



# **IRAN'S UNCONVENTIONAL ALLIANCE NETWORK IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND**

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## SUMMARY

The Islamic Republic's unconventional alliance network reaches far and wide, and its workings have only intensified since the killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani in early January 2020. The systematic effort to consolidate these alliances, indicated by the swift appointment of Gen. Esmail Qaani and his new deputy Gen. Mohammad Hosseinzadeh Hejazi to lead the Quds Force, is about much more than just retaliation and revenge against the United States as pledged by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, a calibrated response to the Trump administration's reckless and escalatory changes to the established "rules of engagement" between Washington and Tehran. Yet, Iran's determination to maintain its unconventional alliance network in the face of mounting Western and regional opposition does not have to culminate in an increasingly aggravated security dilemma or political deadlock. But it will require a change in U.S. policy, as Washington's current approach is making Iran more rather than less dependent on its unconventional alliance network.

# INTRODUCTION

In the three months since the U.S. assassinated Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force (QF) — the extraterritorial arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) — in Baghdad<sup>1</sup> on Jan. 3, the Islamic Republic's regional role and strategy have predictably<sup>2</sup> shown strong signs of continuity rather than change.

On March 11, a series of rocket attacks reportedly launched by Iran-backed Iraqi militias against the Taji military camp north of Baghdad killed<sup>3</sup> one British and two American service personnel and wounded about a dozen others. A day later, the United States carried out<sup>4</sup> retaliatory precision air strikes against five weapons storage facilities said to be used jointly by formal Iraqi police and members of Kata'eb Hezbollah (KH), a pro-Iran paramilitary group that is part of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or *Hashd al-Shaabi*. According to local sources, the U.S. air strikes left three Iraqi army soldiers, two police officers, and one civilian worker dead<sup>5</sup> and many more wounded, including five militia fighters.

The reckless escalation, amid desperate efforts by both Tehran and Washington to contain the coronavirus pandemic,<sup>6</sup> was part of a cycle that started after the Trump administration scrapped the Iran nuclear deal — officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — in

May 2018 and reimposed comprehensive sanctions against the Islamic Republic in two rounds that August and November.

## STATE OF PLAY

On Feb. 8 at an annual gathering reminiscent of the famous<sup>7</sup> show of allegiance by Iran's Pahlavi-era air force officers — known as *homafaran*<sup>8</sup> in the pre-revolutionary military jargon — to the founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, his successor, told saluting<sup>9</sup> Army (*Artesh*) air force commanders that Iran needs to boost its military might and remain “strong” to prevent<sup>10</sup> foreign aggression and war.

The 1979 revolution, which replaced the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with a revolutionary government, and particularly the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in November of the same year, set Iran on a collision course with Western powers. In response to the forceful seizure of its embassy and the ensuing 444-day-long hostage crisis — where 52 American diplomats and citizens were held against their will in Tehran — the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter imposed the first round of U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic. This punitive measure has since become a central part of the broader U.S. strategy toward Iran, and the sanctions regime reached its peak under the Trump administration's “maximum pressure” policy.



To confront this hostility and, more generally, “guard” itself against internal and external threats to its survival, the Islamic Republic has systematically relied on the IRGC. As its name suggests, the IRGC was formed shortly after the 1979 revolution to shield the new political establishment from attempts to topple or replace it, including possible coups by the regular Army, which had been trained under the Shah. The IRGC set up the QF as an expeditionary force<sup>11</sup> in the early years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), and it later developed into its foreign clandestine operations arm and was tasked with advancing Tehran's interests in the Middle East and beyond. This organized extraterritorial force was first led<sup>12</sup> by Gen. Ahmad Vahid — Iran's defense minister (2009-13) under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad — from 1988 to 1997, before Gen. Soleimani took over and massively expanded its powers.

“The Quds Force in the post-Soleimani era is expected to extend its asymmetrical battlefield as a force multiplier to bring more pressure to bear on Iran's adversaries, particularly the United States,” said Douglas London, a recently retired Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Senior Operations Officer and Chief of Counterterrorism for South and Southwest Asia.

“The wider the battlefield, the greater the chances that American vulnerabilities will be exposed, which would raise the cost for the Trump administration in many respects.”

Alternatively, the QF might concentrate on the terrain it knows best, that is, the wider area from Afghanistan to Lebanon and Yemen,

and try to enhance its maneuverability and efficacy in a strategic effort to erode and undermine the U.S. military presence in the region. More specifically, achieving a total U.S. military withdrawal from the Middle East over time remains one of the force's long-term objectives.

“The Quds Force will keep doing its job like before, and naturally one may imagine an escalation of tensions between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic in the current circumstances, but this alone will not prompt the IRGC to get out of its comfort zone,” said Hassan Ahmadian, Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at the University of Tehran. “In sum, the Quds Force will ramp up pressure on the United States and its partners in its familiar home turf over time, but it is unlikely to act out of line with [its] three military traditions of gradualism, proportionality, and trap avoidance or elusiveness.”

“The IRGC's comfort zone of operations is broad enough to obviate the need for resistance against and confrontation with the U.S. elsewhere,” Ahmadian elaborated.

In early February, Iraqi President Barham Salih nominated<sup>13</sup> Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi as the prime minister-designate. This came after weeks of infighting among Iran-backed Shi'a political parties and tense negotiations between them and their rivals. Each faction was vying to replace Adel Abdul-Mahdi, Iraq's caretaker premier, who officially stepped down in late November in the wake of large-scale popular protests against state corruption and incompetence that turned deadly.



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Even though Allawi later withdrew<sup>14</sup> his candidacy after the Parliament repeatedly failed to approve his proposed cabinet, the negotiations that led to his nomination were reportedly<sup>15</sup> coordinated and hosted by Iranian leadership. The IRGC helped arrange a reconciliation meeting in Qom between firebrand Shi’a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and pro-Iran PMF representatives, including Hadi al-Amiri, head of the Fatah bloc in the Iraqi Parliament. Subsequently, Sadr withdrew his vital support for the anti-government demonstrations, hanging the protesters out to dry and leaving them vulnerable once again to a crackdown.

Such an arrangement would have perhaps been impossible without the influential presence of Iran’s QF in Iraq. Iranian leaders see Iraq as the most important country in the neighborhood, as the two nations share

an almost 1500-km-long land and sea border and fought a bloody eight-year war from 1980 to 1988. This perception, which was sharpened by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, is also based on the manifold and multilayered ties between the two nations throughout their tumultuous history. It is therefore no wonder that Iraq has been and will continue to be the QF’s top strategic priority.

Meanwhile, hundreds of kilometers to the northwest, Iranian-backed fighters from as far away as Afghanistan<sup>16</sup> have been quietly helping<sup>17</sup> the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad in its campaign to recapture<sup>18</sup> Idlib, the last rebel stronghold, from Turkish-sponsored opponents to his rule. According to government sources, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), boosted by Russian air support and Iranian militias on the ground, has

managed to retake<sup>19</sup> hundreds of square kilometers in the Idlib and Aleppo regions,<sup>20</sup> including<sup>21</sup> the strategic towns of Maaret al-Numan<sup>22</sup> and Saraqeb<sup>23</sup> on the critical north-south M5 highway. This too would have perhaps been impossible without the involvement of the QF.

Similarly, thousands of kilometers to the south of Idlib, Iran-allied Houthi rebels in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa are believed to be using what look like Iranian weapons in their fight against the Saudi-led military coalition. Some of the weaponry acquired by Shi'a Houthis, also known as Ansarallah, in 2019 "has technical characteristics similar to arms manufactured in the Islamic Republic of Iran," concluded a UN report<sup>24</sup> compiled by a panel of experts on the status of the Yemen arms embargo in early February.

The Houthis recently launched a major military offensive, capturing<sup>25</sup> al-Hazm, center of Yemen's northwestern al-Jawf governorate bordering Saudi Arabia, and making territorial gains in the oil-rich Marib governorate.

"What we witness is a multi-purpose agenda pursued through a multi-pronged strategy," said Saeid Golkar, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and author of *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran*. "In Muslim-majority nations, the Revolutionary Guards usually focuses on the recruitment, organization, and eventually deployment of like-minded forces, while in other places it is more interested in intelligence gathering

and identification of hostile elements, including among Iranian nationals in the host society."

"In some operational theaters, the chief purpose is procurement of raw materials and equipment for Iran's nuclear and missile programs; in others, it is the circumvention of sanctions," Golkar added.

Indeed, the Islamic Republic's unconventional alliance network reaches far and wide, and its workings have only intensified since the Soleimani killing.

The systematic effort to consolidate these alliances,<sup>26</sup> indicated by the swift appointment of Gen. Esmail Qaani<sup>27</sup> and his new deputy Gen. Mohammad Hosseinzadeh Hejaz<sup>28</sup> to lead the QF, is about much more than just a broad and long-term campaign of retaliation and revenge<sup>29</sup> against the United States as pledged by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

It is also, and perhaps more importantly, a calibrated response to the Trump administration's reckless and escalatory changes to the established "rules of engagement" between Washington and Tehran. In fact, aside from intelligence leaks and security failures,<sup>30</sup> it was the Iranian leadership's miscalculation of hawkish American intent and misperception<sup>31</sup> of normalcy in what were clearly abnormal circumstances that made Soleimani's assassination by the United States possible. As the targeted killing of Iran's highest military official made starkly clear, the rules of the game have moved beyond economic pressure and political isolation to involve "leadership decapitation."<sup>32</sup>



As America's aggressive posture and Iran's retaliatory<sup>33</sup> nuclear advances increase the likelihood of war, threatening the survival of the Islamic Republic, Tehran feels a growing need for deterrence and defense. This is likely to further heighten its focus on missile development, conventional military buildup, and the upgrade of its unconventional paramilitary forces<sup>34</sup> in the post-Soleimani era while vindicating its continued defiance<sup>35</sup> of American and European pressure.

"At the end of the day, one should bear in mind that the U.S. is an existential threat to the Islamic Republic, but not vice versa, that is, Washington should not rule out the most desperate Iranian response to perceived American provocations if the regime believes its survival is at stake," London explained.

"At the moment, there is a disconnect between American actions and messaging vis-a-vis Iran, given deeds which appear designed to compel regime change at the same time as the White House calls for negotiations."

## CONCEPT & CALCULUS

The seeds of Iran's unconventional alliance network were sown in the late 1970s when the Islamic Republic emerged as a nascent revolutionary state hell-bent on "exporting its revolution" and standing up for the underdog throughout the Muslim world and beyond. This ideology was, however, operationalized for the first time in the

early years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Desperate to push back against an all-out invasion by the Ba'athist Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein, zealous revolutionary leaders in Tehran relied heavily on persecuted Kurdish and Shi'a groups in neighboring Iraq to gather intelligence and conduct guerilla warfare.

In 1982, Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon provided a golden opportunity for the Islamic Republic to export its revolutionary ideology of resistance, organizing Lebanese Shi'a groups and Palestinian militias into a formidable armed force against Israeli occupation. Hezbollah, Iran's most powerful non-state ally today, is widely believed to have been born out of this effort, carried out by an expeditionary force of Iranian field commanders and special commandos closely involved in the war on the home front.

The close personal ties between some veteran QF commanders and Shi'a militia leaders in Iraq and Lebanon — such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former deputy head of the Iraqi PMF, who was killed along with Soleimani on Jan. 3 — date back to that era.

But the unequal and costly war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq also taught the Islamic Republic a harsh historical lesson: A state with revolutionary and revisionist tendencies is "strategically lonely"<sup>36</sup> and has no powerful conventional allies to count on for protection and support in times of need. To remedy this "geopolitical exclusion"<sup>37</sup> and compensate for the potentially catastrophic consequences of





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isolation, Tehran systematically invested in developing a robust missile capability and cultivating strong ties with ideologically compatible groups as its chief sources of deterrence, security insurance, and power projection in a generally unfriendly region.

"As a big country, Iran's regional presence represents three layers of religious, racial, and linguistic minority status: the Shi'a minority vis-a-vis the Sunni majority, non-Arabs vis-a-vis Arabs, and Persian speakers vis-a-vis Arabic speakers," said Sadegh Alhosseini, a Tehran-based economist and author of *Iran's Economy in the Straits of Development*. "To guarantee its survival as a minority state, Iran needs to have a powerful presence in the region."

"It lacks any reliable natural defenses on its borders such as high mountains or deep valleys, which prompts alternative defense arrangements outside of its borders, so Tehran's regional presence is primarily driven by security and political needs," Alhosseini added.

These exigencies manifested themselves prominently during the eight-year war with Iraq, and, over time, the character of the Islamic Republic's regional outreach evolved from a primarily idealistic and ideological mission to "export the revolution" into an essentially realist and rational endeavor to foster "strategic depth" for security purposes. The corresponding change in terminology could not be more telling either. Few politicians in the Iranian

corridors of power today invoke the former notion, even though it is more or less clearly enshrined<sup>38</sup> in the Constitution.

Strategic “depth” (*omgh*), also called “backup” or “buttress” (*aghabe*) in the Iranian security literature, is understood as the capability to take the fight as close to enemy territory as possible and thus hold the defensive advantage to strike deep in the event of conflict. More commonly though, ideology is now used as a discursive and political tool to boost and back up what has gradually transformed into a security provision and power projection strategy.

“It is probably fair to say that unlike the United States, many European governments consider this network, in principle, more of a regional than an international issue, which is in important part a response to Washington's long-term

aggressive approach towards Iran based on a pathology of the 1979 revolution,” said Erwin van Veen, Senior Research Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Studies (Clingendael). Tehran's “malign” and “destabilizing” regional presence — as well as its missile program — were among the major reasons that the Trump administration cited when it withdrew from the JCPOA. The agreement had deliberately addressed Iran's nuclear program only, in large part due to concerns that widening the scope of multilateral negotiations could result in their failure.

“Therefore, the key problem from a European perspective is perhaps not so much the existence of Iran's network of armed groups in principle, but how it is used tactically and strategically.”



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To embed itself with as little local friction as possible, the Islamic Republic has traditionally tapped into cultural and ethnic commonalities, shared religious and sectarian beliefs, and common political and economic interests among communities in countries across the region.

"Historically speaking, the Revolutionary Guards has proved to be much more successful in nations with a sizable Shi'a Muslim population than in other places," Golkar of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga said. Unsurprisingly, while Tehran has supported and worked with Sunni groups such as Palestinian Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and even al-Qaeda,<sup>39</sup> most of its militia allies, from the Afghan Northern Alliance and Iraqi PMF to Lebanese Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis, are predominantly Shi'a.

Yet, perhaps the weakest and domestically most controversial component of Iran's regional patronage network is its economic dimension, which has arguably been neglected due to an overemphasis on security and political influence. A classic instance of this dynamic can be seen in Syria, where Moscow has gained the upper hand<sup>40</sup> in its competition with Tehran over securing potentially lucrative post-conflict reconstruction concessions and projects, despite closer security and political ties between the Islamic Republic and the Assad government. While the strategy is militarily low-cost compared to the defense expenditures of other regional states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), its aggressive implementation, coupled with rampant

government corruption at home, has helped create a widespread perception that, for Tehran, other Muslim nations take precedence over its own people. Such slogans as "Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, my life be sacrificed for Iran"<sup>41</sup> and "Leave Syria alone, [instead] do something for us"<sup>42</sup> have been a common theme of anti-government protests across Iran in recent years. In sum, Iran's unconventional security strategy in the region has mostly failed to generate wealth and benefit its economy. Additionally, according to the U.S. State Department, the Islamic Republic has spent \$16 billion on support<sup>43</sup> for its conventional and unconventional allies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine since 2012, although it should be noted that such estimates are often highly speculative.

"Economic cooperation with regional countries and communities is the missing link of the Islamic Republic's presence in the region as Tehran has not yet managed to integrate the economic factor with the outsize political and security dimensions of its regional strategy," Alhosseini commented. "In this case, Turkey, which shares similarities with Iran in certain geopolitical respects, has performed more successfully while Tehran has fared better in security and military terms."

Tehran's aversion to exhausting the JCPOA as a means to irreversibly integrate itself into the international community and global financial system provides insights into the mentality of the Iranian leadership, which holds that such moves would risk changing the ideological character<sup>44</sup> and political identity of the Islamic Republic



away from its revolutionary tendencies, the short- and long-term economic benefits notwithstanding. Along these lines, it refused to pass into law and implement anti-money laundering (AML) and counter-terrorism financing (CFT) measures required by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF), causing the intergovernmental watchdog to designate<sup>45</sup> Iran in late February 2020 as a high-risk business partner on a par with North Korea, its only companion on the FATF blacklist.

## THE IRAQ-SYRIA-LEBANON AXIS

The “Axis of Resistance” stretching from Tehran to Beirut — sometimes described as a “Shia crescent” — is the most vital pivot of Iran's unconventional alliance and patronage network in the region. First, it provides a “land corridor” that spans Iraq and Syria up through Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Second it guarantees cooperation between the IRGC and the Lebanese Hezbollah, the most decisive node of the Islamic Republic's “strategic depth” and its greatest deterrent against Israeli threats, including a possible offensive against its nuclear facilities. It was, first and foremost, the maintenance<sup>46</sup> of this strategic connection that convinced<sup>47</sup> Iran to intervene militarily in Syria and prop up the Assad government against all odds.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Israel has been doing<sup>48</sup> all it can to disrupt and degrade this network in Syria and, more recently,<sup>49</sup> Iraq.

“From the Israeli perspective, its airstrikes in Syria and western Iraq are aimed at achieving two main objectives: curbing Iran's military entrenchment in Syria, and halting its efforts to provide Hezbollah with precise missiles and rocket launching capabilities,” said Raz Zimmt, an Israeli strategist and Iran specialist at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv.

“There is no doubt that Iran's entrenchment efforts in the Israeli neighborhood have not ceased, and it is very clear that achieving the goal of ‘no Iranians in Syria’ is not feasible and is no longer mentioned by most Israeli decision-makers.”

Over the past couple of years, as the tide of the Syrian civil war has turned decisively in favor of Damascus, Tehran has adjusted its strategy to minimize the exposure and vulnerability of its assets in Syria against Israeli attacks.

“It has shifted some of its activity to northern parts of Syria and to the Syria-Iraq border region, and instead of delivering precision missiles and rockets to Hezbollah, it has tried to transfer missile components to the group to be put together in factories inside Lebanon, where Israel is less likely to operate,” Zimmt elaborated.

"Nevertheless, the current Israeli assessment is that the military strikes in Syria have at least managed to delay or limit the extent of Iranian entrenchment, as well as Hezbollah's precision capabilities."

The Iraq-Syria-Lebanon Axis of Resistance is so critical to the Islamic Republic's overall defensive posture that the QF has exercised strategic patience and opted for the "long game" despite repeated Israeli provocations and numerous deadly assaults against its installations and allied paramilitary forces.

"The problem is that Iran has the time, patience, and determination to keep advancing its interests in the Israeli northern front and exploit its presence in Syria as an opportunity to expand both its own and Hezbollah's military capabilities," Zimmt explained.

But it is not just long-term deterrence and defense calculations that have persuaded Tehran to endure the growing costs of its asymmetric military strategy. In the irregular alliance building and patronage business, strategic loyalty<sup>50</sup> and reliability matter too.

"Ever since the 1979 revolution, Iran has never turned its back against or let down its unconventional allies, even when it has come under tremendous economic and political pressure to do so," Ahmadian of the University of Tehran noted.

## AFGHANISTAN & ASIA

With an almost 1000-km shared land border with Iran and a long history of conflict and



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instability, Afghanistan naturally falls within the Islamic Republic's immediate area of interest. The strategic significance of the war-torn country, which also shares many cultural, religious, and linguistic characteristics with Iran, increased dramatically after the U.S.-led military invasion in late 2001 in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

While the IRGC initially helped<sup>51</sup> Washington to topple the Taliban government in Kabul — both to get rid of a destabilizing Saudi-backed nemesis in Iran's immediate neighborhood and to avoid getting caught in the U.S. crosshairs in the exceptionally tense atmosphere after 9/11 — the continued large-scale American military presence in the war-ravaged country has since sharpened the Iranian leadership's threat perception and informed its Afghan policy. The QF, which came under Soleimani's command in 1997, and its Afghan paramilitary partners, the

Northern Alliance — an anti-Taliban militia front founded by former Afghan Defense Minister Ahmad Shah Massoud — were instrumental in the success of the U.S.-led intervention in October 2001.

"Iran's interests in Afghanistan, which maintains deep and multilayered relationships with the country, are driven largely by U.S.-centric security concerns," said Javid Ahmad, a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and an expert on South Asian security.

Despite the IRGC's initial support for the American military campaign against the Taliban — which stormed the Iranian consulate in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998 and killed<sup>52</sup> 10 diplomats as well as a correspondent with state-affiliated media outlet — U.S.-fueled security concerns have led Tehran to pursue an ambivalent policy of "strategic hedging"<sup>53</sup> in Afghanistan. This entails aiding the Washington-backed Afghan





government and certain factions within the Taliban at the same time, playing them off against each other whenever expedient.

"Most of Tehran's activities there appear to be focused on deepening its ties with Shiite groups, as well as Sunni Farsi speakers, specific Taliban elements, and armed proxies in the Fatemiyoun Division," Ahmad elaborated, referring to a paramilitary force<sup>54</sup> that is deployed in Syria and numbers an estimated 10,000-20,000 fighters, primarily Shi'a recruited by the QF from Afghan communities, including the 3-million-strong Afghan refugee community in Iran. "These efforts, led primarily by the IRGC, are meant not only to frustrate the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, but also to counterbalance the Saudi influence in the country."

Along parallel lines, the IRGC has also organized a smaller militia unit of 3000-5000 Pakistani Shi'as, known as the

Zeinabiyoun<sup>55</sup> Brigade, who have been dispatched to Syria to fight on behalf of the Assad government as well.

"Other than its mobilization of Zeinabiyoun fighters, Iran's relations with Pakistani Shi'a groups appear quite nebulous," Ahmad of the Atlantic Council added. "Tehran doesn't seem to want to openly engage with Pakistan's Shi'a community to avoid antagonizing Islamabad, while Pakistani authorities also discourage Iranian meddling in their internal affairs and keep a tight lid on the South Asian nation's Shi'a population."

Lastly, in light of the comprehensive U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic, Iran has turned to its immediate neighborhood for trade to reduce the crippling economic impact of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign.

"The current sanctions, which are the harshest ever against a sovereign state in international history, have persuaded Tehran to take economic ties with neighboring countries more seriously," Alhosseini, author of *Iran's Economy in the Straits of Development*, commented. "Afghanistan and Iraq are now among Iran's four major trade partners, which is unprecedented in modern Iranian history."

"Had it not been for Iran's regional presence from Afghanistan to Lebanon, tough U.S. sanctions would have exerted a far stronger and more adverse impact, and this pain mitigation process is largely due to Tehran's development of counter-sanctions mechanisms that have helped prevent its economic collapse or free fall."

Beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan, however, the IRGC has not traditionally been active, except in connection with North Korea.

"The IRGC is not generally interested in engaging with Southeast Asian nations such as Malaysia and Thailand, even though it has sought to target Western and Israeli interests<sup>56</sup> there on a couple of occasions," said Ahmed Salah Hashim, Associate Professor of Strategic Studies at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore, and author of upcoming book *Iranian Ways of War: From Cyrus the Great to Qassem Soleimani*.

"The Revolutionary Guards' East Asian footprint was most notable in the past in terms of procurement of dual-use technologies for aeronautical engineering and missile development, especially from North Korea, where IRGC military specialists

such as Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam attended the test firing of Nodong-1 missiles in 1990s and learned from North Koreans how to build underground missile silos, area denial capabilities, and asymmetric anti-access strategies."

## YEMEN & THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

While the degree of power and influence Iran wields over the Shi'a Houthi rebels in Yemen is comparably limited, the Yemeni civil war pitting the Ansarallah movement against the Saudi-led military coalition represents a good example of Tehran's "strategic depth" policy at work.

Since the Saudi-Emirati military campaign<sup>57</sup> in Yemen began in March 2015 to restore ousted President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi to power, Tehran has predictably utilized the civil war as a valuable source of leverage in its dealings with Riyadh. Houthi missile strikes<sup>58</sup> against Saudi interests and territory have surged during periodic upticks in U.S.-led pressure on the Islamic Republic in recent years.

"The Saudi and Emirati complicity in aiding and abetting tough U.S. sanctions against Iran is, to some extent, driving this surge in Houthi attacks," said a Tehran-based intelligence analyst affiliated with the IRGC,<sup>59</sup> speaking on condition of anonymity, in June 2019.

The IRGC-led drone and missile strikes against Saudi oil facilities last September — which temporarily knocked out approximately 5.7 million barrels per day (bpd) or about half of the kingdom's total oil output — marked the apex<sup>60</sup> of Iran's asymmetric strategy of retaliation.

Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen has also been highlighted as a potential launch pad for missile and drone operations against the UAE and Israel.

“While the potential threat from Yemen against Israel should not be exaggerated, the successful Iranian strikes on Saudi oil infrastructure in September and its improved missile capabilities have stoked Israeli concerns over Iran's ability and willingness to use its missiles in order to

retaliate against continued Israeli attacks in Syria and western Iraq,” said Zimmt of the INSS in Tel Aviv.

## AFRICA & LATIN AMERICA

The IRGC has been active in both Africa and Latin America for various purposes, but neither region has so far been treated by Iran as a primary strategic interest.

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), a Shi'a group founded by Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky and influenced by the Iranian revolution of 1979, advocates<sup>61</sup> for the establishment of a religious state similar to the Islamic Republic. In late July, the Nigerian government of President



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Muhammadu Buhari banned the group, following a court decision<sup>62</sup> that its activities amounted to “acts of terrorism and illegality.” The ban came after a series of deadly clashes and demonstrations in the capital Abuja, with protesters calling for the release of Zakzaky, who has been in police detention,<sup>63</sup> along with his wife Zeenah, since December 2015, despite a federal high court order to free him.

The largest Shi’a organization in Nigeria, the group pledges allegiance to late Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini and operates<sup>64</sup> administrative branches and public services across the west African nation. In 2015, Nigerian security forces conducted an operation against the group, which claimed the lives of 350 people.

While Esmail Qaani, the new QF leader, is believed to have close ties<sup>65</sup> with “resistance groups” in Africa, including Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, and Nigeria, Iran has so far remained half-hearted<sup>66</sup> about fostering a paramilitary presence in these countries akin to that in the Middle East.

The IRGC, under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13), also developed closer relations with a number of leftist “anti-imperialist” states in Latin America, including Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, but operations in that hemisphere have traditionally been outsourced to Hezbollah. This is partly due to the Lebanese group’s influence among Arab communities there, particularly in the Triple Frontier, a tri-border area connecting Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, and partly because of the lucrative narcotics trade in

which Hezbollah purportedly engages<sup>67</sup> to finance its activities. Among these nations, however, Venezuela stands out as Iran’s most convenient partner in the Western Hemisphere, mainly because of similarities in ideology and method of governance between the two “anti-imperialist” states.

In September 2018, Brazilian police arrested<sup>68</sup> Assad Ahmad Barakat, a Lebanese national accused by the United States and Argentina of laundering money on behalf of Hezbollah and serving as one of its chief financial operators in the region. In 2006, the U.S. Treasury Department had labelled Barakat a “global terrorist” and put his name on the blacklist of Hezbollah financiers in the Triple Frontier.

## CONCLUSION

“The bare reality is that the Islamic Republic has no alternatives, from a national security and interests perspective, to replace its current non-state allies,” Ahmadian of the University of Tehran explained. “It is not surprising that Iran did not agree to make its regional presence part of negotiations with world powers over its nuclear program in 2015.”

“Now with American and European violations of the JCPOA, the Iranian policy community has come to appreciate the real strategic value of Tehran’s non-state alliances, so Iran is unlikely to sacrifice its allies for closer relations with the West.”

Yet, Iran's determination to maintain its unconventional alliance and patronage network in the face of mounting Western and regional opposition does not have to culminate in an increasingly aggravated security dilemma or political deadlock.

"What is required is development of a clear idea of what the geopolitical and security integration of Iran into the Middle East could look like, what it would require, and what kind of incentives and security guarantees Western powers could offer to nudge such a process along," said Van Veen of the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands.

"Inevitably, this will involve a protracted tussle with the United States, which currently seeks to isolate the Islamic Republic — that is incidentally a recipe for more conflict — but since the Gulf states have recently become aware, the hard way, of their vulnerabilities in relation to Iran, there might be a good point of departure."

As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps through the Middle East and ravages Iran, hawks in the Trump administration including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien see an opportunity<sup>69</sup> to deal Tehran's paramilitary allies in Iraq, particularly KH, a coup de grace and permanently undermine Iranian influence in the country. This is likely to backfire and result in profound consequences for the United States and its regional allies, but more importantly, even in normal circumstances the Islamic Republic is extremely unlikely to let the unconventional alliance network

it has so painstakingly built over four decades unravel, unless and until a robust replacement is provided that will ensure its national security and interests.

With the U.S. presidential elections in November 2020 approaching, Tehran is bracing<sup>70</sup> itself for another four years of "maximum pressure" and thus moving toward greater securitization and homogenization at home and further entrenchment and consolidation abroad. This means the U.S. policies against Iran are making the latter more rather than less dependent on its unconventional alliance network in the region and beyond. The only way to break this escalatory cycle is for the United States to ease up on the pressure and let negotiations get off the ground in the hope that both adversaries will find more sustainable solutions to their longstanding hostility.

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# PHOTOS

1. Iranian men hold Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units, Hashd Shaabi (C), Iran, Iraq, and IRGC flags while taking part in a rally to mark the Islamic Revolution anniversary in Azadi square in western Tehran on February 11, 2020. (Photo by Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images)
2. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei holds a meeting with the IRGC in Tehran, Iran on September 18, 2016. (Photo by Pool/Press Office of Iranian Supreme Leader/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)
3. Members of IRGC march during the annual military parade marking the anniversary of the outbreak of the devastating 1980-1988 war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in the capital Tehran on September 22, 2018. (Photo by STRINGER/AFP via Getty Images)
4. Qasem Soleimani's long-time lieutenant and the new leader of Quds Force Gen. Esmail Qaani (C), Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Hossein Salami (R) attend a memorial for Qasem Soleimani, commander of Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Forces, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Iraq, in Tehran, Iran on January 09, 2020. (Photo by IRANIAN SUPREME LEADER PRESS OFFICE/HANDOUT/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)
5. A member of the Peace Companies (Saraya al-Salam), an Iraqi armed group linked to Iraq's Shia community and part of the Iraqi state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), stands guard during security precautions against potential threats by ISIS on September 18, 2019 in Samarra, Iraq. (Photo by Ameer Al Mohammedaw/picture alliance via Getty Images)
6. Pro-Iranian Hezbollah militants hold flags during the funeral procession of five of their colleagues who were killed in clashes with Turkish army in the Syrian province of Idlib on March 1, 2020. (Photo by Marwan Naamani/picture alliance via Getty Images)
7. Zarbati, or strike force units of the rebel Northern Alliance, wear new uniforms given by Iran October 30, 2001 at Poshtasorkh camp, 30 miles north of Kabul, in Afghanistan. (Photo by Scott Peterson/Getty Images)
8. Houthi rebel fighters raise their weapons and chant slogans during a gathering aimed at mobilizing more fighters before heading to battlefronts in Sanaa, Yemen, November 16, 2017. (Photo by Hani Al-Ansi/picture alliance via Getty Images)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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