

MERIA

PATTERNS OF SUBVERSION: IRANIAN USE OF PROXIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Jonathan Spyer*

Iran is actively supporting proxies in major conflicts in the following areas: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. In addition, there is evidence that Iranian agencies are active among Shi'i populations – as yet without major effect – in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action adopted in October of 2015 has produced no major impact on the pattern of Iranian regional commitments. However, the release of tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief has enabled the Iranians, who were in some danger of overstretch, to now freely commit to supporting more strongly their various allies and proxies in the Middle East. This paper will look at Iranian aims and strategy and will then focus on Iran's involvement in a number of Arab settings.

INTRODUCTION: IRANIAN AIMS

Iran's strategic goal is to emerge as the dominant power in the Middle East and, eventually, the entire Islamic world. It seeks to roll back the influence of the United States in the region and to work towards Israel's destruction.

At a conference on "Iran, Nationalism, History, and Culture" in Tehran in March 2015, Ali Younesi, a senior adviser on intelligence matters to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, outlined a clear vision for Iranian regional hegemony. Younesi described Iran's role as "protecting the interests of all the people in the region – because they are all Iran's people ... We must try to once again spread the banner of Islamic-Iranian unity and peace in the region. Iran must bear this responsibility, as it did in the past."¹ He noted Iran's past as an empire, and spoke of a "greater Iran" stretching from the borders of China to the Persian Gulf. Younesi's statements are not, of course, a failsafe guide to policy. But his much-noted speech is a fair summary of the wide ambitions of Iran.

In practice, Iranian resources appear to be directed towards realizing this vision in two specific areas: first, the establishment of a contiguous line of pro-Iranian entities between

the Iraq-Iran border and the Mediterranean Sea, and second, extending Iranian influence to the Arabic-speaking side of the Persian Gulf, thus subverting the interests of Saudi Arabia in this area.

Geographical Continuity

There are several motivating forces behind Iran's drive to create geographical continuity in the region. There is an obvious strategic interest for Iran in having access to the Mediterranean, which has been a feature of Iranian and Persian state policy from antiquity. Additionally, reaching Lebanon gives Tehran an entry point into the Israel-Arab conflict. The Iranians have invested heavily for over 30 years in their client Hizballah in Lebanon. As non-Arabs and non-Sunni Muslims, the Iranians suffer from a "legitimacy gap" in the mainly Sunni Muslim Arab Middle East. They seek to close this gap through commitment to the destruction of Israel, and in practical terms through the sponsorship of organizations engaged in war against the Jewish state. Access to Israel's borders is essential for this.

Iran's determined defense of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria should be seen in light of both these ambitions. Were Syria to fall, the hope of a chain of pro-Iranian states to the

Mediterranean would be gone. So would the land link to Hizballah and the conflict with Israel. A post Assad Syria would be controlled by the Sunni Arab majority, who would be unlikely to quickly forgive Hizballah and Iran's support for the regime. Hence the Iranians have no other option but to double down on their support for the regime.

In addition, Iran has an interest in a weak or subordinated Iraq. The Iranian regime fought a bloody war against Iraq in the 1980s, which forms a core formative experience for the regime. To avoid any possible recurrence, Iran has an interest in ensuring a non-hostile Iraq through sponsorship of friendly political players in that country.

Influence in the Gulf

With regard to the Gulf, Tehran sees Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council as rivals for power. Tehran lacks the conventional ground and air forces to project power beyond its borders. It seeks to overcome this disadvantage through the development of its ballistic missile program, and through its efforts in asymmetric conflict.

While the Iranians may hope eventually to isolate Saudi Arabia and cause the Gulf states to abandon their links with the United States and to come instead under Iranian protection, this moment is far away in terms of the current balance of power because of Iran's limited military capacities. At present, therefore, the Iranians aim to frustrate any efforts of the Gulf states or United States to carry out operations in the Gulf or into Iranian territory by building up their deterrent capacity.

The Iranian practice of attempting to disrupt international shipping in the Straits of Hormuz and Iran's investment in small boats, coastal defense and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) reflects this goal. Because of their limited conventional capabilities, the effective use of proxy warfare has high importance to the Iranians.

Thus, it seems clear that Iran's strategic goal is ultimately to build regional hegemony. In the short term, its core goals include maintaining its domination of the space

between the Iran-Iraq border and the Mediterranean as well as deterring the United States while simultaneously intimidating the Gulf states.

These goals place Iran at loggerheads with status quo states in the region, most importantly Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, combined with the collapse of a number of regional states and the growing importance of sectarian identity as a marker of political loyalty, are producing a cross-border sectarian struggle, with Iranian clients lined up against clients of Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Qatar.

This sectarian element is important, because it represents a built-in limit to Iranian potential. As a Shi'i power, Iran finds it difficult to gain legitimacy among Sunni Arabs or to successfully develop proxies outside of Shi'i Arab populations, as becomes apparent when taking a closer look at Iran's main commitments in the region.

The key state agency engaged in the process of Iranian regional outreach is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and more specifically its expeditionary Qods Force. This agency's specific purpose is creating or sponsoring proxy political/military forces in other states designed to help the Iranian state interest (or the "Islamic Revolution," which amounts to the same thing). As such, the current regional reality of state breakdown and fragmentation and the resulting sectarian conflict is a situation in which the skills of the IRGC are uniquely applicable.

THE PATTERN OF IRANIAN SUCCESS AND FAILURE

When assessing how things stand for Iran in the main countries in which it is engaged, an emergent pattern presents itself. Iranian outreach and subversion serves to keep Iranian clients in existence, but nowhere has led to outright Iranian victory. Iran's major difficulty is its apparent inability to form lasting and deep alliances outside of Shi'a and minority Arab communities.

Syria

In Syria, Iran has been determined, since the outbreak of the uprising against the Assad dictatorship in March 2011, to preserve the dictator's rule. Iran and Syria have formal relations of military alliance dating back to 1982. Iranian financial assistance, mobilization of regional proxies, help in military organization and now direct provision of military personnel to Assad have been vital in preventing his downfall throughout the Syrian war.

Has the intervention into Syria been a success for Iran and its methods of outreach? Partially, Assad still controls Damascus. But he rules over only about 25 per cent of the entire territory of Syria.² There is no prospect of the re-conquest of the greater part of the areas which have been lost any time soon. So while Iran's efforts may have kept the dictator in his seat, the result has not been a return to repressive stability, but rather the effective collapse and de facto partition of Syria, with Assad reduced to the status of a single warlord among others, rather than of the ruler of a country. This remains the case despite the relative recovery of Assad's fortunes as a result of the Russian intervention after September 30, 2015.

It is noteworthy that despite Iranian assistance, the direction of the Syrian Civil War appeared to be turning decisively against Assad over the course of 2015. The intervention by Russia beginning in September 2015 derived to a degree from the Russian perception that previous levels of support would not be sufficient to ensure Assad's survival and that if Assad's regime was to be saved, more direct involvement by Moscow was necessary. According to some reports, the Russian intervention was the direct result of a visit by Iranian Qods Force commander General Qasem Soleimani to Moscow in July 2015 in which he impressed on Russian officials the increasingly desperate predicament Assad was facing.³ If this was indeed the case, it is testimony to the limited efficacy of Iranian methods in the Syrian context.

Nevertheless, the limited achievement of Iran in the Syrian context derives mainly from the effective employment of proxy ground forces. Because of the sectarian nature of Assad's regime, and its consequently narrow base of loyal support, his main problem throughout the war has been a shortage of loyal manpower. The Assad alliance with Iran has been the single most important factor in closing this gap. Lebanese Hizballah forces were active on the Syrian front from 2012. As the regime's predicament worsened, so Hizballah increased its commitment. Hizballah and IRGC personnel were also vital in creating the National Defense Forces, a 90-100,000-strong mainly Alawi militia who entered the field in mid-2013.⁴ This Basij-style force was a classic Iranian proxy creation – a sectarian-based light infantry force trained by a proxy (Hizballah) under direct Iranian guidance.

From 2014 to 2015, with the Assad regime's manpower needs still acute, a broader representation of Iranian proxies joined in on the Syrian battlefield. These include Iraqi Shi'i client militias, such as Ktaeb Hizballah, Asaib Ahl- al Haq and even the formerly Sadrist Imam Ali Brigades.

Beginning in late 2014, a brigade of Afghan Hazara Shi'i refugees, the Fatemiyun Brigades, have also been active in the crucial front of northwest Syria.⁵ The presence of these forces strongly attests to the acute crisis suffered by the Syrian regime in terms of shortage of manpower. But it is also testimony to the skill and effectiveness of the IRGC's ability to muster, mobilize and establish proxy paramilitary forces and to deploy them throughout the region at a particular point of need.

Iraq

Iraq has a Shi'i Arab majority, and a traditionally pro-Iranian party (Dawa) is currently in power. Iranian assistance to the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in the form of organizing Shi'i militias in the Popular Mobilization (Hashed al-Shaabi) played a vital role in stopping the

Islamic State (IS) advance eastwards in the summer of 2014. The most powerful of the militias are political as well as military organizations. While these militias are officially administered by the Popular Mobilization Committee, in reality the most powerful of them are directly linked to Iran.

According to a recent report in the *Sharq al Awsat* newspaper, the IRGC maintains a permanent staff of senior officers overseeing the process of cooperation with the Shi'i militias. The report even named the officers concerned: "Brigadier Generals Mohammed Shahlaei, Mojtaba Abtahi, Iraj Masjedi and Ahmad Forouzandeh, who are all directly supervised by the Qods Forces Commander Qasem Soleimani."⁶

The Badr organization, led by Hadi al-Ameri, along with the Ktaeb Hezbollah, led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Jamal Ibrahim), are the strongest of the Shi'i militia groups. Both Ameri and al-Muhandis are veteran pro-Iranian Shi'i Islamist activists, with long and verifiable links to the IRGC, which fought on the Iranian side in the Iran-Iraq war. Both are personally linked to the IRGC's Qods Force and Soleimani.

The Shi'i militias, as both political and military organizations, are Iran's key instrument in Iraq. Through them, the Iranians are able to directly impact the Iraqi policymaking process. Yet Iraq also remains effectively divided into three component regions; the government controlled area in the south, the Islamic State territory in the centre, and the Kurdish north. Neither the Shi'i militias nor the Iraqi armed forces appear anywhere close to re-uniting the country, and it is difficult to see how they could do so, given their openly sectarian Shi'i orientation. The Islamic State is now in eclipse in Iraq, but the actions of the Shi'i militias against Sunni civilians in the recent re-taking of Falluja demonstrate the contradiction at the heart of Shi'i sectarianism in Iraq – it wishes neither to divide the country, nor to rule in an equitable way. As such, even in a future post-ISIS scenario, the growing power of Shi'i sectarian forces is likely to provoke a Sunni response

and greater Kurdish separatism, rather than acquiescence to Shi'a ascendancy.

In Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, according to the previously-noted report in the *Sharq al Awsat* newspaper, Iran maintains a presence of around 1500 personnel from the Qods force of the IRGC, with plans to establish permanent positions between the cities of Kurkuk and Mosul, according to the report. In this area, too, Iranian interest is largely expressed through close coordination with Iran-supported Shi'i militias, who are engaged in a contest for land with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). However, Iran also has close links to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the main rival to the dominant Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in the KRG area.

So Iranian influence runs deep throughout Iraq, but the result of this influence has been the nation's fragmentation, with Iranian domination in a single region, rather than the emergence of a strongly united Iran-aligned Iraqi state.

Lebanon

The success of Iran's strategies of outreach and subversion are most clearly showcased in Lebanon. Hizballah is the prototype of an Iranian-created and -supported political-military group. Established by the IRGC in the early 1980s, Hizballah has, since 1990, been the only non-governmental organization permitted to maintain an armed wing in Lebanon (with the exception of Palestinian groups permitted to carry arms within refugee camps). In 2006, Hizballah launched a war on Israel without seeking the official consent of the Lebanese government. In 2008, it crushed an attempt to impose the authority of the central government over some of its activities.

Hizballah has played a vital role in the Syrian civil war as an ally of Iran. Its personnel are taking an active part in the fighting. Iran and Hizballah have also sought to take advantage of the chaos in Syria to establish an additional front for operations against Israel just east of the Quneitra Crossing (facing the Golan Heights). So far

this has not been successful. Israeli pre-emptive action has included the killing of a number of senior IRGC and Hizballah personnel in a helicopter strike on January 18, 2015.⁷

No challenge to Hizballah's military power is on the horizon, though the entry into Lebanon of approximately one million Syrian Sunni refugees since 2011 has undermined the notion of an emergent Shi'a demographic majority which might underlay and deepen the organization's strength. There is evidence of efforts to organize among the Sunnis by both Jabat al-Nusra and IS.

There are no physical restrictions on Hizballah's freedom of action. But at the same time, the notion of emergent open Hizballah rule replacing the Lebanese state, and implementing the Iranian system of government in the country, is far-fetched. Hizballah has neither the need nor the ability to impose such rule. Iran has implanted a powerful military machine along the border with Israel, giving itself a direct entry point into the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the ability to intervene to help other allies in need. (Hizballah has also involved in supporting pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, Yemen and the Palestinian territories in recent years.) But even in Lebanon, the site of Iran's greatest success, if Iran was hoping to produce a similar Shi'i Islamic regime to its own, this appears neither imminent nor likely.

As a result of its engagement in Syria, Hizballah is at a low point in its fortunes. Iran and its proxies have reached a point where they can neither win the fight in Syria nor abandon it. As a result, Hizballah is hemorrhaging personnel in a war that is still far from over. The movement also appears to be responding with violence to attempts by Lebanese banks to implement United States-mandated sanctions against Hizballah. On June 12, 2016, the headquarters of the Banque du Liban et Outre Mer (BLOM), in the Verdun area of west Beirut, was targeted with an improvised explosive device (IED). The details of the attack suggest that Hizballah, rather than a Sunni jihadi group, was responsible.⁸ It is possible that the movement

will succeed in intimidating the Lebanese financial system against implementing sanctions, but this will come at the cost of further embittering the non-Shi'a and non-Hizballah-supporting segments of the population against the movement.

However, while Hizballah has lost around 1500 fighters in Syria, it has also undoubtedly acquired hitherto-unpossessed skills, specifically in the area of fighting in built-up areas, fighting with a long logistical chain in unfamiliar territory and also, as is becoming apparent, the employment of drones as weapons of warfare.

Iran's investment in Hizballah within Lebanon remains its most successful investment in a proxy organization undertaken since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established. This success clearly highlights the advantages of Iran's approach, while also calling attention to its limitations and vulnerabilities.

Yemen

In Yemen, the Iranian ally/client is the Ansar Allah organization, more commonly known as the Houthis, after the name of the tribe which controls the organization. The Houthis seized control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in September 2014. The government of President Abd-al Rabbo Mansour Hadi was forced into exile in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis and their allies then began a march to the south, intending to seize the Gulf of Aden and unite the country under their control.

Seeking to prevent this outcome, the Saudi and Emirati governments began providing assistance to Yemeni government forces on March 26, 2015. Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain also joined the coalition against the Houthis. The Houthis, having failed to take Aden City, agreed to adhere to a seven-point plan brokered by the United Nations in talks in Muscat, Oman. The plan included a ceasefire and the return of the government to Sana'a. However, it was never implemented, and fighting resumed. A second ceasefire took effect on April 11, 2016, but peace talks in Kuwait have become

deadlocked. The Iranian-backed element continue to dominate the north of the country, but have failed to achieve what was undoubtedly Iran's main strategic goal in Yemen – namely, securing control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This choke point between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea could have been used to block shipping to the Suez Canal. But the Houthis did not manage to reach this strait. Once again, this demonstrates the same pattern of Iranian support resulting in division and renewed conflict, as has occurred in Iraq, rather than in outright victory for Iran.

The Iranian relationship with the Houthis is complex. The movement is not a creation of the Iranians. However, evidence of Tehran's assistance is extensive. As early as January 2013, Yemeni security forces intercepted a shipment of weapons on its way from the IRGC to the Houthis. The shipment included rocket-propelled grenades, surface-to-air missiles, and high explosives. In March of 2016, an Iranian cargo ship unloaded 160-180 tons of military equipment in the Yemeni Red Sea port of al-Saleef.⁹

Houthis have also travelled to Iran for training, according to regional media reports. The pace of Iranian assistance has increased in line with the movement's greater prominence and its seizure of Sana'a. According to David Weinberg of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a think tank in Washington, "Tehran does not exercise command and control over Ansar Allah (the Houthi militia)... But credible reports confirm that it has been providing on the ground advising...training overseas, major sums of money and weapons by the literal ton."¹⁰

Palestinians

Iran maintains a longstanding strategic alliance with one Palestinian organization – Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Islamic Jihad was founded in the Gaza Strip in 1981 by activists directly influenced by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. PIJ has remained a supporter of Iran and beneficiary of Iranian aid and support ever since.

Islamic Jihad, however, is a small organization, with no serious ambitions to compete for political leadership of the Palestinians. Over the course of the 1990s, Iran sought to establish a strategic relationship with Hamas, the largest and most powerful of the Palestinian Islamist groups. This burgeoning relationship was disrupted, however, by the post-Arab Spring rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and then by the outbreak of civil war in Syria. Hamas, a Muslim Brotherhood-linked group, sought to distance itself from the Iran-aligned Syrian regime, which was engaged in crushing a largely Sunni Arab revolt. The movement transferred its headquarters in 2012 from Damascus. At the same time, Hamas sought to draw closer to what then looked to be an emergent Muslim Brotherhood regional bloc, centered on Egypt and Qatar.

Although no such bloc emerged, Hamas's exit from Syria led to estrangement between Hamas and Iran. As of this article's publication, a rift continues to exist within Hamas regarding future relations with Iran, with some elements supporting a return to alignment with the Iranians and others favoring alignment with Qatar and an attempt to repair relations with Saudi Arabia. Iran appears to have maintained relations with the Ktaeb al-Qassam, Hamas's military wing. It is clear that all Hamas elements favoring military struggle against Israel must naturally gravitate towards Iran, since Iranian support represents the only viable military option.

Hamas's political leadership, meanwhile, appears to prefer an orientation towards Qatar and the Gulf states, perhaps reflecting its preferred priority of strengthening and developing the movement's enclave in Gaza, while engaging in political struggle with Fatah and seeking to turn the West Bank into the focal point of violence.

During the period of the Second Intifada, Iran also maintained contacts with and support for armed elements within Hamas's rival Fatah movement. It is likely that these channels of communication and support still exist.

Since late 2015, Iran has also sponsored the establishment of a proxy Hizballah style militia group in Gaza called al Sabirin, led by a former PIJ militant called Hisham Salem, though this movement remains small.¹¹

Bahrain/Eastern Saudi Arabia

Bahrain, with its 70 percent Shi'a majority, close proximity to Iran, status as host of the United States Navy's 5th Fleet, along with its history of discrimination against the Shi'a, is a natural site for Tehran's attentions. Iranian officials have described Bahrain as Iran's "14th province." The area was the site of widespread protests in early 2011, which were crushed by an intervention of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia. Relations between the government and opposition remain tense.

While it is often and correctly noted that Bahraini authorities tend to attribute all opposition to Iranian subversion, even when there is little proof, it is nonetheless true that considerable evidence has emerged of IRGC attempts to smuggle weaponry into the area. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia's majority Shi'a eastern province, an area containing 20 percent of the world's known oil reserves, Iran has been increasing its activity.

Tehran has begun to smuggle armor-piercing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) into eastern Saudi Arabia, as well as providing assistance and instruction to Bahraini Shi'i militants in the construction of these devices.

On July 25, 2015, according to a report by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) notes that Bahraini security forces intercepted a boat carrying 43 kilograms of C4 explosive, detonators and eight AK-type assault rifles with 32 magazines and ammunition. The report also notes that "One of the two Bahraini men in the boat testified to having received weapons and explosives training at an IRGC camp in Iran two years prior."¹²

This incident was only one of a series of related occurrences suggesting that the IRGC is busily attempting to lay the groundwork for insurgency in Bahrain and eastern Saudi

Arabia. Its activities there have included the discovery of a number of bomb making workshops. Three such workshops were discovered in 2015, according to the WINEP report, which noted that "One underground room found in Dar Kulaib on June 6 contained advanced bomb components and an industrial press for fabricating EFPs."¹³

The report also noted claims by Bahraini police chief Major General Tariq al-Hassan that the Iraqi Shi'i militia Ktaeb Hizballah gave EFP training at a camp in Iraq and "offered logistical and financial support" to a Bahraini terrorist group called "Saraya al-Ashtar." On May 8, 2015, a vehicle carrying EFP charges was intercepted as it attempted to cross from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia.¹⁴

This pattern of Iranian behavior suggests that the IRGC is consistent with Iranian activities in other areas and demonstrates that Tehran is attempting to lay the groundwork for insurgency in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the common strategies discussed above, one further commonality visible for all regions discussed above is the risk-averse nature of Iranian intervention (in stark contrast to, for example, the interventions of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan). With the single exception of the period from September 2015 to February 2016 in northwest Syria, Iran has refrained from significant commitment of their own forces in combat positions. The Syrian exception derived from the desperate position that the client Assad regime found itself in at that time, specifically due to an absence of sufficient manpower for ground operations. However, even in that exceptional circumstance, once the situation had been stabilized, by February 2016, Iran rapidly withdrew its forces.

Thus, it would appear that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has not affected Iran's behavior except to bolster Iran's existing strategy by making available greater funding for it as a result of sanctions relief. Iran's strategy represents a bid for

regional hegemony by “stealth,” avoiding significant sacrifices of Iranian personnel. However, examining the current “scorecard” in the region suggests that the net result of Iranian interference and subversion in these geographical regions around the Middle East has produced, rather than outright victory for Iran and the reconstitution of the areas in question as allies of Iran, only further internal fragmentation and continued conflict.

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