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The View From Tehran: Iran's Militia Doctrine

SAEID GOLKAR
KASRA AARABI

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Executive Summary

On 10 October 2020, days before a 13-year United Nations (UN) arms embargo on Iran was due to be lifted, a senior commander in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) boasted of the country's network of loyalist militias. Mohammad Reza Naghdi declared that "the force we have organised and the people [we have recruited worldwide] are much more dangerous than having an alliance with any army as . . . these people are scattered and unrecognisable". He added that when this unrecognisable force strikes, "the enemy will not know who has hit it".[1]

Naghdi's words underscored the Islamic Republic's greatest asset against nations in the region and the West as well as the root of the problem of so-called Iranian-backed proxies: plausible deniability.

Naghdi was championing Iran's network of trained fighters whom the IRGC – the clerical regime's ideological army – has used for over four decades to advance the Islamic Republic's strategic and ideological objectives. Those objectives have remained centred on three pillars: exporting the Islamic Revolution, supporting Muslim and anti-US movements and eradicating the state of Israel. In pursuit of these goals, the IRGC's role in nurturing militancy has ranged from manufacturing its own ideologically compliant militias – such as Hizbullah in Lebanon – to supporting grassroots groups with shared or tactical interests, from Hamas to the Taliban.

Yet, despite the rising threat posed by Iran's support for militant groups, governments and policymakers have been unable to determine exactly how aligned these nonstate actors are with Tehran and the extent of the IRGC's control over their actions. This knowledge gap has produced significant policy consequences, enabling Iran's leaders to use such militias to target governments in the region and attack Western positions – and with enough plausible deniability to prevent an international response.

The known unknowns when it comes to the extent of Iran's extraterritorial reach complicate any risk calculus attached to conflict with the regime. Estimates of the extent of Iran's so-called proxies range dramatically and, in all cases, are either exaggerated or too conservative.

When the West and its regional allies have sought to contain Iranian-backed militias, they have done so primarily through economic sanctions on Tehran, on the premise that the Islamic Republic's lack of funds will eventually curb its support of militant groups. But while economic sanctions have significantly weakened Iran's already ailing economy, they have not altered the regime's priorities. The number of Iranian-backed militias has increased, and their attacks on US military bases have continued.

Crucially, the one-size-fits-all sanctions approach overlooks the fact that while the relationships between Iran's regime and some of the groups it works with are based on material benefit and convergences of interests, other groups have much deeper connections with the Islamic Republic, rooted in a shared ideology, culture and worldview. Groups in the latter category have not only been manufactured by the Guard but have also embraced Tehran's narrow interpretation of the Shia Islamist concept of *velayat-e faqih*, the principle that gives Iran's supreme leader authority over Shia Muslims. To varying degrees, these groups accept ideological subordination to the supreme leader and the IRGC.

Understanding the roots of the relationships between Iran and its network of militias, and the nature of those relationships today, can highlight the limitations of an approach that relies on economic sanctions alone. The West and its regional partners will need greater and more concerted efforts to try to unravel or disrupt the links between Iran and those local militias that go beyond material self-interest.

The assassination in January 2020 of Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, which is responsible for Tehran's network of militias, has not resulted in a scaling back of Iranian-sponsored militancy. For more than two decades, Suleimani was regarded as the operational mastermind behind Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's ambition to paramilitarise the Middle East and create a pan-Shia state under his leadership as the supreme leader of all Shia Muslims. In doing so, he nurtured Shia militancy throughout the region and farther afield, creating and supporting militant nonstate actors.

Since Suleimani's death, commentators have suggested that the Islamic Republic and Iranian-backed militias have become significantly weaker and are in retreat across the Middle East, attributing the earlier expansion of Iran's militia network almost solely to Suleimani. But while Suleimani's leadership was instrumental in allowing the Quds Force to enter deeply contested terrain from Afghanistan and Iraq to Syria and Yemen, it is Iran's long-evolving militia doctrine that has guided the force's activities – and continues to do so. Irrespective of Suleimani's death and the strategic hit it dealt to Tehran, delivering this doctrine remains Iran's primary modus operandi abroad. There are no signs of the regime shifting focus, despite increasing domestic pressures.

UNPACKING IRAN'S MILITIA DOCTRINE

An effective policy that attempts to contain the threat of Iranian-backed militias, either by weakening the Iranian regime or by scaling back the IRGC's militia assets, needs to consider two factors. The first is the privileged status of the IRGC and its Quds Force within Iran's foreign policy and security apparatus, and the extent of direct support they receive from Tehran's soft- and hard-power actors in pursuit of Iran's militia doctrine. The second factor consists of the relationships between the IRGC and the militias themselves and the nature of its influence over their actions.

To address these two factors, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change has launched a programme of work on the IRGC and Shia militias, entitled *Recruit, Radicalise, Deploy: The IRGC and the Hizbullahisation of the Middle East*. This programme reveals how the Guard has expanded its reach across multiple territories and how it prioritises and provides support for different militias. Drawing on original primary sources, this programme will determine the nature of the IRGC's relationships with the plethora of militias it sponsors. Uniquely, this programme analyses Iranian-backed Shia militias through the lens of the IRGC to understand Iran's objectives in the past, now and into the near future.

This first report in the series unpacks Iran's militia doctrine – the foundation of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy by which Tehran has sought to expand its reach, influence and military capabilities. The doctrine has evolved through a process of trial and error since 1979 and been shaped by geopolitical realities and the experiences of various military commanders. The militia doctrine encapsulates Tehran's long-standing commitment to the paramilitarisation of the Middle East as a means to destabilise the region in pursuit of its ideological foreign policy objectives. The doctrine includes the policies, strategies, tactics and implementing infrastructure that the IRGC has developed to extend Iranian influence, radicalise support and advance its revolutionary cause through a network of militias, cells and operatives.

Understanding the genesis of this doctrine enables analysts and policymakers to identify its trends and draw out its procedural patterns. Fundamentally, though, the doctrine is a commitment that is bound to the existence of the Islamic Republic and has endured four decades and countless crises, political events and conflicts.

The militia doctrine is not restricted to hard-power actors but also uses Tehran's soft-power organisations and activities alongside militancy to achieve the regime's objectives. This includes intentional collaboration with – or the instrumentalisation of – Tehran's educational, cultural, humanitarian and diplomatic agencies where they play key roles in helping to recruit and radicalise militants and support covert operations. This doctrine has positioned Tehran to take advantage of vacuums and conflicts and provided a network in places where Iran would not otherwise have a presence. Crucially, embedding the militia doctrine as a central pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign and security policy has enabled the regime to use the paramilitary groups it sponsors to simultaneously advance its ideological ambitions and bolster its state deterrence.

KEY FINDINGS

- **A militia doctrine guides Iran's use of paramilitary groups and is designed to outlive the Islamic Republic.** The Islamic Republic's existence is based on an expansionist ideology that seeks to establish a pan-Shia Islamist state grounded in the authority of Iran's supreme leader. Through the militia doctrine, the clerical regime has a long-standing commitment to use militancy to achieve this ideological ambition, rooted in the Shia Islamist concept of the Imam and Shia Ummah. The doctrine is underpinned by the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, which provides the supreme leader with a mandate from God to rule with absolute authority over the ummah (the global Muslim community), extending his authority beyond Iran's borders. The network and infrastructure the IRGC has created in pursuit of this doctrine are designed to outlive the Islamic Republic. This means that if the clerical regime collapses, the IRGC could continue to advance the militia doctrine, albeit in an insurgency mode.

- **The IRGC – specifically, its Quds Force – is the main implementer of Iran's militia doctrine.** The IRGC and its extraterritorial Quds Force were founded with a constitutional mandate to enforce Iran's Islamic Revolution at home and abroad. An expert in insurgent warfare, the IRGC uses radicalisation and indoctrination to nurture a network of paramilitary cells and militias throughout the region. The IRGC is supported by the full foreign policy apparatus of the Iranian state.

- **The militia doctrine and the IRGC are fully supported by Iran's soft-power institutions and government agencies.** Tehran's soft-power organisations – its educational, cultural, humanitarian and diplomatic agencies – play critical roles in supporting the recruitment and radicalisation of militants, extending the IRGC's reach. Tehran's cultural, educational and religious centres are essential both for maintaining a presence overseas and for disseminating approved messages. These messages form a corpus of readily available propaganda that is both pro-regime and anti-American, anti-Israeli or both. The Quds Force has also embedded personnel in these organisations on whom it can draw, including for covert operations and the transportation of munitions and personnel.

- **Iran's militia network is not a homogeneous bloc, and only some groups are proxies.** Iranian-backed militias are made up of a combination of independently formed grassroots militias and IRGC-manufactured groups. Their objectives and priorities range widely, and their loyalty towards the regime can be complex, depending on their roots, leadership and commitment to *velayat-e faqih*. The spectrum of ideological alignment between independent grassroots groups and those that the Quds Force has manufactured heavily influences the allegiances and power dynamics between the IRGC and the militias it supports. The IRGC privileges groups that have sworn allegiance to *velayat-e faqih* and Iran's supreme leader as the ultimate authority over Shia Muslims.

- **IRGC-manufactured groups are the fastest-growing category of Iranian-backed militias and the greatest threat to regional stability.** These militias have embraced Iran's state-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology as a matter of existence, have approved leaderships and have proven instrumental to Iran's military response in, for example, Syria. Lebanese Hizbullah is the gold standard of the IRGC's manufactured groups and represents the most dangerous of Iran's proxies: fully aligned with the Islamic Republic's vision of a pan-Shia state and Khamenei's absolute authority over the Shia world and in perpetual opposition to Israel, the West and their Gulf allies. These manufactured groups are the IRGC's most valuable militia assets and constitute Iranian proxies.

- **The IRGC Quds Force has repeatedly supported groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda with which it has a conflicting worldview where it sees a tactical necessity.** Support of these groups forms one pillar of Iran's militia doctrine and is grounded in the transactional supply of weapons, training and logistical support to gain a tactical advantage. These groups do not constitute Iranian proxies, and the IRGC does not have control over their decisions. As US-Iranian tensions increased after 2003,

the Quds Force supported local Iraqi and Afghan militant groups, including those aligned to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, based on the shared goal of repelling US coalition forces. While support of these groups is the Quds Force's least favoured approach, the IRGC has kept – and will continue to keep – the option of working with movements that are otherwise its enemies in pursuit of its overarching goals.

- **The 2015 nuclear agreement and the easing of sanctions on Iran did not curb or moderate Iranian-backed militancy or result in the disbanding of the militia doctrine.** The premise that Iran would moderate its commitment to creating and sponsoring militias due to the thaw in US-Iranian relations after the 2015 nuclear deal and sanctions relief for Tehran was false. The number of militias created by the IRGC surged after this period, and the Guard's presence abroad peaked, with the Quds Force expanding its operations in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The common mischaracterisation of Iran's use of militias as part of its deterrence strategy ignores the reality that the regime's militia doctrine existed long before international sanctions and the escalation of tensions between the US, Israel and Iran.

- **The formal militias that make up Iran's network of militias and proxies are only the tip of the iceberg.** The life source of the militia network is composed of the soft-power organisations that ensure the long-term survival of the ideas and worldview that underpin the militia doctrine and *velayat-e faqih*. The network of soft-power levers at the Islamic Republic's disposal has been developing its capability for decades. The threat is now far more than the regime itself.

Without understanding the foundations of Tehran's militia doctrine, there is a risk of viewing the corpus of Iranian proxies and Shia militias as a uniform bloc and of failing to recognise the spectrum of allegiances and the power dynamics between the regime and its militia network. This has led to the terms 'proxy' and 'Shia militia' being used interchangeably and has significantly handicapped policies to counter their attacks and destabilising activities.

This report puts forward a model to distinguish between Iran's militia assets in terms of their ideological alignment with the regime and the characteristics of their formation. This model exposes the limitations of Tehran's militia doctrine and, importantly, demystifies the so-called resistance axis. By distinguishing those groups that subscribe fully to Iran's Shia Islamist worldview, policymakers can better understand the extent of the IRGC's influence over different groups. That will allow governments to identify where a counterterrorism, counterextremism and counterinsurgency approach is needed alongside traditional sanctions to counter Shia militancy in the Middle East.

To dismantle the threat of Shia militancy in the region, a full-scale hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency effort is necessary. This requires, among other measures, a coalition of alliances that understand the complex local dynamics through which the Iranian regime has won local allegiances. It also means sustaining a campaign to gain popular support in Iran's sphere of influence alongside a concerted effort to disrupt the institutions through which the regime permeates societies on a day-to-day basis.

To dismantle the threat of Shia militancy in the region, a full-scale hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency effort is necessary.

Beyond the Middle East, this will require governments and policymakers to monitor and potentially sanction organisations like Al-Mustafa International University and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, which Iran uses to support its militancy. These soft-power outfits not only play critical roles in recruiting and radicalising foreign fighters but also enable the Quds Force to have a presence abroad under a supposedly legitimate guise for its covert operations, including assassinations and terrorist plots.

The Ideological Foundation of Iran's Foreign Policy

Conventional opinion has tended to view the foundations of Iran's foreign policy – in particular, its use of militias – through the lens of deterrence and state influence, the characteristics of a traditional nation-state. This viewpoint is particularly dominant in today's context, with commentators and policymakers alike linking Tehran's tactical support of regional militias to its perception of threats emanating from a proxy war with Saudi Arabia, US-Iranian tensions, international sanctions and the prospect of an Israeli strike.

This connection was one of the main arguments used by proponents of a nuclear deal with Tehran during the negotiations in 2013–2015. Advocates of this view believed that Iran's regional use of militias was part of a strategy of forward defence and deterrence and suggested that a thaw in US-Iranian relations and the negotiated removal of sanctions would moderate Iran's regional behaviour. This viewpoint resonated in particular with those who support the so-called reformists among Iran's political elite.

Iran's militia doctrine is a central part of the Islamic Republic's ideological DNA.

However, it took just 13 days after the 2015 nuclear agreement was signed for Iran's supreme leader to debunk this theory. Khamenei, who holds absolute authority in the Islamic Republic, rejected the idea that the deal – or, indeed, any material reward – would alter Iran's support for its regional militias. Indeed, staying true to his word, the IRGC doubled down on its use of militancy in the region in the months and years that followed. As this report reveals, the number of Iranian-backed militias surged during this period.

This Western mischaracterisation of Iran's use of militias, which dominates public discourse, ignores the reality that the regime's militia doctrine existed long before international sanctions and the escalation of tensions between the US, Israel and Iran. In fact, this doctrine is a central part of the Islamic Republic's ideological DNA.

VELAYAT-E FAQIH (GUARDIANSHIP OF THE ISLAMIC JURIST) AS FOREIGN POLICY

Velayat-e faqih – the Shia Islamist principle that transfers absolute power to Iran's supreme clerical leader – plays a crucial role in shaping the internal politics of the Islamic Republic, but it is also central to defining the regime's actions abroad. *Velayat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the Islamic jurist, is as much a foreign policy principle as it is a model of governance.[2]

The principle's architect, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, never designed it exclusively for Iran. Rather, it was formed as an expansionist concept to rule over the entire Shia ummah. Like other Islamist ideologies, the Shia Islamist ideology that was born out of Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution rejects the concept of the nation-state and instead divides the world between the *dar al-Islam* (land of Muslims) and the *dar al-Kufr* (land of infidels). In turn, proponents of this ideology – Iran's ruling clergy – believe that the land of Muslims and the Islamic ummah should be ruled under an Islamic state that enforces God's law – what the clergy perceives as sharia law. Whereas Sunni Islamists – from the Muslim Brotherhood to the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda – envisage this Islamic state as a caliphate, in which the Islamic lands and people are ruled by a caliph according to Sunni custom, in Shia tradition the Islamic state takes the form of an imamate. The imamate can be ruled over only by one of the 12 divinely ordained Shia imams, who Shias believe are the rightful descendants of the Prophet Mohammad.

In the absence of the Twelfth Imam, who Shias believe was withdrawn into occultation in AD 874, Khomeini designed *velayat-e faqih* to provide a divine mandate for a supreme clerical leader to rule over all Muslims worldwide as the Hidden Imam's deputy and God's representative on Earth. This concept, which was enshrined in Iran's constitution in 1979, has been embraced by many Iranian-backed Shia militias. It provides the supreme leader with a mandate to use armed jihad to expand the territories of Islam as a precursor for the return of the Hidden Imam. This principle of the Imam and Shia Ummah has enabled the clerical regime to establish authority over receptive Shia communities worldwide, with the goal of creating a pan-Shia state centred on Iran's supreme leader (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: "The Territories of the [Shia] Resistance Empire"

KHAMENEI'S IDEOLOGICAL VISION FOR A PAN-SHIA STATE

Translation: "The West Asia region is the territory of the [Shia] Resistance Empire with its capital the Islamic Republic, and as I have already announced, the response to assassination of the commander of the resistance [Qassem Suleimani] will be carried out from all over the empire." Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi, Secretary General of Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba

Description: This propaganda image was developed by IRGC proxy in Iraq, Harakat al-Nujaba, and was shared by multiple Shia militias throughout the region as well as being recirculated by the official media channels of the IRGC.

Source: al-Nujaba.ir[3]

The IRGC teaches recruits this concept as part of its internal indoctrination programme. Recruits are taught that "there is no difference between [the supreme leader], the Prophet and the [infallible Shia] Imams" in terms of administering the affairs of, and being responsible for, the Islamic ummah. Given this divine mandate, the supreme leader, "like the Prophet and the Imams", has a responsibility to "spread Islam to other countries and regions of the world". To achieve this, IRGC members are told the supreme leader is permitted to "use the public funds and public assets of the community to develop military, political, cultural and other programmes for expanding and exporting Islam to other countries".[4] This ideology underpins the IRGC's activities abroad and the militias it has created that subscribe to this worldview. *Velayat-e faqih* therefore gives Iran's supreme leader a divine mandate to expand the land of Islam to bring about the return of the Hidden Imam.

Since 1979, both of Iran's supreme leaders – Khomeini and Khamenei – have interpreted this concept to pursue a foreign policy based on three core ideological objectives: exporting the Islamic Revolution, supporting Muslim and anti-Western movements, and eradicating Zionism and the state of Israel.[5]

Exporting the Islamic Revolution

According to Iran's 1979 constitution, the objective of exporting the Islamic Revolution is "to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community (ummah)" for "all Muslims to form a single nation". In turn, the constitution underlines that the Iranian supreme leader retains the leadership not only of Iran but also of the Islamic ummah.[6] This concept highlights that "the Constitution provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad". The IRGC's internal training manuals, which are used to radicalise recruits, define "exporting the revolution" as its fighting objective.[7]

Supporting Muslim and Anti-Western Movements

This worldview projects Iran and the US as two opposing fronts: good *(jebeh-e hagh)* and evil *(jebeh-e batel)*. Within this framework, Western countries, especially the US, are part of the so-called domination axis, while Iran is the leader of the resistance axis. Anti-Americanism and hostility towards the US remain at the crux of the Islamic Republic's worldview.

The Iranian constitution states that foreign policy will be based on the "defence of the rights of all Muslims [and] non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers" and that Iran "supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe".[8] There is a hierarchy for the support Tehran gives to such movements: first Shia groups, then broader Muslim movements, followed by anti-Western or anti-US groups.

Eradicating Zionism and the State of Israel

Like other Islamist ideologies, the Iranian regime's Shia Islamist worldview regards Israel as an illegitimate, oppressive and usurping entity created in the heartland of the Muslim world for the West to achieve its supposed colonial goals across the Muslim world. In turn, Tehran has affirmed the liberation of Palestine through the destruction of Israel as its key Islamic duty. The Islamic Republic's continuous refusal to use Israel's name, instead referring to the country as the "Zionist regime" or "Zionist entity", is emblematic of the clerical regime's rejection of the Jewish state's right to exist.

IRAN'S OVERARCHING MILITARY TRADITION

Like its foreign policy, Iran's overarching military tradition is heavily shaped by ideology. The blueprint of the Islamic Republic's armed forces – in particular, the IRGC – is moulded by ideology and human capital, rather than technology or advanced weaponry. Khamenei has explicitly outlined that the military should always base its calculations and decision-making on the religious devotion of its personnel above all other factors.

> **The blueprint of the Islamic Republic's armed forces is moulded by ideology and human capital.**

The effectiveness of this strategy was demonstrated to Iran's clerical establishment during the Iran-Iraq War in 1980–1988. Religious indoctrination enabled hundreds of thousands of ill-trained and ill-equipped volunteers to be deployed in kamikaze-style human wave attacks, with these men welcoming death as martyrdom in the path of God. This strategy underpinned Iran's model of warfare as a way to compensate for its inferior military technology and weaponry. Although this resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, it helped the Islamist regime ingrain a culture of martyrdom into society, which has contributed to ensuring the regime's continuity.

The belief that Iran's military personnel should be religiously devoted above all other factors is reinforced by the Quranic verse that "a pious man will win in a confrontation with ten unbelievers".[9] In turn, the clerical regime has sought to create a military strategy based on religious principles and ideological *(maktabi)* values.

The foundations of Iran's overarching strategy are rooted in its Shia Islamist ideology – specifically, the accounts of Alavi and Ashurai. Alavi refers to Ali, the first divinely ordained Shia imam, whose forces lost the Battle of Siffin in AD 657 against Muawiyah, the first caliph of the Umayyad empire. The Shia critique suggests that Ali was defeated because his army did not display loyalty to his orders. This is manifested in Iran's militia doctrine as a demand for total obedience to the supreme leader and his orders *(velayat-e madari)*.[10]

By contrast, Ashurai's account is derived from the date on which Imam Hussein, the third Shia imam, led his small band of fighters against the massive army of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid at the Battle of Karbala in AD 680. Although Hussein knew defeat was preordained, he sacrificed himself and his men for the cause of defending true Islam by taking on the Umayyads. The IRGC adopted this logic – that oppressors must be challenged, whatever the outcome – into Iran's militia doctrine through a belief in acting on a religious commandment regardless of potential outcomes *(taklifgarai)*.[11]

Relying on Shia militias can also be understood through the lens of the regime's ideology. In the framework of the Imam and Shia Ummah, every Shia Muslim – regardless of nationality, ethnicity or language – is part of the Shia ummah and a soldier of the Shia Hidden Imam and, until the Hidden Imam returns, a soldier of his representative, the supreme leader.

IRAN'S MILITIA DOCTRINE

With the militia doctrine, Iran's supreme leader and clerical regime commit to achieve their ideological foreign policy objectives through militancy. Rooted in the concept of the Imam and Shia Ummah, it is the enduring ideological policy position of the Islamic Republic to develop and sustain a foreign policy based on the use of militias and cells.

The militia doctrine encapsulates Tehran's long-standing commitment to the paramilitarisation of the Middle East as a means to destabilise the region in pursuit of its ideological foreign policy objectives. This doctrine includes the policies, strategies, tactics and implementing infrastructure that the IRGC has developed to extend Iranian influence, radicalise support and advance its revolutionary cause through a network of militias, cells and operatives. By understanding the genesis of this doctrine, it is possible to identify its trends and draw out its procedural patterns. Fundamentally, though, the doctrine is a commitment that is bound to the existence of the Islamic Republic and has endured four decades of countless crises, political events and conflicts.

The militia doctrine is not restricted to hard power but combines hard- and soft-power activities to pursue the Islamic Republic's ideological goals to maximum effect. This involves the intentional coordination of the IRGC and Tehran's soft-power organisations, such as educational, cultural, humanitarian and diplomatic agencies, to help recruit and radicalise support. These resources have positioned the IRGC to take advantage of political vacuums and conflicts and extend its network and influence to places it would not otherwise reach. Crucially, embedding the militia doctrine as a central pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign and security policy has enabled the regime to use the paramilitary groups it sponsors to simultaneously advance its ideological ambitions and boost its state deterrence.

> **It is the enduring ideological policy position of the Islamic Republic to develop and sustain a foreign policy based on the use of militias.**

Iran's militia doctrine has evolved through a process of trial and error since 1979. It has been shaped by the supreme leaders' positions, geopolitical realities and the experiences of various military commanders.

When it comes to the IRGC's manufacture of its own groups, there are three components to the militia doctrine: recruitment, radicalisation and deployment. These components require an enabling ecosystem and infrastructure.

First, recruitment involves the Islamic Republic's soft-power organisations – including cultural, educational, religious, humanitarian and diplomatic bodies – using the international privileges afforded to Iran as a nation-state to establish a physical presence in a target nation. The creation of a presence enables the regime to move operatives to host nations under an apparently legitimate guise. This physical presence allows the process of recruitment to begin, with Tehran targeting individuals and communities susceptible to the regime's ideology. To entice recruitment, the regime uses other mechanisms, including material compensation and welfare provision.

Second, the establishment of a physical presence in a target nation enables a process of radicalisation – the dissemination of ideological propaganda and indoctrination, which are necessary to serve the regime's hard-power objectives. Established cultural, educational and religious centres are essential for the dissemination of approved content and messages. These can be in the form of officialised written manuals, libraries with selective translations of religious, cultural or political books and pamphlets, or screenings and lectures. These materials form a corpus of readily available propaganda that is both pro-regime and anti-American, anti-Israeli or both.

The aim of these centres is to engage and retain new recruits and promote the values of the Islamic Republic. A gradual process of radicalisation enables the regime to identify individuals or groups that embrace or show enthusiasm towards the core tenets of Tehran's worldview. Over time, the initial process of light indoctrination, which often occurs in the host nation, results in direct opportunities to visit Iran, allowing for more rigorous indoctrination.

Third, formation and deployment are contingent on several factors, including resources, capacity and geopolitical realities and vacuums. Where possible, the IRGC will seek to manufacture a militia that can be deployed if necessary. To achieve this, the Quds Force, the IRGC's extraterritorial branch, has created a network of training headquarters and camps dedicated to insurgency and guerrilla warfare that can enable the training of new and existing recruits. These facilities are effectively dedicated to professionalising militancy – a process the IRGC has maintained since 1983, when it created the Ramazan Headquarters as a central function to coordinate its foreign fighters. As well as receiving military training, recruits undergo a parallel process of indoctrination to ensure commitment to *velayat-e faqih* and its core principles. These headquarters are all led by Quds Force commanders and are often supported by Hizbullah operatives.

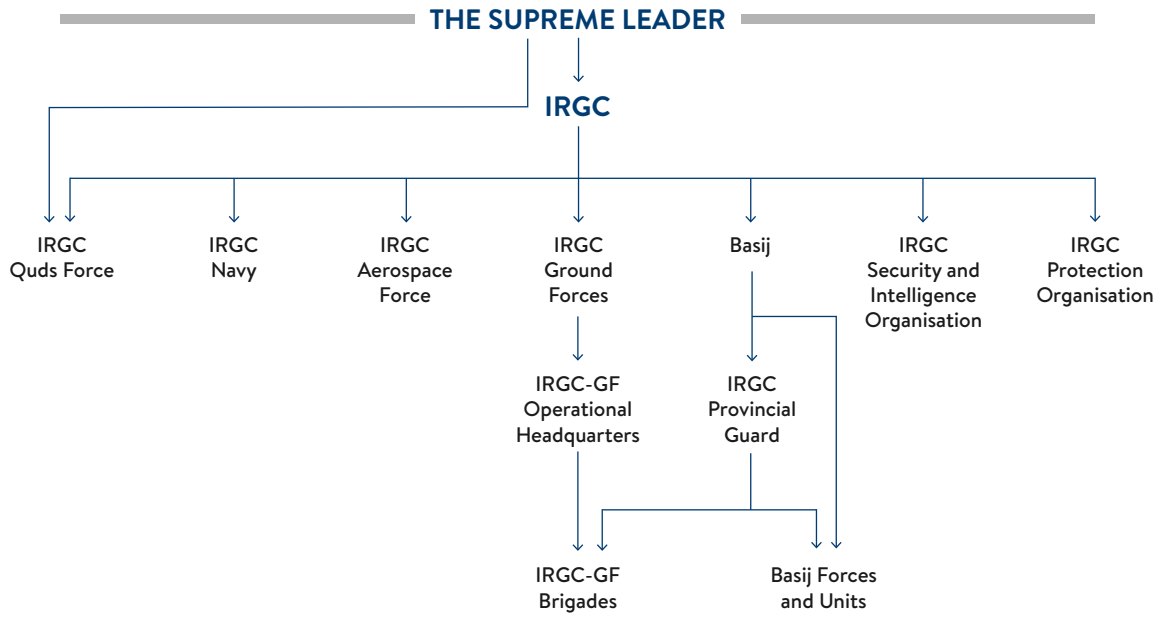
Crucially, in addition to facilities in Iran itself, the IRGC has established a network of headquarters and camps across the Middle East in countries like Iraq and Syria.[12] In doing so, the IRGC has designed an infrastructure that can function even if the clerical regime in Iran collapses. If the IRGC does not have the capacity, the resources or a vacuum to manufacture a militia, the Islamic Republic will seek to form a cell that can be deployed overseas and activated when necessary. These recruits almost always receive training in Iran.

THE IRGC: ARCHITECT AND EXECUTOR OF IRAN'S MILITIA DOCTRINE

The Islamic Republic uses a range of institutions to achieve its ideological foreign policy objectives. Chief among these is the IRGC, which has become Tehran's most valuable asset for implementing its militia doctrine, especially in the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS



Source: TBI analysis

Established by Iran's constitution in May 1979, the IRGC was created as an ideological army tasked with embedding the Islamic Revolution's Shia Islamist ideology at home and exporting it overseas. Formed from several Islamist *(hizbullahi)* militias that came together to consolidate the clergy's grip on power in postrevolutionary Iran, the IRGC was never a conventional state military force but rather an institutionalised militia. Iran's constitution states that the IRGC has an "ideological mission of jihad in God's way, that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law [sharia law] throughout the world".[13]

This mission would lead to the formation of the Quds Force to support the regime's extraterritorial objectives. The Quds Force would become Tehran's most important foreign policy institution and the lead architect of Iran's militia doctrine.

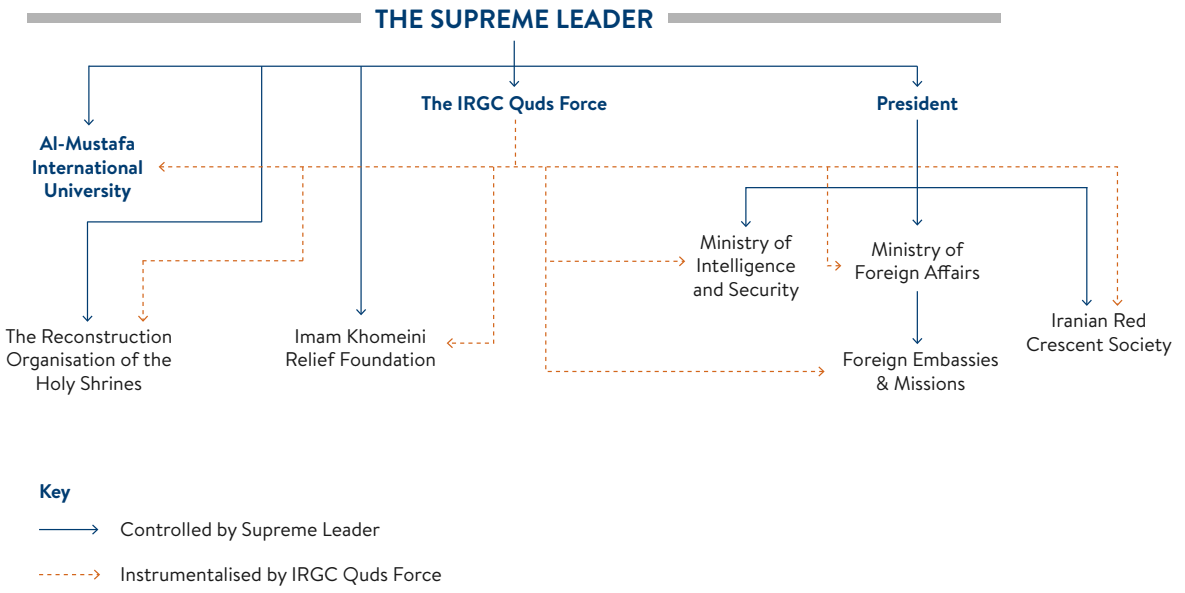
Institutions at the Quds Force's Disposal

The Quds Force has access to both soft- and hard-power tactics for advancing the Islamic Republic's militia doctrine in the Middle East and across the globe.[14] Over the years and with the supreme leader's full backing, the Quds Force has embedded personnel in state institutions and the regime's soft-power organisations (see Figure 3).

Among other bodies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, Iran's Red Crescent Society and Al-Mustafa International University all host IRGC-affiliated personnel. The Quds Force has made full use of the international rights and privileges of these apparently legitimate institutions to implement Tehran's militia doctrine and its missions abroad. Beyond their support of the IRGC, these institutions also advance the regime's ideological objectives via their own mandates as parts of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy apparatus.

Figure 3

THE KEY SOFT-POWER INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS INSTRUMENTALISED BY THE IRGC



Source: TBI analysis

The IRGC and the Evolution of Iran's Militia Doctrine

The means through which the Iranian regime has used the IRGC to recruit, radicalise and deploy paramilitary forces have evolved and expanded over time. Today, the IRGC has more control domestically than it has ever had; this is in part due to how central it has become to preserving the ideological ambitions of *velayat-e faqih*, both at home and abroad.

Iran's militia doctrine has evolved in four distinct phases: the formation of the IRGC and its extraterritorial activities (1979–1989); the creation of the Quds Force and its soft-power capabilities (1989–2001); the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks and the mercenary era (2001–2011); and the war in Syria and the expansion of IRGC-manufactured militias (2011 to the present). Since 1979, the IRGC has sought to enact the regime's foreign policy objectives by co-opting and creating militias in support of Iran's Islamist cause. The Islamic Republic has experimented over time with a range of infrastructure, strategies and tactics that form its militia doctrine today.

THE FORMATION OF THE IRGC AND ITS EXTRATERRITORIAL ACTIVITIES, 1979–1989

The period immediately after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution was undoubtedly the most zealous, ambitious and disorganised phase of Iran's sponsorship of Shia militancy. The newly formed IRGC was quick to demonstrate the prioritisation of its extraterritorial objectives, despite the domestic fragility of the new republic. In doing so, the IRGC underscored that exporting the revolution was not only symbolically important but also a working objective of Iranian foreign policy.

In this first phase, the Guard embarked on an ambitious capacity-building programme, establishing much of the operational infrastructure in play today. The IRGC also took the first critical steps towards professionalising its use of militancy abroad.

Operationalising the Ayatollah's Ambition

To implement Khomeini's grand vision to export the Islamic Revolution, the IRGC created the Liberation Movement Office (LMO).[15] The LMO's mandate was to cultivate ties among and provide assistance to Islamist groups across the Muslim world that were "fighting for freedom from the servitude and fetters of Western and Eastern imperialism and global Zionism".[16] To achieve this, the LMO worked closely with the leaders of multiple insurgent movements, providing them with a safe haven in Iran for ideological and military training.[17] One outcome of the LMO's work was the establishment of the Arabian Peninsula Liberation Front in Tehran to act as a hub dedicated to exporting the Islamic Revolution to the Arabian Peninsula. This office was tasked with creating a network that would export the revolution to the Gulf states, not least Saudi Arabia, in a move that would catalyse the rupture of Iranian-Saudi relations.[18]

The IRGC also established an International Relations Unit (IRU) to support its foreign activities. The IRU was charged with forming extraterritorial units, such as the IRGC's Lebanese Guard, Iraqi Guard and Afghan Guard. These units comprised Islamist foreign fighters who had vowed allegiance to Khomeini as the supreme leader of Islam and were committed to exporting the revolution to their respective countries.[19]

Afghanistan and the Islamist Fight Against the Soviets

Afghanistan was the first foreign territory for the IRGC to test out its capabilities abroad. Instability in the country after the Soviet-backed coup of April 1978 and the Islamist revolt that followed in 1979 provided the perfect vacuum for Iran's clerical establishment to export the Islamic Revolution. As early as May 1979, the IRGC's LMO crossed the border from Iran into Afghanistan to recruit Afghans – especially from Shia Hazara communities – into IRGC-organised militias to fight the Red Army.[20]

The IRGC's LMO and IRU simultaneously began to recruit, radicalise and train Shia Hazara Afghan refugees living in camps across Iranian cities, such as Kashan, Qom and Tehran.[21] These efforts were bolstered by several Afghan Shia clerics who had vowed allegiance to Khomeini and were willing to use their mosques and religious centres to recruit and indoctrinate young Afghan men.[22] From the start, the IRGC saw radicalisation and ideological indoctrination, rather than just military training, as fundamental to achieving its objectives. The Guard was able to draw on ideological motivations to recruit young Afghan militants to fight for the Islamic Republic's cause.

The success of this model resulted in the formalisation of this process, which became an integral part of Iran's militia doctrine, with IRGC-sponsored clerics playing a pivotal role in the recruitment and indoctrination of Guard fighters. The Afghan men recruited in 1979 were organised into the first IRGC-manufactured militia and fought alongside the Sunni Afghan mujahideen forces under the banner of the Shia Mujahideen.

Reality Strikes: How the Iran-Iraq War Shaped the Militia Doctrine, 1980–1988

Priorities were forced to shift when the army of then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September 1980. The Iran-Iraq War had a fundamental impact on the fabric of the Islamic Republic. It became a cornerstone of the new regime's identity and heavily influenced Iran's military strategy for decades to come.

The eight-year conflict would have a lasting impact on Iran's militia doctrine, with the Islamic Republic making two key adjustments. The first was that the ayatollah redeployed his radicalised foreign fighters in defence of Iran's territorial borders. The second was that the regime met the challenge of operating as both a state and a revolutionary cause – sustaining traditional and ideological warfare on multiple fronts simultaneously.

> After the Iran-Iraq War, the militia doctrine served the revolutionary objectives of both the clerical regime and Iran as a nation-state.

As Baghdad invaded, Tehran was facing a far superior military force and had no professional armed force itself. The IRGC redeployed its newly formed Shia militias from Afghanistan, loyal to Khomeini, to the Iranian front line and scaled up its recruitment of Afghan refugees in Iran. The regime replicated this model to recruit dissident Iraqi Shia refugees who had fled Saddam's Iraq and vowed allegiance to Khomeini as the leader of the Islamic world. Tehran learned that paramilitary groups could provide far wider benefits to the regime, not only in exporting the revolution, but also in furthering the deterrence strategy of the Iranian state. After the Iran-Iraq War, the militia doctrine served the revolutionary extraterritorial objectives of both the clerical regime and Iran as a nation-state.

The Iranian regime experienced the union of ideological cause and political state with another invasion, this time in Lebanon in June 1982. Just months after Tehran had succeeded in pushing the Iraqi army out of Iranian territory, Israel invaded Southern Lebanon. This sparked a seismic debate in the IRGC: Should Iran prioritise the defence of its own territories in the war with Saddam? Or should it commit to fighting the Zionists, the Shia Islamists' ideological enemy, and securing the liberation of Jerusalem?

Khomeini opted for both, and the IRGC vowed to "engage in a face-to-face battle against Israel, the primary enemy of Islam and of Muslims".[23] Iran was operating as both a state and a cause in one. As a state, the regime recognised the rational need to defend its borders against Iraq; but as an Islamist cause, it chose to also prioritise its ideological objectives: eradicating Israel and keeping Lebanon, a Shia-majority country, in its sphere of influence. This second conflict led to the creation of one of the Islamic Republic's most valuable foreign assets – Lebanese Hizbullah – and underscored the value of ideologically aligned paramilitary forces that embraced *velayat-e faqih* to the regime's foreign policy goals.

The Emergence of Hizbullah: From Loyal Cell to Ideological Militia

The formation of Hizbullah in Lebanon in 1982 has proven to be the greatest strategic investment Iran's clerical leaders have made to date. The organised method by which the IRGC manufactured Hizbullah became the gold standard of Iran's militia doctrine – and a template the regime has sought to replicate across the Middle East and beyond.

Despite the ongoing war with Iraq, the IRGC deployed its forces to Lebanon within just five days of the Israeli invasion.[24] Tehran was well aware that its mission to "remove [Israel] from the face of the world" would require a long-term presence on Lebanon's border with Israel, and the Guard was well placed to achieve this.[25] Many senior members of the IRGC had trained in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley before Iran's 1979 revolution and had personal ties with the grassroots Shia Amal Movement in Lebanon – not least its militant wing, which was composed mainly of members of the movement's Islamist faction. After Iran's revolution, Amal's Islamist wing was de facto operating as an Iranian cell, with its members tacitly embracing *velayat-e faqih* and recognising the authority of Khomeini as their leader.

As the Israeli invasion began in June 1982, Tehran tasked the IRGC unit in Lebanon with splintering this loyalist cell from Amal and transforming it into an IRGC-manufactured militia: Hizbullah.[26] Hizbullah would not only subscribe theoretically to Iran's Shia Islamist ideology and *velayat-e faqih* but also embrace the ideology practically, by recognising the authority of Iran's supreme leader as the leader of the Shia ummah, subordinate to Tehran and the IRGC.[27] Senior IRGC commanders co-wrote and edited Hizbullah's 1985 charter, which is still in use today.[28]

To coordinate between Tehran and this newly manufactured paramilitary group, Khomeini appointed then Iranian President Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini as supreme leader in 1989, as his representative to Hizbullah. Creating the option to form a splinter group by supporting cells of radicalised loyalists within existing paramilitary movements has become a cost-effective and ingrained tactic of the IRGC. The regime would use this method again and again with varying levels of success in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq and Syria in its efforts to 'Hizbullahise' the region and territories beyond.

Professionalising the Militia Doctrine: The Creation of the Ramazan Headquarters

The next game-changing advancement of Iran's militia doctrine was the establishment of the Ramazan Headquarters in Tehran in April 1983. Having expanded its military assets and extraterritorial influence at an unprecedented rate, the IRGC set up the headquarters as a central function to coordinate its foreign fighters, operations in Iraq and other missions abroad. The headquarters would operate as a centre dedicated to guerrilla warfare and insurgency, streamlining coordination among IRGC units and Iranian-backed militias, and marked Tehran's first major step towards professionalising Iran's militia doctrine.[29] The centre had significant political influence from its founding, with Khamenei, who also chaired Iran's Supreme Council of Defence, appointed to oversee its operations.[30]

Until the creation of the Ramazan Headquarters, Iranian-backed Shia militancy was disorganised and often poorly executed. In Paris in 1980, for example, the IRGC failed in its attempt to assassinate Shapour Bakhtiar, the last Iranian prime minister under the shah, with the support of its Lebanese cell. The Ramazan Headquarters was able to turn such failures into successes within a few months: in October 1983, the headquarters successfully coordinated the Hizbullah bombing of US barracks in Beirut, the deadliest terrorist attack on an American target before 9/11.

Aside from supporting militia operations abroad, the Ramazan Headquarters would house five special IRGC insurgency units, including two IRGC-manufactured militias. The first, the IRGC Badr Corps, comprised Iraqi Shia dissidents and became Tehran's main force for exporting the Islamic Revolution to Iraq, not least before the 2003 US-led invasion.[31] The Badr Corps was the armed wing of a new Iraqi Shia Islamist political movement, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.[32]

The second militia, the IRGC Abozar Brigade, was formed from Afghan fighters who had initially been recruited to fight the Soviets. These foreign fighters were not mercenaries engaged for material reward. Rather, they were ideologically motivated fighters who were extensively indoctrinated at the Ramazan Headquarters. Indeed, one of the key tasks of the headquarters was to carry out soft-power activities to advance the regime's hard-power objectives. This included working with Iran's state television and radio to disseminate ideological propaganda and assigning IRGC-affiliated clerics to each militia as ideological trainers for indoctrination.[33] The model, devised by the Ramzan Headquarters, would be inherited by its successor organisation, the Quds Force, and came to underpin the IRGC's entire militia doctrine.[34]

THE CREATION OF THE QUDS FORCE AND ITS SOFT-POWER CAPABILITIES, 1989–2001

The death of Khomeini in 1989 and the end of the Iran-Iraq War the previous year represented a turning point for the Islamic Republic and a rebalancing of domestic priorities alongside ideological foreign policy objectives. It is often said that Tehran abandoned its goal to export the revolution after Khomeini's death and the end of the war. To support this claim, commentators and policymakers alike point to the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, the forefather of so-called reformism in the Islamic Republic, and to the sidelining of Khamenei, the new and underqualified supreme leader.

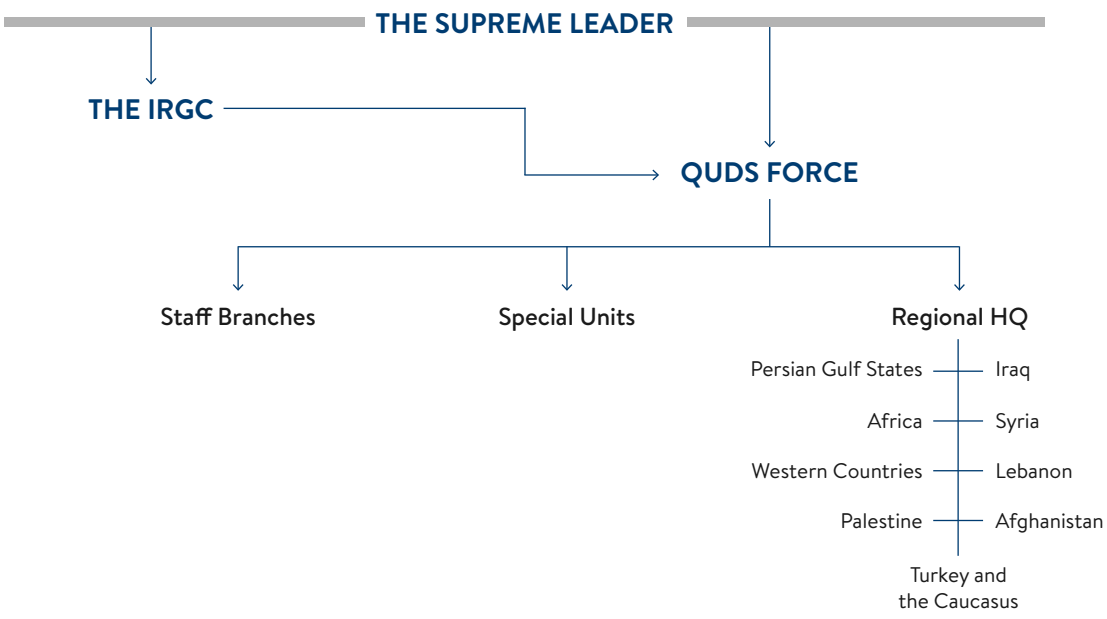
It is true that Khamenei suffered from a lack of both charisma and clerical credentials and often found himself in Rafsanjani's shadow during his first administration from 1989 to 1992. Rafsanjani sought to implement a pragmatist agenda. Having inherited a shattered postwar economy, the president pushed for economic liberalisation, privatisation and improved relations with Iran's Arab neighbours, not least the Gulf states that had actively supported Saddam during the Iran-Iraq War. At the same time, Rafsanjani's administration downplayed the zealous revolutionary rhetoric of the previous decade.

However, it would be a profound mistake to suggest that this led the Islamic Republic to abandon its export of the revolution. While Khamenei was often supportive – or, at least, quiet in his criticism – of Rafsanjani's policies, the one area in which the new supreme leader felt confident to push back was the regime's military activity, particularly when it came to militancy. Khamenei outright rejected Rafsanjani's suggestion to merge Iran's military capabilities, the regular armed forces (*Artesh*) and the IRGC. As commander-in-chief of Iran's armed forces, Khamenei ordered the expansion of the IRGC and called for the creation of a new and separate branch dedicated to the regime's extraterritorial activities. This new branch was to be called the Quds (Jerusalem) Force, an explicit reference to the IRGC's goal to liberate Jerusalem through the destruction of Israel.

The Quds Force was created by consolidating several units, all of which had been involved in exporting the revolution, and included the Ramazan Headquarters (see Figure 4). Under the leadership of General Ahmad Vahidi, the Quds Force was charged with implementing all of the IRGC's extraterritorial activities and became the principal executor of Iran's militia doctrine.

Figure 4

THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE QUDS FORCE



Source: TBI analysis

In parallel, Khamenei advocated the idea of Iran as the mother of all cities of the Islamic world *(Umm al-Qura-ye Jahan-e Islam)*. During the Third International Islamic Unity Conference in 1989, the ayatollah declared that "today the Islamic Republic of Iran is the *Umm al-Qura* [mother of all cities] of Islam and the unity axis of all Muslims".[35] According to the principle of *Umm al-Qura*, "after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Iran became the leader of the Islamic ummah" and "all Muslims have a responsibility to regard the guardianship and leadership of [Iran's supreme leader] as the only leader of the Islamic ummah".[36] In essence, Khamenei sought to position himself as the leader of the Islamic ummah and shift the centre of Islam – for all Muslims – from the Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina to the Shia holy city of Qom in Iran.

The creation of the Quds Force as a separate branch of the Guard shows that the Islamic Republic's appetite for militancy had increased, not declined. Khamenei saw Iran as the centre of the Islamic world, himself as the leader of the Muslim world *(rahbar-e mosalmanan-e jahan)* and the Quds Force as his armed force in all Muslim lands. Ensuring the growth of the Quds Force became a top priority for Iran's new supreme leader – and the stronger it became, the stronger he became. This calculus would result in the Quds Force becoming the most influential branch of the IRGC.

The Quds Force's First Taste of Militancy: The March 1991 Iraq Uprisings

The Quds Force's first experiment abroad was in Iraq after the end of the First Gulf War in 1990–1991, when US-led coalition forces expelled Saddam's army from Kuwait. Although Rafsanjani officially announced Tehran's neutrality during the conflict and condemned both sides, the Quds Force began to provide limited assistance to Iraq's March 1991 uprising, in which thousands of Iraqi Kurds and Shias revolted against Saddam's regime after he was forced out of Kuwait. The IRGC sent a small contingent of its Badr Corps to Iraq to assist the uprising in an action that resulted in bloodshed and defeat.[37]

The Quds Force deliberately kept its involvement in Iraq's 1991 uprising limited for several reasons, including a lack of experience, pressure from Rafsanjani's camp to improve relations with neighbouring Gulf states and the strength of Saddam's forces. The last of these factors frustrated Tehran. For Khamenei as the self-proclaimed leader of Shia Islam, control over Iraq – home to Shia Islam's holiest sites – was an absolute necessity. But Saddam's increasingly authoritarian grip over Shia communities in Iraq made it all but impossible for the Quds Force to export the Islamic Revolution to the Shia heartlands.

The Iranian regime's failure in 1991 pushed the Islamic Republic's activities in Iraq underground. The Quds Force established a network of cells that could be activated should Iraq's Baathist regime ever collapse. This investment would later pay dividends for Tehran.

The Failed Hizbullahisation of the Western Balkans: The Bosnian War, 1992–1995

The Quds Force's first real experience of warfare was on European soil. The outbreak of the 1992–1995 Bosnian War, in which Serbian forces turned their weapons on the local Bosnian Muslim population, presented the Quds Force with an opportunity to deploy its forces to carry out its mandated mission of supporting oppressed Muslim populations. Learning from its Hizbullah experience in Lebanon, the IRGC also believed that the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina presented an opportunity to establish a permanent presence in Europe. Khamenei had seen how strongly Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against British Indian author Salman Rushdie had resonated with European Sunni Muslims in the wake of Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*. Khamenei was confident that the Bosnian crisis created a fertile opportunity to export the Islamic Revolution to Europe.

The Bosnian War would shape the Quds Force's identity and Iran's militia doctrine for years to come.

The Bosnian War would shape the Quds Force's identity and Iran's militia doctrine for years to come. Unable to freely transport its forces onto European soil, the Quds Force coordinated with the office of the Iranian presidency and used the cover of Iran's Red Crescent Society to deploy its forces to Bosnia and Herzegovina. These fighters armed, trained and indoctrinated Bosnian militants fighting against Serbian and Croatian forces under the banner of the Bosnian Mujahideen.[38]

Likewise, in direct violation of the arms embargo on the former Yugoslavia and the no-fly zone over Bosnia and Herzegovina imposed by the UN in the early 1990s, the Quds Force began transporting munitions on Iranian civilian aircraft. As well as deploying its own resources, the Quds Force also requested that Hizbullah support its activities, adding a further 400 militants to the Western Balkans.[39] The instrumentalisation of Iran's humanitarian and civilian-aviation sectors would become a hallmark tactic of Iran's militia doctrine and was critical for later operations, not least in Syria.

In addition to using Iran's humanitarian organisations to transport fighters to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Quds Force used these agencies to send hundreds of Bosnian Muslims to Iran to undergo rigorous ideological indoctrination.[40] In doing so, the force hoped these radicalised recruits would return to Bosnia and Herzegovina and form an IRGC-organised militia committed to exporting the Islamic Revolution to Europe. Despite these efforts, the regime soon realised that it was unable to overcome the sectarian Sunni-Shia divide and failed to establish a European outpost.

The Bosnian experience demonstrated the limits of Tehran's influence over Sunni populations, leading to a fundamental recalculation of both Iran's grand ambition and its militia doctrine. The Guard effectively created a hierarchy for its support of so-called liberation movements abroad: at the top were Shia groups, then other Muslim movements, followed by anti-Western outfits. Geopolitical realities would temper this hierarchy, resulting in Tehran often picking and choosing its battles. Iran's leaders also learned that Europe's security structures meant the continent was not fertile territory for the hard export of the Islamic Revolution. Afterwards, the Islamic Republic focused on expanding supposedly legitimate soft-power activities that could aid the Quds Force's operations.

The Quds Force Develops Its Soft-Power Capability

From the 1990s onwards, the Islamic Republic's soft-power organisations, particularly its charitable foundations, became key components of the Quds Force's influence and Iran's militia doctrine. For example, in Lebanon in 1991, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation helped expand the Quds Force's ideological and propaganda operations and provided social and welfare benefits to impoverished Shias, in an effort both to cultivate support for Hizbullah and to aid recruitment.

The use of soft-power organisations – including Iran's cultural, educational, religious, humanitarian, diplomatic and civilian agencies – became a crucial tool for the Quds Force to expand its footprint across the world, particularly in regions in which it would not otherwise be present. The Quds Force used the international privileges afforded to Iran as a nation-state to establish nominally legitimate physical presences abroad. Through these channels, the Quds Force recruited, indoctrinated and organised local forces – as cells or militias where possible – and coordinated operations under the radar of foreign intelligence services.

During the 1998–1999 Kosovo War, for example, the Quds Force used funds provided by Iran's Culture Centre in Belgrade to form a cultural society that recruited ethnic Albanians and sent them to Iran to study the regime's militant Islamist ideology, with the goal of establishing a base of support in Europe. Incorporating the Islamic Republic's soft-power organisations into Iran's militia doctrine would open up new frontiers for the Quds Force, not least in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and Europe.

CASE STUDY:

The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation

The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF) is an ideological charity that has been at the forefront of the IRGC's use of Tehran's soft-power agencies in support of Iran's militia doctrine. The IKRF has propagated the Islamic Republic's ideology and aided the Quds Force's efforts to recruit and indoctrinate foreign nationals, sending many to Iran for training and radicalisation. Today, the organisation has global operations covering Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and South America.[41]

Formed after the 1979 revolution, the IKRF was originally a domestic charity supporting underprivileged Iranians. However, it soon created an international branch that enabled it to operate abroad as a supposedly legitimate Iranian humanitarian organisation. A charitable organisation under Khamenei's direct control, the IKRF has repeatedly been used by the Quds Force to disseminate the Islamic Republic's ideology under the guise of providing humanitarian relief.

The IKRF's managing directors are often IRGC members and coordinate not only with Quds Force commanders but often also with the leaders of various Iranian-backed Shia militias to help advance their goals, with the ultimate objective of exporting the Islamic Revolution via soft-power means.[42] In 1991, the IKRF assisted Hizbullah in establishing its first television news network, Al-Manar TV, which today has over 10 million viewers.[43] Similarly, in Southern Lebanon, the IKRF built several schools and education centres, incorporating the clerical regime's extremist ideology into the curriculum.[44]

Rising Tensions in Afghanistan: Enter Qassem Suleimani

The second decade of Iran's militia doctrine took place against a backdrop of rising tensions between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist extremist group with an alternative Islamist ideology, which had seized power in Afghanistan in 1996. The increasing likelihood of conflict prompted Khamenei to ensure the Quds Force's leadership had the right expertise on Afghanistan, and in late 1997, General Qassem Suleimani was appointed to command the force.[45] He was chosen because of his network and experience, having started his career in Afghanistan by assisting the Islamist Mujahideen in ousting the Soviet army.

When Kabul fell to the Taliban in 1996, Suleimani crossed the border again and used his network to establish an Afghan resistance headquarters in the province of Panjshir. Tensions reached their peak in 1998, when the Taliban executed 11 Iranian diplomats.[46] This prompted Tehran to provide ongoing support to the anti-Taliban fighters of the Northern Alliance – an investment that would have long-term benefits for Tehran in Afghanistan.

While Suleimani was chosen for his expertise on Afghanistan, his legacy would be determined in the Arab world and the Shia heartlands of Iraq and Syria. In the coming decades, he became Tehran's mastermind in taking on the US in Iraq, providing a lifeline to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and, importantly, pursuing Khamenei's ambition to create a pan-Shia state. In the process, Suleimani developed his own personality cult as the archetypal militant, inspiring Shia fighters to pick up arms for Khamenei's cause. Describing himself as merely a "soldier of the *velayat* [supreme leader]", Suleimani embodied the values of Iran's clerical regime and had a lasting impact on the militia doctrine.[47]

THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11 AND THE MERCENARY ERA, 2001–2011

The mainstream narrative on Iran in the immediate wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US often begins with Tehran extending an olive branch to Washington by cooperating with operations in Afghanistan in 2001, only to be branded as part of the "axis of evil" months later by then US President George W. Bush. According to many commentators, the "axis of evil" metaphor, which placed Iran alongside other state sponsors of terrorism like Iraq and North Korea, fundamentally altered the Iranian calculus from rapprochement to conflict with Washington.[48] Thereafter, the mainstream thinking goes, Tehran decided to target the US and destabilise its operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003.

This conventional view overlooks the previous two decades of IRGC investment in Afghanistan and Iraq, which had in essence laid foundations in readiness for the fall of the Taliban and Saddam. It also ignores the fact that Iran was developing a secret nuclear programme, which was always going to put Tehran on a collision course with Washington. Thus, Iran's initial decision to cooperate with the US in Afghanistan was born out of the short-term tactical objective to oust the Taliban, rather than a strategic shift in calculus that sought rapprochement with the US. In fact, this period demonstrated Tehran's willingness to go to extreme lengths to ensure US failure in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As Sir William Patey, British ambassador to Iraq from 2005 to 2007, said, "Iran wanted the US to fail in both Afghanistan and Iraq and invested a lot of effort in encouraging that failure."[49]

Ensuring the Failure of US-Led Democracy Building in Afghanistan and Iraq

The so-called War on Terror that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were in many ways a bittersweet moment from Tehran's perspective. In the long term, the removal of two of the Islamic Republic's nearest enemies – the Taliban and Saddam – had finally created the long-awaited opportunity for Khamenei to export the Islamic Revolution to Kabul and, most importantly, Baghdad.

> **The War on Terror and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were in many ways a bittersweet moment from Tehran's perspective.**

However, in the short term, the region's wars brought the US, an ideological enemy with far superior and technologically more advanced military capabilities, to Iran's doorstep. As US-Iranian tensions began to rise – not least with the exposure of Iranian's nuclear programme – Tehran was prompted to rethink its regional strategy, resulting in a shift in its militia doctrine. Aware of both the new threats and the opportunities, in a speech to Iran's military commanders, Khamenei called for "military strategists [to] formulate, design and prepare their warfare doctrine on the basis of the possibility of confrontation with the US".[50] The militia doctrine went into overdrive.

Suleimani, the new Quds Force commander, was instrumental in bringing this doctrine to Iraqi and Afghan streets. In essence, the Quds Force adopted a twofold approach. The first element was to take on the short-term threat by fomenting chaos in Iraq. The plan was to bog down US and coalition forces to prevent a future attack on Iran and ensure the failure of US democracy-building efforts in Iraq. For Khamenei, this latter point was of utmost importance. A flourishing US-made democracy in Iraq, a Shia-majority nation and home to Shia Islam's holiest shrines, would not only undermine his theocratic model of governance as the only just form of rule over Shia populations but could also set a precedent for democracy building in Iran against his authoritarian regime.[51]

The second part of Suleimani's strategy took a long-term perspective. He sought to use the chaos in Iraq to nurture Shia militancy with the goal of cultivating ideologically compliant militias – like the IRGC's Badr Corps – that would work to make Iraq part of Khamenei's pan-Shia state. The Quds Force adopted a diluted version of this strategy in Afghanistan, aiming to make the coalition forces bleed on both its eastern and its western front.

Activating the Iranian Cell Network in Iraq

Drawing on past experience, the Quds Force made full use of the soft- and hard-power capabilities available to it for operations in Iraq. Having raised the prospect of a US invasion of the country, the Quds Force was granted $26 million to strengthen the IRGC Badr Corps, a critical component for implementing Suleimani's plan in Iraq.[52] As US-led troops arrived in Baghdad, senior Quds Force officials and hundreds of Badr militants would covertly cross the border into southern Iraq and connect with Iranian cells in the city of Basra. This network of cells would support the transport of Iranian weapons into Iraq to back the fight against coalition forces and secure Iraq for Iran.

The Quds Force used the full capabilities of the militia doctrine in Iraq. It leveraged the Islamic Republic's soft-power organisations to recruit and deploy Iraqi clerics, who had studied in Iran's seminaries and embraced the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, to help fill the power vacuum after Saddam's collapse. Under the supervision of Suleimani, Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim, the former chief of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, became the main coordinator for sending Iraqi Shia clerics to export *velayat-e faqih* to the Shia heartlands.

The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation soon established a presence in all of Iraq's 11 Shia provinces, effectively operating as a recruitment centre for Shia militias.[53] Ironically, the arrival of Iranian charitable organisations in Iraq was initially welcomed by US and British forces, as they thought that the Iranian nongovernmental organisations were offering stability.[54] Only later did it become clear that the Khamenei-run charities were an ideological front and played a key role in supporting the IRGC's operations, from recruitment efforts to the transportation of munitions.[55]

The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Friend: Localised Militias and Convergences of Interests

The most significant development in this period of Iran's militia doctrine was the IRGC's need to supplement ideologically motivated militias with those that were exclusively driven by material and tactical benefits. This marked the start of what can be described as the mercenary era. Tehran took this decision because its demand for groups to target US-led forces outweighed its own supply. Out of necessity, the Quds Force began to support grassroots militias, some of which – including al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan – were both ideologically opposed to Tehran and actively hostile towards it. As one IRGC commander commented, the "Quds Force would pay anybody who wanted to attack the US and coalition forces, regardless of their ideology or views towards the Islamic Republic".[56]

Until 2006–2007, this mercenary tactic was a central feature of the IRGC's militia doctrine, designed to inflict maximum harm on the coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Quds Force began to train, arm and finance local Iraqi and Afghan militant groups that shared the goal of attacking US and British forces. In many ways, this placed the Quds Force in new territory, as it started to cooperate with groups without the ideological alignment that had typified most of its previous militia relationships.

This model served Iran's short-term objectives, and by 2006 the US-led forces were bogged down in both Iraq and Afghanistan and in no position to target Iran. In spite of the short-term usefulness of the mercenary tactic, however, the Quds Force soon realised that it could not rely on these groups for its longer-term objectives. While Tehran put a significant amount of effort into asserting its authority over these groups, in reality the Quds Force struggled to retain control, and many of these groups soon became liabilities.

A prime example was Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which was supported by the IRGC but never embraced *velayat-e faqih* and was Arab nationalist in nature.[57] Despite Sadr heavily relying on Iranian support, the Quds Force struggled to keep the Mahdi Army on a leash: it had its own agenda and sometimes acted in direct conflict with the IRGC's plans. In 2004, the Mahdi Army went so far as to agree to a ceasefire with US and coalition forces – a truce that was against Tehran's will and would be broken within months.

To solve the problem of an uncontrollable client, the Quds Force set out to manufacture its own Shia militia groups in a return to its preference of supporting groups that were ideologically subordinate to the ayatollah and, by extension, the IRGC. Just as the IRGC had been able to create Hizbullah in Lebanon as a splinter group from the loyal Islamists in the Amal Movement, so Tehran had de facto cultivated a loyal pro-Khamenei cell in the Mahdi Army, which was led by Iraqi Shia cleric Qais al-Khazali.[58] On the orders of the Quds Force, Khazali and the pro-Khamenei cell of the Mahdi Army spilt from Sadr's group in 2004 to form a new group, which would formally operate as Asaib al-Haaq (the League of the Righteous) from 2006 onwards.[59] This group displayed greater obedience and loyalty towards Tehran and became one of its greatest Iraqi assets, conducting over 6,000 attacks on US-led forces in Iraq.[60]

Due to the tribal nature of Iraqi society, the Quds Force implemented a strategy of divide and rule to manage the diverse groups of Iraqi militants and confuse the coalition forces about the nature of the threat. By splintering militias and supporting multiple groups, the IRGC could keep a firmer grip on these groups and make them compete for Tehran's resources – often resulting in greater ideological subordination.

CASE STUDY:

Hizbullah's 33-Day War With Israel and Iran's Postwar Opportunism

Having successfully tested the Quds Force's insurgency strategy against coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, Suleimani was ready to implement this approach against Israel when war broke out again between Israel and Hizbullah in July 2006. This was another example of Iran's capacity to engage in conflict with vastly technologically superior enemies, both through direct confrontation and via its proxies.

Like before, the Quds Force used Iran's Red Crescent Society and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation to smuggle military equipment and weapons from Iran to Lebanon. Hizbullah's willingness to use civilians as human shields, conceal its arsenal and forces in underground bunkers and fire large numbers of rockets from densely populated urban areas was supported by its ideology: the group's glorification of martyrdom enabled it to sustain huge casualties.

In the case of the 2006 war, which lasted 33 days, it was the aftermath that would prove most valuable to Khamenei and the Islamic Republic. The conflict boosted Hizbullah's status across the Muslim world and, interestingly, galvanised support for Iran's clerical regime from Sunni communities. This was despite Tehran taking a sectarian approach to the conflict in Iraq in previous years. Tehran and Hizbullah would later be discredited again among Sunni Muslims by the unprecedented level of sectarianism that typified Iran's engagement in the Syrian Civil War. Nonetheless, the 33-day war taught the Islamic Republic that should direct conflict with Israel ever break out, Iran could garner at least some support from the Muslim world. The extent to which this will hold after the normalisation of relations between the Arab states and Israel in 2020 remains unclear.

More locally, Hizbullah's 2006 war with Israel also created a lasting opportunity for Tehran to strengthen its position in Lebanon. Iran's leaders consolidated their soft-power presence in the country and bolstered local support for Hizbullah. The absence of Western and regional development assistance in the postwar rebuilding efforts enabled Tehran to win the hearts and minds of the local Shia population. By 2009, Iran had implemented nearly 400 development projects in the Shia-populated areas of Southern Lebanon, building schools, religious centres, sports complexes and hospitals – all promoting Tehran's brand of Islamism.[61]

The Islamic Republic also spent significant resources to rebuild much of Southern Lebanon's destroyed infrastructure, including $100 million on reconstruction of the area's road network.[62] Underscoring the priority the Iranian clerical regime gives to advancing its ideological objectives overseas over the interests of the Iranian people is the war-torn infrastructure of Khuzestan, a Sunni-populated Iranian province. Devasted over 30 years ago in the Iran-Iraq War, much of this area remains underdeveloped to this day.

THE WAR IN SYRIA AND THE EXPANSION OF MANUFACTURED MILITIAS, 2011 TO THE PRESENT

The 2010–2011 Arab Spring uprisings triggered the most consequential phase in Iran's militia doctrine. In this most active period since the Quds Force's formation, Tehran mobilised the entire infrastructure of its militia doctrine throughout the region as it faced civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS while continuing its course with Iraq and Afghanistan and its aggression towards Israel.

From 2013 onwards, Iran also found itself engaged in nuclear talks with world powers, including, for the first time, the US. There were high hopes in the West that the nuclear negotiations and the easing of sanctions on Tehran would moderate Iran's militancy in the region. In the belief that Tehran's support of paramilitary groups was grounded in a strategy of deterrence and forward defence, advocates of the 2015 nuclear agreement believed that the thaw in US-Iranian relations would change Khamenei's calculus. But this view overlooked three decades of investment in an ideological objective and the genesis of Iranian-backed militancy. Not only did sanctions relief fail to scale back Iran's support of militancy, but from 2013 onwards, the number of militias directly manufactured by the IRGC also increased.

Syria: The Main Artery of Khamenei's Pan-Shia State

While Tehran initially welcomed the Arab Spring as an Islamic awakening, the 2011 Syrian uprising against Assad would become a nightmare for the regime. The conflict in Syria would be Tehran's biggest test.

Syria has long been the Islamic Republic's main supply route to Hizbullah in Lebanon, as well as to Palestinian militants like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which Tehran supports because of their shared interest in eradicating Israel. As the supreme leader's senior foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, declared, "Syria is the backbone of the [Shia] resistance [axis] against the Zionists."[63]

Syria also provides vital territory for Quds Force intelligence operations against Israel and offers Tehran a gateway to Europe via the Mediterranean. For Khamenei, the Syrian land bridge from Tehran to Baghdad to Beirut not only served a material purpose but also had a symbolic meaning: the removal of borders among the Shia ummah and the creation of a pan-Shia state centred on his leadership.

The 2011 Syrian uprising against Assad would become a nightmare for the Iranian regime.

The IRGC Arrives in Syria: Rescuing Assad's Regime

The Quds Force's involvement in Syria started immediately after the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian revolution. The IRGC deployed its personnel to advise and provide vital supplies to its Syrian arm, including weapons, funds and personnel. Learning from the Bosnian experience, the Quds Force used civilian airlines, including Mahan Air and Iran Air, to transport munitions and supplies through the airspace of neighbouring countries on a daily basis.[64] But by early 2012, the IRGC was forced to significantly escalate its involvement in what was now a full-scale civil war, with the Assad regime having lost control of almost 75 per cent of Syrian territory to opposition forces.[65]

The Quds Force urgently needed more manpower. Unlike in Iraq, where it could draw on grassroots militias for its short-term goals, the mercenary tactic was not a viable option in Syria, as there were no local groups that the Quds Force could co-opt. Tehran turned to its so-called resistance axis. On the orders of Suleimani, Lebanese Hizbullah was called on to support the Assad regime. Hizbullah was aware that any kind of intervention would be deeply unpopular to its domestic constituency in Lebanon; but just as it had done in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 and Iraq in 2003, the group followed Tehran's lead and deployed its fighters in defence of Assad. Hizbullah's intervention spoke volumes about its ideological subordination to Iran's supreme leader – and the Quds Force took note.

While Suleimani had been successful in convincing Hizbullah to intervene in Syria as early as 2012, the same could not be said of other militant groups that Iran had considered part of its resistance axis. In a move that surprised many, the Palestinian Islamist militia Hamas rejected Khamenei's call to intervene in Syria – despite the Islamic Republic having been Hamas's main supplier of arms and funding for more than three decades. That caused embarrassment and outrage in Tehran, which reacted by cutting its support for the group.[66]

The Quds Force Incorporates the Basij Model Into Its Overseas Militia Doctrine

From the struggle to control Sadr's Mahdi Army in Iraq to Hamas's refusal to intervene in Syria, when the IRGC had tried to operationalise groups it had not manufactured or militias that were not ideologically compliant, the results had been mixed. Despite supporting a broad range of nonstate actors, Tehran came to the conclusion that it could not rely on militants who had served its short-term interests. This led the Quds Force to make some radical changes to its approach.

The first major shift was the decision to incorporate the Islamic Republic's tried and tested model for suppressing domestic unrest – based on the Basij, a civil militia that enforces state control over society – into its overseas operations.[67] Suleimani called on IRGC commanders who were directly involved in suppressing Iran's protests to travel to Syria and support this effort. This led to the creation of the so-called Syrian people's Basij, also known as the National Defence Force (NDF).[68] Using the Iranian Basij as a model, the IRGC recruited, trained and armed Syrian youth into a volunteer militia that would protect regime-controlled neighbourhoods.[69] Like the Iranian Basij, the NDF recruited from almost all ethnic groups, including Alawite Shias, Christians and even some Sunni Arab tribal groups, who joined mainly for material profit.[70]

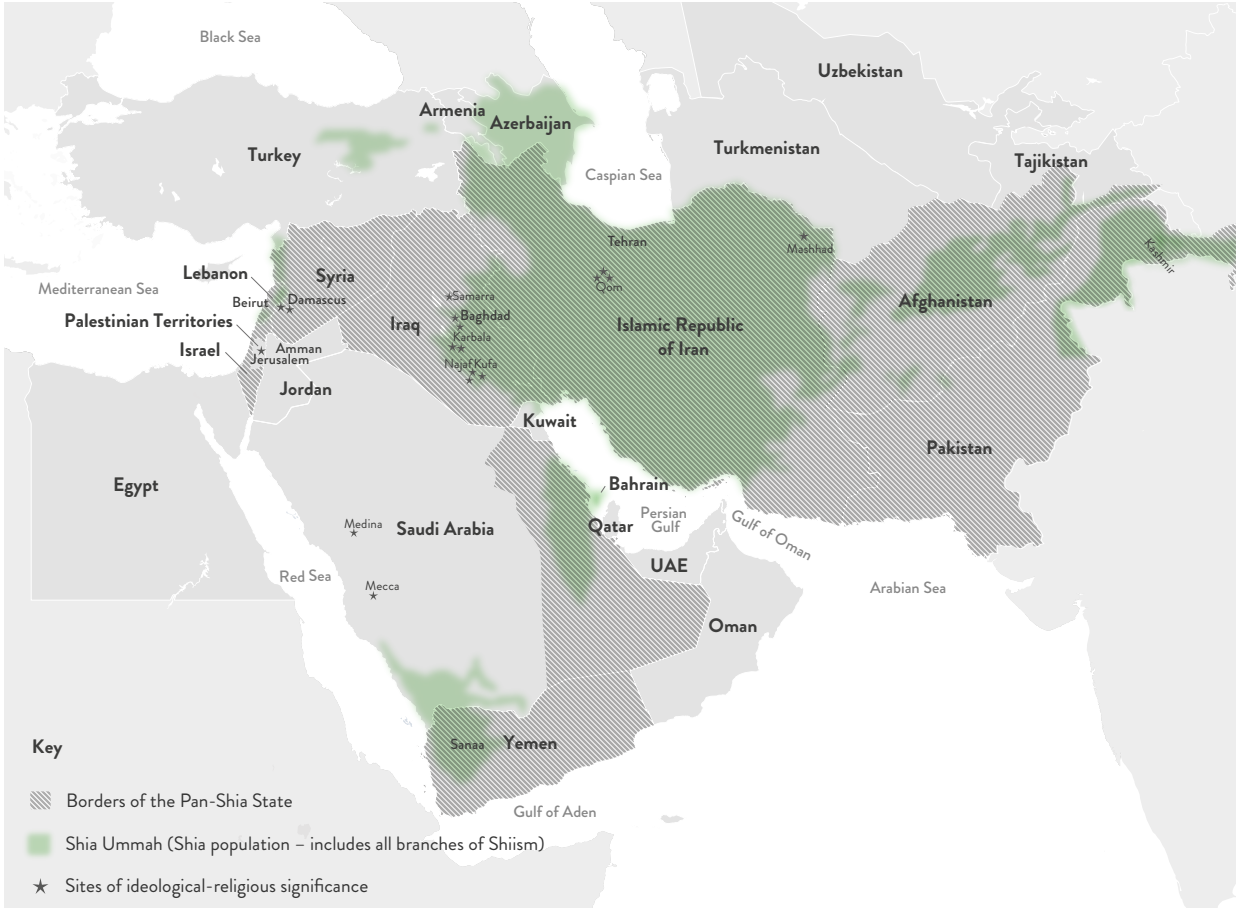
The deployment of the NDF eased the strain on the Syrian Army and the IRGC, which had previously faced the dual task of defending terrain while launching offensives to regain lost territory. Remarkably, the IRGC's plan for the NDF was not restricted to warfare but had five dimensions: military, security, economic, political and ideological-cultural.[71] Ideological indoctrination had proven vital in increasing the willingness of Iranian Basij members to suppress popular uprisings at home against the Iranian regime.[72] Although time was not in their favour, the Quds Force believed that ideological-cultural activities would be central to increasing the endurance in Syria of the NDF, which principally comprised poorly trained volunteers. Such activities could also aid the IRGC to establish a long-term presence in Syria.

The Defenders of the Shrines: The IRGC-Manufactured Militias

The second major shift came with the increasing sectarianism of the Syrian conflict. From April 2013 onwards, the Salafi-jihadi groups that had gradually hijacked the Syrian revolution began to target Shia shrines in Syria, including that of Sayyida Zaynab, the daughter of the first divinely ordained Shia imam, Ali. As fury gripped Shia communities throughout the world, Khamenei and the Quds Force saw an opportunity to leverage this ideological moment and transform the civil war into a full-scale sectarian conflict. Overnight, the narrative that accompanied Iran's presence in Syria shifted from preserving Assad to "defending the Shia shrines", which were under attack from what the regime described as the "apostate" enemy.[73] This enabled the Iranian regime to draw on its ideological influence throughout the region and call for support for its now holy cause (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

THE PAN-SHIA STATE AND THE UMMAH – DEFENDERS OF THE HOLY SHRINES



Source: TBI analysis

The Islamic Republic's "defence of the Shia shrines" became the perfect battle cry for the regime not only to deploy military personnel from the regular army, the IRGC and the Basij but also to recruit, radicalise and deploy foreign fighters as part of newly manufactured and ideologically compliant militias. To achieve this, the Islamic Republic also began to propagate the idea that there was an existential threat to Shiism and Shia Muslims from a "[Sunni] Arab-Zionist-Western axis" (*mehvar-e arabi-hebri-gharbi*).[74] This supposed conspiracy to eradicate Shiism, which was at the centre of the IRGC's communications strategy for recruitment, claimed that the US, Britain, Israel and Saudi Arabia had created ISIS and al-Qaeda to destroy Shiism and enable the West's domination of the Middle East.[75]

Salafi-jihadi attacks on Shia shrines provided the IRGC with the right ideological mandate to intensify its manufacture of militias.

The Salafi-jihadi attacks on Shia shrines in essence provided the IRGC with the right ideological mandate to intensify its manufacture of militias and turbocharge the doctrine with its preference for ideologically compliant groups. Thereafter, the prioritisation of IRGC-manufactured militias – the gold standard under the doctrine – resulted in this type of militia becoming the fastest-growing Iranian-backed paramilitary group. These militias fought under the banner of Khamenei as the representative of the Hidden Imam and as part of Khamenei's Shia Liberation Army under the ideological concept of the Imam and Shia Ummah.[76]

The Shia Liberation Army was made up of several newly manufactured militias that not only received arms and training from the Islamic Republic but also embraced *velayat-e faqih*.[77] Among the new groups created by the Quds Force, the most important were the Afghan Fatemiyoun, the Pakistani and Kashmiri Zeinabiyoun and the Iraqi Heydarioun.

The militia doctrine's soft-power assets played a critical role in the formation of these militias, and the Quds Force sought to ensure these fighters were ideologically aligned rather than fighting for material reward. Much coverage has been given to the way the Quds Force recruited the Fatemiyoun's membership from Iran's Afghan refugee population, but this tells only part of the story. The leadership and a significant number of the 10,000–20,000 Afghan Shias who formed the Fatemiyoun[78] were recruited from the cohort of Afghan clerical students studying at the Khamenei-run Al-Mustafa International University in the Iranian city of Qom.[79]

Likewise, in 2014, the Quds Force used the university to reach new nationalities and establish a new militia of Pakistani and Kashmiri Shia Muslims. Originally composed of Pakistani clerical students studying in Iran, the Zeinabiyoun has been deployed to Syria, where it began as a 24-man cell but had a fighting force of approximately 1,000 militants as of late 2015.[80]

The Iraqi militants fighting in Syria under the collective banner of the Heydarioun make up a large proportion of Iran's militias in the country. The Heydarioun is the label the IRGC has used to describe the pro-Khamenei Iraqi Shia militias – such as Asaib al-Haaq, Kataib Hizbullah and the Badr Corps – and a number of newly formed IRGC-manufactured Iraqi militias. The Iraqi Shia militants fighting under the banner of the Heydarioun were all trained by IRGC commanders at the Heydarioun Headquarters in Syria.[81]

From 2013 onwards, the push to create IRGC-manufactured militias led to the formation of several new groups to defend the Shia shrines, including Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas (5,000 fighters),[82] Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (7,000 fighters)[83] and Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba (10,000 fighters).[84] The newly formed groups consisted primarily of Shia Iraqis, including refugees in Syria.[85] Fighting under the collective banner of the Heydarioun, these militants had not only been prepared for the IRGC's mission in Syria but had also embraced *velayat-e faqih* to varying degrees.

CASE STUDY:

Al-Mustafa International University and the Quds Force – a Pool for Recruitment

Al-Mustafa International University is, to all intents and purposes, Iran's global engine of indoctrination and greatest soft-power asset abroad. Khamenei founded the university in 2007 as a merger of two Iranian religious organisations: the World Centre of Islamic Sciences and the Organisation of Seminarians. Khamenei directly controls Al-Mustafa, whose head is appointed by, and accountable to, him. The university's entire curriculum is based on the views and positions of Khomeini and Khamenei.[86]

Al-Mustafa's objective is to enrol and train non-Iranian students interested in Iran's revolutionary Shia Islamist ideology, or in becoming Shia clerics, to disseminate and advance the ideological goals of Iran's Islamic Revolution. As Ali Abbasi, the head of Al-Mustafa, asserts, the university's "mission is to organise religious schools in line with [spreading] the Islamic Revolution abroad".[87]

Al-Mustafa has more than 170 branches in and outside Iran and operates in over 80 countries, including in Asia, Africa and European cities such as London. The university and its branches have attracted more than 70,000 non-Iranian students from 130 countries.[88] All Al-Mustafa students must spend a year studying at the main branch in Qom to attain their qualifications. Graduates return to their home countries to work in local seminary schools or mosques as the regime's propagandists.

Al-Mustafa International University is one of the soft-power organisations the Quds Force has used to recruit, radicalise and organise non-Iranians into manufactured militias. According to a senior university figure, "Seyed Hassan Nasrallah [Hizbullah chief], Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr [late Saudi Shia cleric], Sheikh Zakzaki [head of Nigeria's Islamic Movement] and other influential people in the region are all graduates of Al-Mustafa".[89] The university is de facto affiliated with the Quds Force, providing a nominally legitimate cover to operate beyond Iran's borders.

The Quds Force and the Popular Mobilisation Units

The emergence of ISIS in Iraq from 2014 onwards constituted both a threat to the Islamic Republic – not least because the Salafi-jihadi group was vehemently anti-Shia, viewing Shia Muslims as apostates – and an opportunity for the Quds Force to further its ambitions in Iraq and entrench its Heydarioun militia in a post-ISIS Iraq. In 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shia clerical authority in Iraq, issued a fatwa calling for all Iraqi people to take up arms against ISIS.[90]

Sistani's fatwa led to the creation of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), or Hashd al-Shaabi.[91] The PMU is an umbrella militia that houses 40 paramilitary groups with more than 140,000 fighters. Armed, trained and ready to be deployed, the Heydarioun provided the foundation of the PMU. Among the units' Shia militias, some groups were more closely aligned to Iran than others who followed Sistani's Iraqi Shia seminary and have been described as Sistani loyalists.[92]

Despite the Quds Force supporting, training and equipping the PMU, only some militias in the umbrella groups were ideologically subordinate to the IRGC and Khamenei, such as Kataib al-Imam Ali (also known as the Imam Ali Battalions)[93] or Saraya al-Khorasani,[94] both of which were created in 2014. While other groups help Iran achieve its strategic goals, such as defeating ISIS or targeting US forces, only a few can be considered true Iranian proxies. These groups receive greater military support from the Quds Force as a consequence.

The creation of the PMU gave the Quds Force the upper hand in Iraq. This is because the Islamic Republic's ideological Shia militants, such as the Badr Corps and Kataib Hizbullah, which had previously been widely regarded as part of the sectarian problem in Iraq, could use the fight against ISIS to legitimise their presence on the Iraqi streets under the banner of the PMU. These groups' role in defeating ISIS emboldened militants to have a stake in post-ISIS Iraq – something that continues to destabilise the country. While Western policymakers have relied heavily on Sistani's ability to demobilise and contain the PMU, the extent to which he controls the units is partly determined by how much the Heydarioun dominates their internal dynamics.

The IRGC Quds Force and the Houthi Movement in Yemen: Proxy or Strategic Ally?

In 2014, the fall of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, to the Shia Houthi movement provided the Quds Force with another opportunity to extend its reach. The relationship between the Houthi movement (Ansarallah) and the IRGC dates back to 1979, when leaders of the Yemeni Shias from the Houthi tribe visited Iran to congratulate Khomeini on the creation of an Islamist state. During the 1980s, some Houthi leaders studied Iran's militant brand of Shiism in the Qom seminary in the hope that they could emulate the methods used in Iran's Islamic Revolution at home in Yemen.

When that moment came in 2014, the Quds Force rushed to deploy its advisers, mostly from its Lebanese and Iraqi Shia militias, to help the Houthis consolidate power.[95] But in spite of the long-standing ties between the Houthis and the Islamic Republic, as well as the Quds Force's material and strategic support for its militancy, the Quds Force struggled to enforce its authority over the group. While the grassroots Houthi movement was certainly influenced by Khomeini's revolution, the Houthis belong to the Zaydi subsect of Shia Islam – unlike the Twelver Imam Shia branch, which is followed by the Quds Force and other IRGC-manufactured Shia militias. This confessional divide limited Tehran's ability to gain the Houthis' undivided loyalty and influence over them.

So far, the Houthis in Yemen have not accepted Iran's interpretation of *velayat-e faqih* or the authority of Khamenei as the supreme leader of all Shia Muslims. The Houthi movement in Yemen can be best described as a strategic ally, rather than a proxy, of the Islamic Republic. But this is not to say that the Quds Force cannot alter this dynamic. The tactic of splintering existing groups to manufacture loyalist paramilitaries has been a consistent feature of Iran's militia doctrine.

This model has created some of Tehran's most powerful militias, such as Hizbullah in Lebanon and Asaib al-Haaq in Iraq, and could – at least in theory – be repeated in Yemen if the opportunity arises. There are hundreds of Yemeni students from Houthi tribes studying in Iran at places like Al-Mustafa International University, some of whom have explicitly displayed ideological loyalty to Khamenei.[96]

Shia Militancy in the Post-Suleimani Era

On 3 January 2020, a US drone strike killed Suleimani, the mastermind behind Iran's doctrine to Hizbullahise the Middle East. For more than two decades, the Quds Force commander had operationalised Khamenei's ideological ambition to create a pan-Shia state centred on his leadership.[97] In doing so, he nurtured Shia militancy across the region, creating and supporting some of the deadliest paramilitary groups in the world.

> **In 2020, Iranian-backed Shia militias not only grew in number but also became more aggressive in their small attacks.**

Since Suleimani's death, some commentators have suggested that Iran's regional militancy has been significantly weakened and is in retreat across the Middle East.[98] However, Iranian-backed Shia militias not only grew in number in 2020 but also became more aggressive in their small attacks, with hundreds of rocket assaults against US positions in the Middle East throughout the year.

There are also signs that the Quds Force has stepped up its efforts to manufacture new Shia militias and cells. In Bahrain, immediately after the signing in September 2020 of the Abraham Accords to normalise relations with Israel, the Martyrs of Quds Company emerged as a Shia militia with the objective to target Bahrain's rulers for making peace with Israel. Likewise, in Iraq, several new militias have appeared, including Saraya al-Muntaqim (Avenger Regiments), to avenge the killing of Suleimani and target US forces as part of the so-called resistance axis.

At the same time, the weakening of the IRGC's command and control over the plethora of Shia militias in the region could lead to a process of decentralisation. That, in turn, could make the nature of the Shia militia threat even more chaotic and harder to contain.

Figure 6

"WARRIORS WITHOUT BORDERS" QUDS FORCE PROPAGANDA POSTER

Source: Fars News[101]

Since Suleimani's death, Khamenei has allocated yet more prestige and resources to the Quds Force and the militia doctrine. This includes providing it with an additional €200 million ($245 million) in the immediate aftermath of the US strike despite Iran's ailing economy.[99] In a speech after Suleimani's death, Khamenei also praised the Quds Force and referred to it for the first time as the "Quds Guard", raising its status to an equal of the IRGC itself. According to Khamenei, "the Quds Guard is a force that looks everywhere ... its warriors are warriors without borders. They are present wherever they are needed; they sacrifice themselves to defend the sacred sanctuaries and shrines" (see Figure 6).[100]

While it is without question that the killing of Suleimani landed a huge blow to the Islamic Republic, it was Iran's long-evolving militia doctrine that guided the Quds Force's activities. Delivering this doctrine – irrespective of Suleimani's death and the strategic hit it has dealt – remains Iran's primary modus operandi abroad. There are no signs of the regime shifting focus, despite increasing domestic pressures.

A New Model: Demystifying Iran's Resistance Axis and the Allegiances of the Shia Militias

The IRGC established the Quds Force as Tehran's main instrument for achieving the clerical regime's expansionist foreign policy objectives. Iran's militia doctrine has evolved over time, driven by the Quds Force, both to support grassroots paramilitary groups with which it shares interests and to inspire, support and manufacture proxy groups that are ideologically aligned with the regime. This includes the so-called gold-standard groups that the regime now seeks to replicate at pace throughout the region: Lebanese Hizbullah, the Iraqi Badr Corps and the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade.

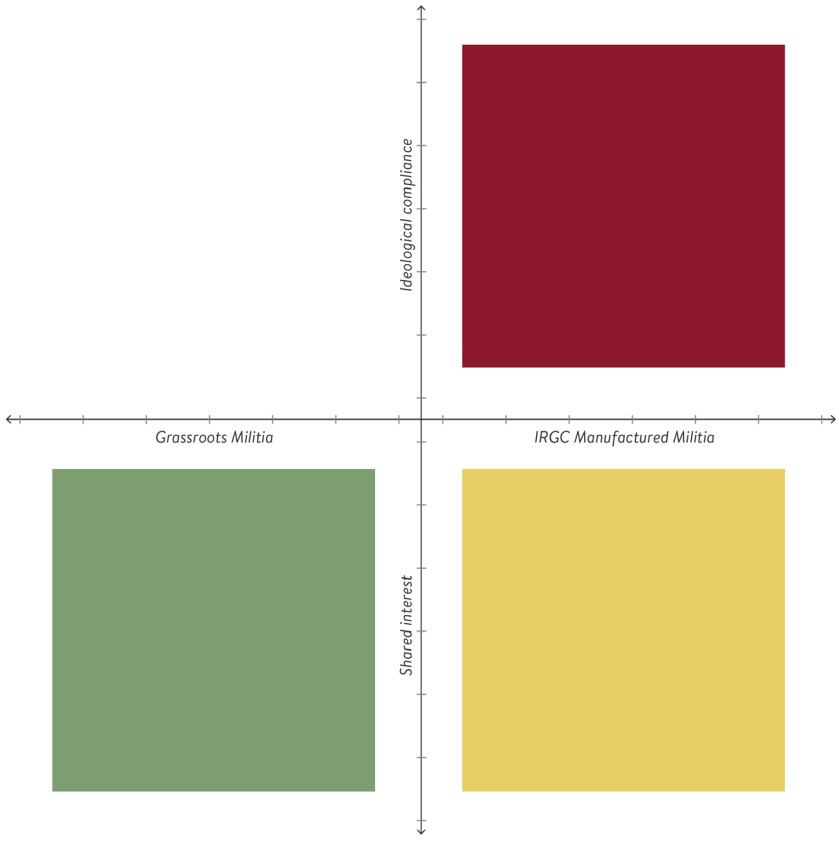
> Not all the militias Tehran supports are Iranian proxies under the control of the Islamic Republic.

Not all the militias Tehran supports are Iranian proxies under the control of the Islamic Republic, and not all recognise the authority of the supreme leader. Many have greater autonomy, although others embrace their subordination to Iran's ayatollah, its clerical regime, its ideology and the IRGC. Without understanding the foundations of Tehran's militia doctrine, there is a risk of viewing the corpus of Iranian proxies and Shia militias as a uniform bloc and of failing to recognise the spectrum of allegiances and the power dynamics between the regime and its militia network. This has led to the terms 'proxy' and 'Shia militia' being used interchangeably and has significantly handicapped policies to counter their attacks and destabilising activities.

The new model presented here offers a framework to more accurately determine the nature of the relationships, alliances and allegiances between Iran and the militias it supports. This model distinguishes between Iran's militia assets in terms of their ideological alignment with the regime and the characteristics of their formation (see Figure 7). In doing so, it exposes the limitations of Tehran's militia doctrine and, importantly, demystifies the so-called resistance axis. This model will enable decision-makers to prioritise and determine proportionate policies to minimise or mitigate the threat the militias pose.

Figure 7

A NEW MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING SHIA MILITANCY



Policy Recommendations:

- Sanctions targeting supply chains and the misuse of the Islamic Republic's soft power entities
- Comprehensive sanctions targeting the IRGC and the misuse of soft power entities
- Comprehensive sanctions targeting the IRGC and the misuse of soft power entities coupled with counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism approaches

Source: TBI analysis

By distinguishing those groups that subscribe fully to Iran's Shia Islamist worldview, policymakers can better understand the extent of the IRGC's influence over different groups. That allows governments to assess where a counterterrorism, counterextremism and counterinsurgency approach is needed alongside traditional sanctions to counter Shia militancy in the Middle East.

The model's horizontal axis indicates the means of the militias' formation. On the left are pre-existing grassroots militias, which were created independently of the IRGC; in the middle are those whose formation was inspired or supported by the Guard; and on the right are militias that were manufactured by the IRGC.

By distinguishing groups that subscribe fully to Iran's Shia Islamist worldview, policymakers can better understand the extent of the IRGC's influence.

The vertical axis marks the nature of the relationships between the militias and Tehran. At the bottom are militias with tactical and strategic interests in common with Tehran, while at the top are those that are fully ideologically aligned with the regime and subordinate to the IRGC. The latter group is further divided into militias whose subordination is theoretical and those who evidence ideological compliance in their practical day-to-day operations.

Based on this model, four types of Iranian-backed militia can be distinguished:

1. Grassroots militias with shared interests
2. Grassroots militias with ideological compliance
3. IRGC-manufactured militias with shared interests
4. IRGC-manufactured militias with ideological compliance

Understanding the placement of militias in this framework will enable tailored policy approaches to countering their activities, based on a nuanced appreciation of the IRGC's relationships with the militias and proxies in its orbit.

GRASSROOTS MILITIAS WITH SHARED INTERESTS

One pillar of Iran's militia doctrine is the tactical use of pre-existing grassroots militias with which the IRGC has shared interests but not necessarily a shared or even a compatible worldview or end goal. With relationships grounded in the transactional supply of weapons, training and logistical support in return for tactical advantage, the IRGC does not have direct command or control over these groups' strategic decisions. As such, the groups cannot be considered proxies.

An example is Hamas, which shares with the IRGC a strategic interest in the destruction of Israel and is one of Tehran's longest-serving beneficiaries. There are, however, significant limits to cooperation, as evidenced by the group's rejection of the IRGC's order to intervene in Syria despite nearly three decades of Iranian support.

The policy relevance of this category lies in the dependence of these relationships on material goods rather than ideology. That makes these militias more vulnerable to the disruption of supply chains or the impact of economic constraints. If the IRGC's Quds Force cannot provide financial or military support to these groups – as a result of international sanctions, for example – they will simply search for another patron. In policy terms, sanctions that target supply chains, including through the Islamic Republic's soft-power institutions and organisations, will have a material impact.

GRASSROOTS MILITIAS WITH IDEOLOGICAL COMPLIANCE

There is currently no evidence that the IRGC or Iran's clerical regime has successfully recruited pre-existing grassroots militias to its worldview and ideology. This is in part because the small number of militias that were shaped under Khomeini's ideals before Iran's Islamic Revolution – for example, the United Ummah, Peasants, Victors and Monotheists – merged to form the IRGC itself. It is also because the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, in its current form, was disseminated only after the Shia clergy's consolidation of the Iranian state.

IRGC-MANUFACTURED MILITIAS WITH SHARED INTERESTS

The IRGC is increasingly manufacturing its own militias to achieve its foreign policy objectives. These groups are almost always Shia, providing a degree of ideological alignment with the regime, but crucially, not all accept Tehran's interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*. An increasingly vital pillar of Iran's militia doctrine, the formation of these groups is heavily influenced by the IRGC: they often receive direct support from and, in some cases, are directly manufactured by the Quds Force. These groups' rejection of *velayat-e faqih* means they are not necessarily ideologically subordinate to Tehran, resulting in divided loyalties and placing limits on their usefulness to the regime.

The Iraqi Abbas Combat Division is a prime example. Shaped with the IRGC's support, this pro-clerical Islamist group has a high degree of ideological alignment with the Iranian regime but looks to Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq for its leadership. While such groups are Shia, they cannot be considered proxies in the true sense of the term.

Given the regime's rigorous soft-power promotion of its ideology and emphasis on radicalisation, it is plausible that under the right circumstances, these groups could come to embrace *velayat-e faqih* and become proxies of the Iranian regime. Most likely, this could be achieved through the IRGC's tried and tested tactic of creating splinter groups, often by identifying ideologically aligned leaders through their cultural and educational outreach activities. This was the case with Lebanon's Amal Movement, from which the IRGC was able to manufacture one of its most successful proxies: Lebanese Hizbullah.

Countering this type of group requires a much more nuanced and surgical approach than the application of sanctions that target supply chains. Any steps taken must limit the regime's ideological influence over militias through targeted sanctions against the Islamic Republic's soft-power organisations. Measures that target the IRGC will also be needed to curb the influence of the Quds Force over these groups.

IRGC-MANUFACTURED MILITIAS WITH IDEOLOGICAL COMPLIANCE

The most valuable assets in Iran's militia doctrine are its proxies. These are the militias that the IRGC has manufactured and that have embraced the Islamic Revolution's Shia Islamist ideology, including the principle of *velayat-e faqih* and the absolute authority of Khamenei and the clerical regime. While they enjoy a broad range of operational autonomy and agency, grounded in their ideological subordination to the regime and their shared values with the IRGC, the Islamic Republic retains a far stronger degree of command and control over these groups than those in other categories. It is this ideological connection that makes these manufactured groups proxies – not the fact that they are trained or equipped by the IRGC.

The regime recognises two types of proxy, based on their levels of ideological compliance: groups that practise theoretical compliance (*eltezaam-e nazari*) by accepting the theory of *velayat-e faqih* and those that display practical compliance (*eltezaam-e amali*) by not only accepting *velayat-e faqih* but also practically implementing the will of the supreme leader on a day-to-day basis. There is a strong correlation between recognition of the authority of Iran's clerical regime and subordination to the IRGC and its Quds Force.

Lebanese Hizbullah is the gold standard of the IRGC's militia doctrine and represents the most dangerous of Iran's proxies: it is fully aligned with the Islamic Republic's vision of a pan-Shia state, subordinate to Khamenei's absolute authority over the Shia world and in perpetual opposition to Israel, the West and their Gulf allies. These groups have the strongest allegiance to the Iranian regime and repeatedly prove their willingness to fight and die for the imam.

Lebanese Hizbullah is the gold standard of the IRGC's militia doctrine and the most dangerous of Iran's proxies.

These militias have the most strategic, long-term value to the IRGC in its efforts to secure its grip on the region. As such, the IRGC proactively seeks to radicalise these groups' fighters, working in collaboration with the Islamic Republic's soft-power organisations to indoctrinate them with the clerical regime's extremist Shia Islamist ideology.

Policies to counter these groups must include elements of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency and countering violent extremism. As well as contesting the IRGC's hard-power militia assets, policies should aim to sanction and dismantle the infrastructure Iran has built to sustain these groups. This includes the soft-power organisations that play critical roles in recruiting and radicalising local populations and enable the Quds Force to have a presence abroad under a supposedly legitimate guise.

Forthcoming Research

The Institute's programme *Recruit, Radicalise, Deploy: The IRGC and the Hizbullahisation of the Middle East* will continue to determine the ideological relationships between IRGC-manufactured proxies and the Islamic Republic. Forthcoming work in this series will examine the scale and reach of IRGC activity and the relationships between the Iranian regime and its network of militias.

The series will study Shia militias in the wider Middle East and beyond – from groups in Iraq, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula to those now active in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir as well as new frontiers for the Quds Force in Africa and Europe. The series will explore the full corpus of Iran's militia assets using Persian-language materials developed by the regime and offer a deep analysis of the militias' leaderships and structures.

Throughout the series, the model presented in this report will be used to plot over 50 Shia militias based on the IRGC's role in their formation and the extent of their ideological alignment with the regime and subordination to the IRGC.

About the Authors

SAEID GOLKAR

Saeid Golkar is a senior fellow at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. He is also an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Service at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Golkar received his PhD in political science from Tehran University in 2008 before moving to the US in 2010. He has taught and conducted research at Stanford University and Northwestern University.

His research focuses on international and comparative politics of authoritarian regimes, with an emphasis on the Middle East and North Africa. An authority on the Basij militia and the IRGC, his first book, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Post-revolutionary Iran* (Columbia University Press, 2015), was awarded the Washington Institute silver medal prize.

KASRA AARABI

Kasra Aarabi is an analyst in the Extremism Policy Unit at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, where he specialises in Iran and Shia Islamist extremism. He is also a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute.

His research includes Iran's military and security forces, with a focus on the IRGC and the Basij, Iran and Shia militias across the Middle East, Iran's domestic politics, the Islamic Republic's political elite and Iran's state-societal relations, Iran-UK affairs and Europe-US-Iran ties.

Aarabi is a native Persian speaker and a regular contributor to international print and broadcast media outlets, including the BBC World Service, Reuters, CNBC, *Newsweek*, *the Times*, *the Sunday Times*, *Foreign Policy*, Al Jazeera, *Arab News*, *Times of Israel* and *the Jerusalem Post*.

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