



Statement before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

On “Defeating the Iranian Threat Network: Options for Countering Iranian Proxies”

# Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies

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November 29, 2016

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and the distinguished committee members: Thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing on Iran's support for terrorism and proxies. I will focus my comments on how that support fits into Iran's strategic priorities and how US policy can best counter it.

Please note that while this testimony constitutes my own research and analysis, it draws as well on discussions conducted as part of a working group at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The working group aims to analyze potential opportunities to deter Iran in the post-JCPOA environment. The final results of its deliberations will be published in February 2017.

### **The Role of Proxies in Iranian Deterrence Strategy**

Few states in the modern era, if any, have placed the development and sustainment of proxy forces more central in their defensive strategies as has the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Assessing the role these groups play in Iran's deterrence strategy—and the direction IRI strategies will take in the future—requires understanding the reasons why Tehran placed such emphasis on building foreign forces to defend its security and project its influence in the years after 1979.

The executor of Iranian proxy policies, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), was created by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini first to secure the revolution at home and then export the revolution abroad. As an amalgam of existing paramilitary groups and neophyte recruits consciously separate from Iran's traditional imperial armed forces (the Artesh), the IRGC had no distinct military traditions, doctrines, or strategic frameworks beyond ensuring Khomeini's new political order must survive and flourish. The organization's motto from the Quran "prepare against them what you can" captures both the pragmatic ethos that drove the IRGC's structure and missions and the fundamentally reactive nature of the force to the threats and opportunities faced in the early 1980s, namely the risk to the new regime from the United States and Iraq and the chance to confront Israel in Lebanon.

Proxies quickly became central in each of these confrontations.<sup>1</sup> The limitations of the IRGC and the Artesh's ability to project military power drove the IRGC's need for proxies to conduct unconventional warfare abroad. The IRGC worked with Iraqi Kurdish militants and formed the Badr Corps from opposition Shia Iraqi groups to help fight Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. When Khomeini decided against a direct Iranian intervention in Lebanon to combat the invading Israelis and their Western allies, the IRGC crafted Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) from existing local Shia militias.<sup>2</sup> The corps' Quds Force (QF) branch oversaw the expanding foreign network, the so-called axis of resistance.

Tehran also found these groups to be well-suited as vehicles for the promulgation of IRI ideological and political influence. Direct coercion or forced revolutionary conversion of its neighbors, Soviet-style, is neither feasible nor politically palatable for the anti-imperialist-minded Iranian leadership. Instead, proxies in places such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq could slowly subvert and co-opt state institutions while attempting to create a more authentic appearing movement toward Iranian ideology and influence from below. In places like the Arab Gulf states, this process has been less successful, and true Iranian proxies do not yet exist. However, the fear Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have of infiltration by IRGC agents or cells, and the prospect of IRGC-led terrorism campaigns, assassinations, or general unrest, does provide a significant psychological or even deterrent effect.

Iran does not initially create proxies with the intention of using them as a deterrent force. Rather, this mission is adopted as proxy capabilities strengthen and become existentially important to Iran. This deterrence via proxy exists in two layers. The first is *retaliatory deterrence*, the ability to instill fear of significant casualties, destruction of critical infrastructure, or economic disruption to dissuade Tehran's conventionally more powerful enemies from taking direct military action against Iran or its interests. This draws from what Khamenei and Iranian military leaders describe as the IRI's "threat in response to threat" doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Proxies also give the IRGC a degree of plausible deniability, which can help Iran manage potential escalation after any retaliatory actions. Since Iran cannot strike the US homeland conventionally the way the United States can strike the Iranian homeland with near impunity, Tehran seeks ways to balance the deterrence equation by threatening US interests worldwide through proxy terrorism and asymmetric operations.<sup>4</sup> The IRI similarly hopes to keep Israel at bay through the threat of terrorism and asymmetric war from Lebanese Hezbollah. While the IRGC is employing its existing proxies and building new ones to fight ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra on the front lines, the militias are also already playing a role in deterring these Sunni extremist groups from assaulting deeper into Shia or Alawite territories in Iraq or Syria.

The second layer of *passive deterrence* is more latent and designed to deter foreign involvement in states such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon that are already in Iran's sphere of influence. The IRGC has helped mobilize large paramilitary groups such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) in Syria and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, not only to conduct unconventional war against Damascus' and Baghdad's enemies but also to solidify its influence in each states' security apparatus and dissuade any military or political efforts by outside powers to pull these states out of Tehran's orbit. Iran's direction of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) similarly threaten the counter-Islamic State coalition currently operating in Iraq and dissuade reestablishment of a long-term US military presence in the country.

### **Current Capabilities and Future Trajectory**

The IRI has significantly expanded the size and complexity of its proxy force in the past five years, due primarily to the wars in Syria and Iraq. This includes not only the growth of the primary groups that form the axis of resistance such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Badr Corps, KH, and AAH, but also the establishment of new Shia militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and the mobilization of Iraqi and Syrian civilians into the PMF and NDF respectively. The proliferation and permutation of smaller Iranian-backed proxies in Iraq and Syria can be extremely challenging to discern, although almost all can trace their formation and ultimate command back to one of those four principle groups, with the QF one echelon above.

The IRI continues to invest in training and arming its proxies and partners with increasingly advanced equipment, with its most trusted groups receiving the best weaponry. Lebanese Hezbollah has acquired unmanned aerial vehicles and an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 rockets and missiles through Iranian assistance, including advanced air-to-ground and ground-to-sea missiles.<sup>5</sup> The IRI's Iraqi proxies employed the QFs' signature improvised explosive device, the explosively formed projectiles against coalition forces in the last decade.<sup>6</sup> Yemen's al Houthis, in contrast, have received mostly small arms from Hezbollah or the IRGC, although there are indications the movement has gained some Iranian rocket technology.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps more important than weapons are the tremendous strides the IRGC has made in the past five years advancing their proxies' deployability, interoperability, and capacity to conduct unconventional warfare. The corps has effectively moved its Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani proxies into and out of the Syrian theater as requirements demand. In addition to building the NDF and coordinating with Lebanese Hezbollah, Russian, and Syrian government operations, the IRGC, along with some Artesh special forces units, has also begun rotating cadre of its brigade-level officers to Syria to train and lead the Shia militias in their counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>8</sup>

The IRI is in effect turning the axis of resistance into a region-wide resistance army.<sup>9</sup> Recent estimates indicate more than a quarter million personnel are potentially responsive to IRGC direction,<sup>10</sup> including:

- *Lebanese Hezbollah*: 45,000 fighters, of which 21,000 are full time, and 6,000 to 8,000 are currently deployed to Syria<sup>11</sup>
- *Palestinian Islamic Jihad*: at most 1,000 personnel focused on targeting Israel<sup>12</sup>
- *Badr Corps Brigades*: between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters<sup>13</sup>
- *Kata'ib Hezbollah*: likely a core group of around 1,000 fighters,<sup>14</sup> with 10,000 or more mobilized through its main subsidiary Saraya al-Difaa al-Shaabi and 1,000 to 3,000 likely deployed to Syria
- *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*: approximately 10,000 fighters, and 1,000 to 3,000 likely deployed to Syria<sup>15</sup>
- *Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade*: 2,000 to 3,000 thousand fighters deployed to Syria, but total numbers for the group are unknown<sup>16</sup>
- *Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade*: up to 1,000 fighters deployed to Syria, but total numbers for the group are unknown<sup>17</sup>
- *Syrian National Defense Force*: approximately 100,000 mobilized Syrian fighters<sup>18</sup>
- *Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces*: approximately 100,000 fighters, of which 80,000 are considered to be part of Iranian supported groups<sup>19</sup>

The challenges Iran faces from the Islamic State, other Sunni extremist groups, and allied state instability have driven the shift to larger scale mobilization of proxy and partner groups in the past three years, although notably there appears to be little parallel impetus to create cyber proxy groups.<sup>20</sup> A degree of success in the current wars in Syria and Iraq will likely lead the governments in Damascus and Baghdad to officially demobilize some of these militia forces, especially those deemed less proficient or which possess more tentative relationships with the IRGC. However, these forces will still represent a latent deterrent capability for Tehran. Those groups that profess *vilayet e faqih*, and are thus considered part of the Islamic Resistance, will largely remain a standing force under Iranian guidance. These groups will likely deepen their integration into their respective states' political and security infrastructure. The IRGC proxy "army" in Iraq and Syria will be in a strong position to threaten or deter Iran's adversaries if some form of victory is achieved in their civil and counterterrorism wars.

IRI proxy groups are considered part of the axis of resistance, which the Iranian leadership views as an ideological and security extension of the Islamic Republic. These organizations proclaim their ultimate religious and political allegiance to the supreme leader and owe most of their financial and material support to the QF. However, unlike other tools used for deterrence, Iran does not fully control this weapon. Working with partially autonomous actors can pose a liability at times for Iranian leaders, especially in times of crisis when rapid decisions are needed. Despite these operational weaknesses, there

is political value for proxies to demonstrate their relative independence and make their support to IRI policy appear more grassroots and voluntary.

These dynamics are also reflected in the IRI's command and control over its proxies, which tend to be tailored based on the relative levels of trust and experience. The IRGC, through the QF, gives strategic guidance to most other proxies, under the supreme leader's broad orders. Lebanese Hezbollah is fairly self-directed. QF delegates much of the day-to-day operational command of its Iraqi proxies to the Badr Organization. In Syria, the relative infancy of most of the proxies requires direct control by the rotating cadre units of the IRGC. The campaigns in Iraq and Syria are now creating deep ties among QF, IRGC, and even some elements of Artesh.

As a revolutionary state facing stronger military opponents that threaten the very nature of the state, the IRI sees warfare in 360 degrees, where domestic and foreign battlefronts frequently blend. Many of the roles and missions proxies perform abroad to expand IRI ideology and influence while opposing Iran's enemies are also executed by the IRGC and Basij paramilitary forces to secure the IRI's internal stability. Training and doctrine development among the IRGC, Basij, LH, and other proxies, such as for counterinsurgency operations, are increasingly integrated, the latest example being the role the Basij is taking in shaping the Syrian NDF.

The ideological and religious mission of Iranian proxies brings them in close contact with Iran's clerical establishment, as the IRI proselytizes its version of Shia Islamic thought. Proxies also provide a means for Iran to seek and funnel money for religious or political donations throughout the Shiite diaspora. Lebanese Hezbollah, in particular, has developed its own financial system through Lebanese banking institutions and the black market, which the IRGC uses to bypass international sanctions and facilitate its worldwide operations. However, Iranian civilian political leaders have little to no influence over these groups.

### **Implications for the Region and US Interests**

As long as the IRI lacks the conventional military power to match the United States or Israel, the IRGC will continue building and sustaining proxies to pressure Tel Aviv, threaten the US homeland, and level the deterrence equation. The QF usually works in partnership with Lebanese Hezbollah to create new operational capacities in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The wars in Syria and Iraq, though, have apparently dampened some of the IRI's ability to create new networks. However, if the current Middle East conflicts subside, anticipate a renewed emphasis on growing the IRI's global proxy reach.

Once a proxy's role in Iranian deterrence strategy is solidified, preserving that group becomes an existential matter for the state. Ensuring LH, the crown jewel in the axis of resistance, can still deter Israel is the most vital reason Tehran must protect the group, even more so than the role LH plays in shaping the Lebanese state and expanding Iranian influence. This is why the Iranian military has gone to, and will continue to go to, enormous lengths to maintain its access to Hezbollah through Syria.

It is crucial to differentiate between the IRI's true proxies and groups that are best described as Iranian partners. The key distinguisher is whether an organization adheres to the Iranian revolutionary governance ideology of *vileyat e faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist, and recognizes the Iranian supreme leader as its ultimate religious and political authority. Groups that do not acknowledge that

authority—such as the Promise Day Brigade and other forces that follow the nationalist Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr, the al Houthi rebels in Yemen, and even Sunni militant organizations such as Hamas—can still enjoy significant support from Iran and cooperate with Tehran’s foreign policies. However, the IRI cannot depend on these organizations to form the front lines of retaliatory deterrence against its adversaries, or even to consistently execute the Iranian leadership’s directives. Moreover, even the true proxies at times act more like partners, as local or national considerations may temporarily trump Tehran’s needs.

The IRGC’s new resistance army poses a huge threat to internal stability in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and potentially an external challenge to Israel, Jordan, and the GCC states. Additionally, the IRI will still use the threat of terrorism or domestic instability inside the GCC as a useful tool to restrain Riyadh and to hold US regional military bases at some risk. The QF will continue to support organizations such as Yemen’s al Houthis and some Bahraini Shia opposition groups to the degree that it can. However, it is doubtful that Iran can create true proxy forces in Yemen or Bahrain on the scale of those created in Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon. Keeping the Gulf Arab states off balance is likely the IRGC’s primary objective on the Arabian Peninsula in the near term.

### **Policy Recommendations**

As long as the IRI sees the United States as a threat to its existence, it will seek deterrence through proxies, unconventional weapons, or whatever feasible means it can support. However, the United States can take steps to mitigate the deterrent effect of Iran’s proxies. Four principles in such an approach include:

***Expose and Demystify.*** Much of the deterrent effect of Iranian proxies stems from the impact of their fear-instilling and clandestine nature. The IRI bemoans the “Iranophobia” among the Gulf Arabs, but Iran benefits from the belief there is an Iranian element behind every internal and external threat the GCC states face. Greater efforts by the US Treasury and State Department to name and shame Iranian backed groups, front companies, and their financial activities could erode the psychological foundation of Tehran’s deterrence strength.

***Contain and Push back.*** The United States can conduct relatively effective counterterrorism operations to trim QF and its proxies. Despite their sophistication, Iran’s proxy organizations have a much more detectable signature than true non-state actors such as the Islamic State or al Qaeda. The US capacity to contain and push back on these organizations is limited not by a lack of operational and tactical options, but rather by a lack of political will to confront Iran.

***Divide and Undermine.*** The IRGC and its proxies’ heavy-handed behavior frequently stoke nationalist resentment in areas where they operate. These sentiments can be exploited through information operations and diplomatic activities to create a greater degree of separation between Tehran and its proxies. Reenergizing efforts to strengthen national military and police forces can prevent Iranian proxies and militias from becoming a permanent third army in places such as Iraq.

***Stem and Shape.*** Preventing the IRGC from turning groups it supports into full proxies, and therefore eventual tools of Iranian deterrence, is crucial. For example, US and Saudi interdiction activities, in addition to difficult geography, hamper closer cooperation between the IRGC and the al Houthis.

Reinforcing these efforts can prevent the opposition group from becoming an actual Iranian proxy. The United States should also focus where it can, such as in Yemen and Iraq, on supporting the development of national and local forces that can provide both legitimacy and security to minimize the space the IRGC can exploit within the state for building proxies under its control.

Efforts to counter proxies' deterrent effects need to account for the other reasons Iran supports these organizations: to conduct the IRI's unconventional warfare campaigns and to spread its political, ideological, and security influence. However, the United States will not be able to alter the IRI's logic for supporting such groups in general and the logic for using proxies for deterrence specifically, without fundamental changes in Tehran's threat perception from its more conventionally powerful foes, the United States and Israel, or real ideological change in the leadership.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This approach is notable in that there is little historical precedence for the Iranian state's use of proxies. Paramilitary groups have existed historically in Iran, but they were typically formed in opposition to the state rather than as principle agents of Iran's foreign and security policies.

<sup>2</sup> Khomeini decision was largely driven by Syrian President Hafez al Assad's rejection of the offer for direct Iranian intervention. See Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 63–67.

<sup>3</sup> Asghar Eftekhari, Fatallah Kalantari, "Evaluating and Defining the 'Threat in Response to Threat' Strategy in Iran's Defense Policy," *Journal of Defense Policy* 22, no. 88 (Fall 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The IRGC used Badr Corps and its descendent groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) to bleed coalition forces in Iraq after 2003 and deter any military actions against Iran.

<sup>5</sup> Avi Issacharoff, "Israel Raises Hezbollah Rocket Estimate to 150,000," *Times of Israel*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-raises-hezbollah-rocket-estimate-to-150000/>.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Weisgerber, "How Many US Troops Were Killed By Iranian IEDs in Iraq?" *DefenseOne*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.defenseone.com/news/2015/09/how-many-us-troops-were-killed-iranian-ieds-iraq/120524/>.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Zimmerman, "Signaling Saudi Arabia: Iranian Support to Yemen's al Houthis," *AEI Critical Threats Project*, April 15, 2016, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-signaling-saudi-arabia-iranian-support-to-yemen-al-houthis-april-15-2016>.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Bucala and Frederick W. Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War: How the IRGC Fights in Syria," *AEI Critical Threats Project*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/bucala-kagan-irans-evolving-way-of-war-how-irgc-fights-in-syria-march-24-2016>.

<sup>9</sup> Retired IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Al Falaki has coined the term "Shia liberation army" for the collection of partners and militias currently operating under IRGC command in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This term has received coverage in both the Persian-language and English-language press, although it does not appear to be in widespread use among Iran's political leadership at this time. See "Reports: Iran Forms 'Liberation Army' to Deploy Abroad," *Al Jazeera*, August 20, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/iran-raises-force-deploy-arab-states-reports-160820061102379.html>; and Amir Toumaj, "IRGC Commander Discusses Afghan Militia, 'Shia Liberation Army,' and Syria," *The Long War Journal*, August 24, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/irgc-commander-discusses-afghan-militia-shia-liberation-army-and-syria.php>.

<sup>10</sup> In total, the IRI has 13,000 to 15,000 of its proxy forces fighting in Syria in addition to the NDF. In Iraq, perhaps 30,000 or more of those 80,000 personnel can be considered direct Iranian proxies consisting of KH, AAH, and Badr Corps. The remaining 50,000 mostly include those who follow Muqtada al Sadr. Across all these groups, Iran could employ approximately 75,000 to 80,000 fighters for direct retaliatory deterrence purposes. The rest conduct secondary deterrence as a bulwark against foreign interference in Iran's sphere of influence.

<sup>11</sup> Nadav Pollak, "The Transformation of Hezbollah by Its Involvement in Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote35-Pollak-2.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015," *US Department of State*, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257523.htm>.

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- <sup>13</sup> Michael Knights, "Iraq's Popular Demobilisation," Al Jazeera, February 26, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-popular-demobilisation>; and Susannah George, "Breaking Badr," Foreign Policy, November 6, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim "Iran Backs Assad in Battle for Aleppo with Proxies, Ground Troops" *Washington Post*, October 19, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iran-backs-battle-for-syrias-aleppo-with-proxies-ground-troops/2015/10/19/b8bec268-765f-11e5-a5e2-40d6b2ad18dd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-backs-battle-for-syrias-aleppo-with-proxies-ground-troops/2015/10/19/b8bec268-765f-11e5-a5e2-40d6b2ad18dd_story.html).
- <sup>15</sup> Matthew Hilburn, "One-Time US Prisoner Now Key in Battling IS," Voice of America, March 15, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/a/qais-khazali-onetime-us-prisoner-now-key-in-battling-islamic-state/2679431.html>.
- <sup>16</sup> Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 22, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-afghan-and-pakistani-proxies-in-syria-and-beyond>; and Human Rights Watch, "Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria: Refugees, Migrants Report Deportation Threats," January 29, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/29/iran-sending-thousands-afghans-fight-syria>.
- <sup>17</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran Recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for Combat in Syria," Reuters, December 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pakistan-iran-idUSKBN0TT22S20151210>.
- <sup>18</sup> Christopher Kozak, "An Army In All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, April 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%201.pdf>; and Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>.
- <sup>19</sup> Bret Baier, "US Officials: Up to 100,000 Iran-Backed Fighters Now in Iraq," Fox News, August 16, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/special-report-bret-baier/blog/2016/08/16/us-officials-100000-iran-backed-fighters-now-iraq>.
- <sup>20</sup> The IRI uses its growing cyber capabilities in the same ways it uses proxies for retaliatory deterrence. The unique characteristics of the cyber realm allow Iran to execute its missions more directly. The IRI tends to use front organizations under direct IRGC control, although it will cooperate with non-Iranian cyber groups if that suits its needs. See J. Matthew McInnis, "How Much Should We Fear Iranian Cyber Proxies?," *The Cipher Brief*, July 21, 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/tech/how-much-should-we-fear-iranian-cyber-proxies-1092>.