives been captured alongside these materials to provide definitive proof.³³ Without a "smoking gun," no nations or organizations such as the UN have been able to lay definitive blame for the escalation of war at Iran's feet. Similar to the CIA's successful operation that supplied the Afghan mujahideen with weaponry during the Soviet-Afghan War, masking where the materiel came from and who delivered it allows the culprit to maintain plausible deniability. In the absence of proof of culpability, the affected nation is less likely to engage its foe directly, because it cannot justify the escalation towards traditional war to the international community. Such a move risks sanctions, isolation, and removal from certain organizations vital to the country's economic and political interests.

The US military has provided support to the Saudi coalition, but the political issues surrounding the civil war and the presence of other threats to the United States have limited US involvement, in particular against the QF. The Saudis' handling of the war has been politically distasteful, given the humanitarian crisis devastating the Yemeni people and the documentation of indiscriminate air operations by the coalition. From the start of the conflict, the US military has provided intelligence and naval support to the coalition to locate and interdict shipments to the Houthis,

but in 2018, the US Air Force stopped refueling coalition combat planes amid criticism of air strikes on civilians.³⁴ The Houthis do not present any realistic threat to US security.

By late 2017, the United States had begun sending teams of Army Special Forces to Saudi Arabia to train Saudi soldiers and assist with locating and targeting Houthi ballistic missiles. The mission was focused on training, border defense, and intelligence, and steps appeared to have been taken to keep it apart from any offensive operations.³⁵ There is no open-source evidence that US Special Forces teams accompanied Saudis on counterinsurgency operations. The United States did attempt to target a QF general in Yemen, Abdul Reza Shahlai, on the same day that Qassem Soleimani was killed in Iraq, but the operation appeared to be more about disrupting and signaling to the IRGC following increasing tensions in Iraq than in retaliation for operations inside Yemen.³⁶ The QF's support to the Houthis does garner some attention in US national security circles, but the limited nature of US operations against the Houthis demonstrates that the Yemeni war is a secondary or tertiary concern.

What is Success in Yemen?

Since 2019, there has been an increase in friction among the Saudis, Emiratis, and other members of the coalition stemming from a lack of resolve and unity of effort.³⁷ These issues have left several parties looking for a way out. In May 2017, before it withdrew from military action in 2019, the UAE created the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which included several separatist non-state actors it supported in southern Yemen. This conglomeration of militant groups aligned with the UAE's interests has fought the Houthis and competed for influence in negotiations, giving both the UAE and the STC a say in the formation of any future Yemeni government, while weakening the position of Yemen's existing Saudi-backed government.³⁸ This move further divided the Saudi-led coalition and undermined its campaign against the Houthi rebels. In response to Houthi

gains around the city of Marib, the UAE did re-enter the fighting in mid-2021 with the deployment of its Giants Brigade militia. The militia's operations have helped prevent the Houthis from taking the city, but the Houthis responded by unleashing their arsenal of drones and missiles at targets in the UAE.³⁹ Given the Emirati military's inability to effectively counter the attacks, this escalation proved a significant problem for the UAE government. Tourism accounts for over 12 percent of the UAE's gross domestic product, a fact that is especially significant in 2022 as the country looks to recover from pandemic losses.⁴⁰ The Emirati leadership likely miscalculated the Houthis' capacity for a violent response to the UAE's return to a more direct role in the Yemeni conflict. Like its Saudi allies, the UAE needs a way out of the war if it hopes to return to post-pandemic norms and rebuild the losses to its economy.

Eighty percent of Yemen's population now relies on humanitarian aid; there is widespread famine, and Saudi military operations continue to draw criticism on the world stage for exacerbating the human toll.⁴¹ The COVID-19 crisis offered the Saudis an opportunity to withdraw under the guise of humanitarianism, but Saudi leaders did not use the excuse to cut their losses.⁴² Until April 2022, the Saudis were unable to maintain any ceasefire; the Houthis continued to launch attacks into Saudi territory while the Saudis' only response was to continue their politically damaging air strikes.

In February 2021, in a major blow to the Saudis, US President Joe Biden announced an end to US support for offensive operations in Yemen. After the announcement, several current and former US officials were quoted as saying that the Biden administration needed to try to make up for the guilt it felt about prior administrations' support for the conflict.⁴³ The Saudis' situation has been made worse by US intelligence reports that openly place blame for the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi leadership's feet, and by US officials' calls for an immediate termination of the blockade of Yemen's coast, which they blame for preventing humanitarian relief from reaching Yemeni civilians.⁴⁴

Not only did Saudi Arabia's biggest supporter, the US government, withdraw from involvement in the conflict, but the coalition with which Saudi Arabia expected to end the war in six weeks back in 2015 is more fractured than ever. While UAE-backed groups are working to ensure that the UAE's security objectives are being met in the south, the Saudis and Omanis vie for influence over tribes in east Yemen with money and military aid. In fact, one Brookings Institution article summarized the state of Yemen in 2021 as being split into seven separate Yemens, based on geography and ideological boundaries.⁴⁵

Saudi Arabia needs a way out of a conflict it went into based on misjudgments. The rest of the coalition members are also looking for a way to leave. After seven years of fighting, the Houthis appear to have the upper hand, thanks in many ways to the support of Iran and its Quds Force. A source from the March 2021 round of peace talks referred to the state of affairs for the Saudis as "a case study on how to end a war you didn't win."⁴⁶ In 2022, there is little evidence that the status has changed. A Yemen expert with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Elana DeLozier, noted that "the Saudis want to end the war—in part because of the damage it has caused to US-Saudi relations," and that "they have the political will, they just can't figure out exactly how to get out."⁴⁷ When the drawdown



Flag of the Quds Force

does occur, Iran will be in a better position to assert influence over the Houthis and begin reaping more benefits from its IW campaign in Yemen.

Innovation in IW Practice and Lessons Learned

A properly executed IW strategy appears, in 2022, to have mostly achieved Iran's strategic intent in Yemen. I contend that its intent aligns with what was posited by Thomas Juneau: to aggravate and pressure an adversary through irregular means that do not risk escalation to traditional war.⁴⁸ This finding is similar to that of a Congressional Research Service Report, which asserts that Iran's intent is to project power and spoil Saudi efforts to ensure a stable and ideologically aligned government in Yemen.⁴⁹ In the



Mujahideen in Kunar, Afghanistan, 1987

Houthis, Iran found an ideologically aligned proxy with which it could punish its archrival and the rival's allies. Iran could not do so through diplomatic or economic mechanisms, and traditional military action would have entailed an unacceptable cost. As discussed at the beginning of the case study, the exact reasoning for the QF's approach in Yemen remains debatable due to the lack of access to IRGC documentation or official statements. Whatever the exact reasons, however, a covert strategy appears to have been the best way for Iran to meet its strategic intent. Based on circumstances in 2022, it appears that Iran's intent has nearly been met, given that the Saudis and other coalition members have been looking for a way out of the war since 2020.⁵⁰

The Yemen case study demonstrates that a nation-state can compete with its peer adversaries using an IW strategy that is executed with careful attention to risk management and the maintenance of plausible deniability. While the competition between Iran and the Saudi coalition is not between nuclear powers, the lessons provided by the QF's innovative tactics do suggest methods for violent competition that minimize the possibility of escalation between relatively peer militaries. Iran's actions were never going to result in a nuclear exchange, but they could have led to the deployment of conventional forces and ballistic missile exchanges into both countries' sovereign territory. Iran could also have faced military retaliation by US and other coalition nations.

US military doctrine concerning the intent of different forms of warfare states that "an enemy using irregular methods will typically endeavor to wage protracted conflicts in an attempt to exhaust the will of their opponent and its population."⁵¹ The QF has effectively done this in Yemen without triggering military retaliation from the Saudis or any of their allies. The QF used several principal methods that were innovative when compared to previous IW campaigns conducted by Iran, or other revisionist states such as Russia, against near-peer militaries. These methods include inventive ways of delivering materiel to the conflict zone; minimizing potential casualties

among its personnel in the conflict zone; and gradually escalating pressure to test an adversary's red lines. The QF has also been patient. It has taken seven years to get to the current stalemate in Yemen. One must not try to rush to victory in irregular warfare; this is a war of small cuts, not the swing of a sword.

The QF delivered personnel and materiel across a border it did not share, primarily by smuggling and taking advantage of the extensive Yemeni coastline. The CIA did something similar in Afghanistan in support of the mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s, but Iranian operatives innovated further. Weapons and other hardware were delivered in pieces that were hidden in cargo and assembled at their destinations. The QF has been able to get hundreds of ballistic missiles through coalition nets via this method. QF advisers assisted in the assembly of clandestine aerial and waterborne craft in Yemen that were used to sabotage coalition interdiction craft and air defense systems. The QF's delivery methods were truly unique and proved vital for maintaining Tehran's plausible deniability.

The QF deployed operatives to Yemen, but has managed their activities so as to not present targets or appear overtly engaged in combat operations. The US-orchestrated train-and-equip program for Syrian militias fighting against ISIS in Syria demonstrated the failures of using proxies without putting advisors on the ground with them. The inability of US SOF to maintain positive communications with, advise, and verify the activities of the proxy militias there nearly led to the dissolution of the entire campaign in late 2015.⁵² Russia's and Iran's deployment of conventional forces in the Syrian war demonstrated the negative impact of combat casualties on the international stage and among the home population. Iran's casualties and its economic expenditures in the Syrian Civil War, which could not be completely hidden from public view, contributed to extensive protests across Iran in November 2019. In Yemen, by contrast, the lack of open-source reporting on Iranian casualties, despite data showing

Iranian operatives have been active there, demonstrates that their use is being more carefully managed: they provide technical and tactical assistance, verify proxy activities, and provide ground-level intelligence without being overtly engaged in the fighting.

IW operations and campaigns will occasionally result in overt retaliation when the opponent decides the activities have reached the point of being unacceptable. The case of Soleimani's targeted killing in Iraq in 2020, the US response to Russian irregular forces' aggression towards US SOF in Syria in 2018, and the Israeli response to Iran's launch of drones from Syria into Israeli territory in 2018 all demonstrate the potential consequences for exceeding an adversary's level of tolerance.⁵³ In all three events, one party exceeded an opponent's threshold of violence and the opponent responded in exceptional fashion. In contrast, Houthi actions taken with QF support have not brought significant retaliation by the Saudis; the only response has been more of the indiscriminate air attacks that further erode support for the war. Due to this careful management of escalation over a lengthy time and Iran's ability to disavow involvement, the QF has avoided crossing the coalition's red lines. This approach takes time, but it demonstrates the viability of a protracted approach to slowly wearing down an opponent via deniable, gradually escalating violence.

Concluding Thoughts

IW provides a solution for violent and non-violent competition with hostile states, whether they be near-peers or asymmetric. The 2018 NDS Problem Statement concerning IW recognizes that

IW is a persistent and enduring operational reality employed by non-state actors and increasingly by state actors in competition with the United States. Past U.S. approaches to IW have been cyclical and neglected the fact that IW—in addition to nuclear and conventional deterrence—can proactively shape conditions to the United States' advantage in great power competition.⁵⁴

Although the Yemen case does not represent competing nuclear powers, over 40 years of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union after the Soviets became a nuclear power demonstrates that nuclear use is only likely to be considered when sovereign territory and civilian lives are put at risk. Nation-states will accept economic and military losses in foreign lands so long as the activities of an adversary maintain plausible deniability and avoid escalation past an acknowledged threshold.

There are lessons to be learned from Iran's success in Yemen as the DoD innovates for the future of IW. The ongoing war in Ukraine and diplomatic maneuvering with China for alliances and control in the Pacific are two primary areas of concern. Iran has shown no signs of stopping its support to non-state actors across the Middle East as it seeks to expand its regional influence. The DoD must be prepared to use IW against adversaries' interests in these areas in a manner similar to what the QF has been able to do in Yemen. Developing inventive methods for delivery of support, managing the risks of SOF operatives deployed inside the conflict theater, and escalating in a manner that avoids surpassing thresholds for retaliation are innovative ways to conduct IW. The US military has traditionally ignored these methods, favoring the funneling of arms and money to proxy forces without SOF boots on the ground to provide oversight. This occurred during the first year of the war against ISIS in Syria and in the Iran-Contra affair of the 1980s.⁵⁵ In other cases, the US military seems inclined to interject conventional forces into a conflict and turn it into a conventional war of maneuver and attrition. This happened in both Vietnam and Afghanistan before either conflict warranted such an escalation. By contrast, Iran kept the Yemen Civil War to one mainly of proxies. Through protraction and managed escalation, popular and political support among the Saudi coalition partners has faltered to a point where the Houthis appear to have the advantage and may determine the future of Yemen.

These IW techniques do not represent an all-inclusive strategy, but serve to complement nuclear and conventional military power in deterrence and coercion. Irregular warfare, properly executed, provides decision makers with a relatively low-cost and low-risk method for competing with adversaries. The Yemeni Civil War shows that one nation can further its regional objectives in a violent manner without risking traditional warfare. What is required is some unconventional thinking, and such lessons can be learned from adversaries who have been practicing IW for quite some time. Leaders in the future of strategic planning should take note.

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NOTES

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