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THESIS

**THE QUDS FORCE MODEL: WHAT MAKES
IRREGULAR WARFARE EFFECTIVE IN
ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT**

by

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December 2020

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EFFECTIVE IN ASYMMETRIC CONFLICT**

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ABSTRACT

In recognition of asymmetric handicaps concerning military, political, and economic power with the United States, weaker revisionist states complement diplomatic pursuit of their national security objectives with irregular warfare (IW) tactics. These tactics include subversion, sabotage, political manipulation, terrorism, smuggling, and utilization of proxy forces to compete with adversaries while not escalating to the level of conventional armed conflict. One revisionist state, the Islamic Republic of Iran, utilizes its extraterritorial special operations force, the Quds Force (QF), to conduct IW against its stronger and near-peer adversaries. The QF has intervened in no less than six wars over the past thirty years in pursuit of Iran's goals. The unit provides us with a model for understanding how special operations forces can be utilized to coerce, deter, disrupt, and circumvent conventional strength of stronger foes.

This thesis examines the conditions that enable the QF's IW campaigns to be effective. While a great deal of this study concerns the tactics, techniques, and procedures utilized by the QF, this thesis also surveys the social and political factors among the belligerents that shape the nature of the conflicts and their outcomes. Through qualitative analysis of six case studies, this thesis finds three conditions for effective use of a weak state actor's special operations forces to compete with near-peer and stronger state actors via an IW strategy.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq
AQAP	Al-Qaeda Arabian Peninsula
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CTS	Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service
EFP	explosively formed penetrator
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IAF	Israeli Air Force
IDF	Israel Defense Force
IED	improvised explosive device
IRAM	improvised rocket assisted munition
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRP	Islamic Republican Party
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham
IW	irregular warfare
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KH	Katab Hezbollah
MOIS	Ministry of Intelligence and Security
NLF	National Liberation Front
NSO	national security objective
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
QF	Quds Force
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SNA	Syrian National Army
SOF	special operations forces
STC	Southern Transitional Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle

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I. THE PROBLEM

Despite three decades of competition and conflict with its regional neighbors and the United States, the Islamic Republic of Iran has demonstrated exceptional resiliency. Iran wields its instruments of national power (diplomatic, information, military, economic) to advance its national security objectives in a similar fashion as other nations in the Middle East. Iran is unique, however, in that it utilizes its special operations force to further its objectives in the region and globally on a level not demonstrated by any other nation. Iran's extraterritorial special operations force is the elite arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), known as the Quds Force (QF). The QF is a division of the IRGC that is responsible for expeditionary operations outside of Iran's borders. Its operations are mostly covert in nature and encompass numerous activities. Covertiness is defined by Austin Carson as "government-managed activity conducted with the intention of concealing the sponsor's role and avoiding acknowledgement of it."¹ Actions conducted by the QF include monetary, material, and training support to militant groups aligned with Iran's goals; sabotage; subversion; illicit funding schemes; and intelligence gathering.² Little was known about how the organization functions until several years ago, when more open source material became available.

The QF effectively operates at a level below or teetering on the threshold of armed conflict. Most QF operations occur in the "gray zone" of conflict, wherein the manner of the struggle exists somewhere between peace and traditional war. There exists significant evidence that QF operators, through support to various Iraqi militias, were responsible for over 600 U.S. soldier deaths in Iraq, failed assassination attempts in foreign countries,

¹ Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5.

² Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6; Michael Wigginton et al., "Al-Qods Force: Iran's Weapon of Choice to Export Terrorism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 153–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2015.1090053>; Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance.*, Report No. DIA_Q_00055_A (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), 57, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf.

illegal arms transfers, illicit financing, and internal subversion of Middle Eastern governments. These campaigns and operations are unconventional in nature and their construct follows that of an irregular warfare (IW) strategy. The definition and key aspects of IW are examined in the literature review of this thesis; however, IW can be best described as a form of warfare encompassing nontraditional mechanisms to subvert an opponent and gain control of a population.

Through qualitative analysis of several IW conflicts in which the QF have participated, this thesis determines the conditions that make QF's IW campaigns effective, and provides recommendations for curtailing QF activities. As the QF serve as a model for how a weak state actor may use its special operations in asymmetric competition, the analysis also provides a framework for countering future revisionist states that may follow Iran's blueprint for utilizing IW.

A. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This project addresses the following question: Under what conditions does a weak state actor's use of special operations forces and irregular warfare prove effective against strong state actors, or near-peer adversaries who are supported by a strong state actor? Although the data gathered in this research concerns operations and campaigns conducted or orchestrated solely by the Quds Force, it does serve as a model for how other states may use their special operations in asymmetric conflict. This study also addresses several sub-questions:

- When does it work and when does it fail?
- Why would a weak state actor employ its special operations forces in low intensity conflict over other mechanisms that support its national security objectives?
- What effect does the belligerents' form of government have on effectiveness in asymmetric competition?

B. METHODOLOGY

This thesis examines the successes and failures of various campaigns where Iran utilized the QF as a mechanism to achieve national security objectives (NSO). The campaigns to be examined include the Balkans; the U.S. occupation of Iraq; the Syrian Civil War; the Yemen Civil War; the war against ISIS in Iraq; and Iran's use of activities associated with terrorism. Qualitative analysis of these case studies will enable identification of the internal and external conditions that resulted in success or failure.

The measurement of effectiveness in IW can be especially difficult and subject to numerous variables. It is easy to say that quantifiable metrics of losses in money, terrain, and lives will provide the answer to who won and who lost. IW, however, is more complicated than regular warfare since progress cannot be measured in terrain and fighter attrition. It must include dozens of variables including legitimacy and influence.³ The metrics that could hypothetically demonstrate progress are incredibly complex, and some are arguably impossible to measure. Trying to gauge effectiveness in IW shares many characteristics with measuring success in a counterinsurgency.

The military fell into a trap in the Vietnam War by quantifying progress with body counts, and terrain lost or gained. In "No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War," Gregory Daddis concluded that the United States lost in part because its metrics of success ignored the counterinsurgency aspect of the war. The military used measurements in body counts and terrain to show progress because it was simple and what conventional minded leaders understood.⁴ In fact, what was critical to winning the war for the populace, but almost impossible to collect data on was will, social development, and political growth.⁵ When the United States finds itself in an irregular struggle, the lessons of defining success in the Vietnam War still perplexes the military to

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, JP 3-05 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), II-1, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_05.pdf.

⁴ Gregory A. Daddis, "No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War" (Ph.D. dissertation, North Carolina, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009), 360-61, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/304959457/abstract/1B5B5F1D929E4860PQ/1>.

⁵ Daddis, 364.

this day in Iraq and Afghanistan. Daddis contended that there were and are ways to measure progress and effectiveness in situations where the problem is not solely a military one, but one should not seek a statistical tool for the solution when the operational and strategic environment is poorly defined.⁶

In recognition of the statistical trap of attempting to measure the effectiveness of IW in the aforementioned QF case studies, this thesis will define success in achievement of NSOs at an acceptable cost. Defining what is an acceptable cost is developed alongside determining Iran's NSOs in Chapter II and III.

The Islamic Republic of Iran portrays itself as the vanguard for the Islamic world in an existential struggle against Western imperialism, but research suggests that this is only one factor. Significant evidence exists that Iran only champions true Islamic tenets and the plights of Shiism when it benefits them.⁷ Following the literature review, this thesis will explore what the Islamic Republic says its objectives are in its political rhetoric, and then what evidence from think tanks and U.S. agencies, including the Defense Intelligence Agency and U.S. State Department suggest. Acknowledging the potential bias in these agencies, I also include scholarly articles and news reports from various agencies around the globe in the research. After identifying the NSOs that have the greatest evidential support, I will then be able to answer if the conditions in the examined campaigns yielded success, failure, or a draw for Iran.

The QF is not a traditional military unit, and its operations occur along a long spectrum that range from smuggling to political influence and subversion. Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, recognizes that weaker adversaries in asymmetric conflict will employ not only military methods but diplomatic, informational, and economic schemes as well.⁸ Evaluating historical operations on

⁶ Daddis, 378–79.

⁷ Afshon Ostovar, "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy," in *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, ed. Frederic Wehrey (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 99–102.

⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, JP 1 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017), I–6, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1_ch1.pdf.

traditional military standards of progress is not sufficient. The case studies of this thesis will examine the social-political situation in the territories in which the conflicts took place, along with those of the belligerents. Following this analysis, the tactics, techniques, and procedures of the QF in each conflict are examined. Finally, the tactics are then scrutinized according to the social, political, military, and economic impact the QF's campaigns had in advancing Iran's interests at an acceptable cost.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Iran is a revisionist state with goals counter to those of the United States although the two are not in a conventional armed conflict, they have been in an asymmetric conflict ever since Ruhollah Khomeini formed the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. A core tenet of the Islamic Republic of Iran is that the revolution must be exported in order to survive. The IRGC in particular believed that the imperialist West would always seek to subvert the Middle East, and that spreading the revolution to other territories would be an effective defense.⁹ In the 1990s, the Iranian government found its mechanism to do so in the Quds Force. It was designed to be a special operations force (SOF) to promote the revolution's ideals abroad and circumvent Western influence in low intensity conflict because Iran knew it could not compete symmetrically.¹⁰

In order to develop a theory of how a weaker state such as Iran utilizes SOF units to circumvent diplomatic and military pressures of a stronger power at an acceptable level of risk, it is essential to examine existing literature for refinement. The definition of IW, and how SOF are utilized must be examined to determine how QF techniques and procedures differ from U.S. doctrine. Additionally, defense literature regarding asymmetric conflict and deterrence theory must be evaluated to understand the inability of the United States to force a change in Iran's revisionist intent.

⁹ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 102–4.

¹⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London, UK: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent>.

1. Defining Special Operations Forces and Irregular Warfare

Iran utilizes its expeditionary special operations unit to enact an asymmetric strategy for influence in the Middle East below the level of armed conflict. Believing exportation of the 1979 revolution as critical to its survival, the Islamic Republic created a sub-unit of the IRGC in the 1990s. This unit is called the Quds Force (QF), which is responsible for spreading Iran's ideology outside of its borders.¹¹ The QF is a SOF unit that operates mainly in the covert realm, executing Iran's foreign policy through numerous activities including subversion, smuggling, proxy force development, sabotage, and illicit financing.¹² However, before one analyzes its activities as a SOF unit, it is imperative to dispel misconceptions about what defines SOF, and the operations which SOF conducts.

What defines a special operation and makes SOF unique is necessary for understanding how they are used in asymmetric conflict. Theory and military doctrine discern what makes a military activity special. However, we are examining a foreign unit that does not operate under the same rules and authorities, nor does it conduct these activities in a uniform manner due to its disadvantage in strength.

As a graduate student pioneering special operations theory in the U.S. military, William McRaven combined intellectual insight with case study analysis to develop his theory of special operations.¹³ McRaven analyzed eight case studies to develop his six principles of special operations. The case studies encompass raids, and rescues across a span of several conflicts from World War II to the post-Vietnam era. The theory of SOF that McRaven posits does effectively explain how a small force can defeat a far superior adversary using six principles centered around the standard of achieving relative superiority.

McRaven's theory is lacking, however, in that it forgoes inclusion of irregular warfare, and focuses entirely on two types of operations: raids and rescues. McRaven is

¹¹ Wigginton et al., "Al-Qods Force," 154.

¹² Wigginton et al., 161–62.

¹³ William McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 1996).

upfront in his introduction, stating that his case studies discount many types of special operations and instead focus on direct action operations.¹⁴ An unfortunate side effect from McRaven's book, which is likewise demonstrated in the majority of media regarding special operations, is that the understanding of what encompasses special operations continues to neglect activities such as unconventional warfare, illicit financing, and political subversion. This loss is especially important to correct in advancing to political decision makers how SOF can be used to accomplish national security objectives at a less costly and bloody level of risk.

The QF is designed to further the goals of the Islamic Republic through special means, and critical to its ability to do so is remaining in the overt realm for the purpose of signaling, and in the covert realm when plausible deniability must be maintained. The weaker actor in asymmetric conflict must often omit those activities that occur in the conventional or "regular" state of conflict due to fewer resources and deterrent capabilities. Therefore, the weaker actor must be better in the irregular realm.

Joint Publication 3.05, *Special Operations*, defines the principles for employment of special operations, and advises commanders at different levels for preparing and conducting special operations.¹⁵ A key tenet of special operations that is often overlooked, but essential to understanding how SOF supports national security objectives in low intensity conflict, is the definition of irregular warfare:

Irregular warfare (IW) [is] a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Non-state actors often seek to create instability and disrupt and negate state legitimacy and governance to gain and maintain control or influence over and the support of a relevant population. Non-state actors use political, psychological, and economic methods, reinforced with military- type activities that favor indirect approaches and asymmetric means. Countering these methods requires a different mindset and different capabilities than traditional warfare methods.¹⁶

¹⁴ McRaven, 2–3.

¹⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, 1–1.

¹⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, II–1.

The issue with JP 3.05's definition is that it appears to limit the adversary to a non-state actor, traditionally seen as terrorists or an insurgency. However, other doctrine clarifies that the less powerful participant can be either a state or non-state actor.¹⁷ Iran is a state actor that has utilized IW in numerous operations where Western intelligence agencies linked the QF to the incident.¹⁸ The Iranian military cannot compete in a symmetric fight, so it utilizes SOF to conduct IW operations that disrupt or circumvent U.S. deterrence measures. How a SOF-executed IW strategy enables Iran to spread the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, while competing for influence with the United States below the level of armed conflict, is examined in the case studies of this thesis.

2. Asymmetric Conflict Theory

The theory of how a weak actor can prevail in asymmetric conflict is essential to understanding Iran's activities and how seven U.S. presidents have been unable to curtail many of its revisionist undertakings. Numerous researchers have formulated hypotheses to answer how a world power can be bested by a significantly weaker actor. The question itself is nothing new; a conglomeration of colonists with French support shocked the world when they defeated the world's strongest empire in 1783. However, the literature addressing this question only began to form following the defeat of U.S. forces in Vietnam.

In 1975's "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," Andrew Mack was the first to define asymmetric conflict as a struggle between two rivals, which Mack refers to as the insurgents and the external/metropolitan power, with two distinct variables: 1) "the insurgents can pose no direct threat to the survival of the external power because...they lack an invasion capability," 2) "the metropolitan power poses not simply the threat of invasion, but the reality of occupation."¹⁹ In his analysis of several conflicts, Mack demonstrates that military superiority is not an adequate predictor of victory in war. The superior determination to see the fight through is the greater predictor. Mack most

¹⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-6.

¹⁸ Iran Action Group, *Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities* (Washington, DC: U.S. State Department, 2018), 13-17, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Iran-Report.pdf>.

¹⁹ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 181, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009880>.

predominantly uses the outcome of the Vietnam War to build his case that war, traditionally viewed as only being fought on the battlefield, is actually fought on two fronts: the physical battlefields, where the cost is in blood of soldiers and in the belligerents' home where the fight is for the mind of the body politic and social institutions.²⁰

Explicitly demonstrated in the case of Vietnam, the overwhelming military superiority of the United States was counter-productive to the war effort. Leaders failed to recognize the political reciprocation it had on civilians at home, viewing images of war from their personal television screens for the first time in history. This led to mobilization of the anti-war effort which decimated support for the war itself. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong on the other hand were fighting a war for survival, where surrender meant complete destruction of their communist ideals and possible continued occupation by a foreign government.²¹ In his conclusion, Mack surmises that governments must fully understand the nature of the conflict they will face before embarking on one. Ultimately, what he calls an "external power" will be forced to withdraw once it loses popular support, which is harder to maintain over time and when there is no real threat to the homeland.²²

Ivan Arreguin-Toft built upon Mack's theory of the more determined actor being the best predictor for winning an asymmetric struggle. In "How the Weak Win Wars," he quantifies what makes a conflict asymmetric as one that involves at least 1,000 deaths per year and is between two actors where one's material power is at least 10:1 over the other actor.²³ Arreguin-Toft uses measurable data under these guidelines to determine that Mack's thesis is not sufficient to answer why the strong lost in all asymmetric conflicts.²⁴

In order to explain asymmetric outcomes, Arreguin-Toft introduces his theory of strategic interaction which analyzes the outcomes of previous conflicts based on the strategies chosen by the competitors. These strategies range from the conventional direct

²⁰ Mack, 177.

²¹ Mack, 177–78.

²² Mack, 200.

²³ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 94.

²⁴ Arreguin-Toft, 96–99.

attack and defense, to guerilla warfare and barbarism.²⁵ Data analysis of conflicts meeting his criteria from 1800–1998 showed that stronger actors won 76 percent of the time when both chose the same approach to the conflict, whereas the weaker actor won 63 percent of the time when there were opposite approaches.²⁶ Arreguin-Toft admits the analysis is imperfect given that some data is unavailable and, therefore, conducts a case study of the Vietnam War to further compare his theory to Mack's.

Following his analysis, Arreguin-Toft concluded that “strong actors lose asymmetric conflicts when they adopt the wrong strategy vis-à-vis their weaker adversaries.”²⁷ In his conclusion, there are two key points suggested for a U.S. strategy in asymmetric conflict: “1) preparation of public expectations for a long war despite U.S. technological and material advantages, and 2) the development and deployment of armed forces specifically equipped and trained for Counter Insurgency (COIN) operations.”²⁸ Arreguin-Toft's final points are sound and are supported not only by his case study of Vietnam but are also evident in the failures of the United States in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. What is missing from his and Mack's analysis, however, is the belligerents' advantages and disadvantages based on their form of government. Additionally, the scope of their analyses is limited to conflicts of open warfare. Conflicts fought in the gray zone between proxy forces, and through covert mechanisms are not included.

In a separate piece of literature, examining faults in the U.S. strategy during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Jeffrey Record emphasized the disadvantage conventional militaries face with insurgencies, and the problem set democracies face as conflicts drag on. In “Why the Strong Lose,” Record concluded that the U.S. military required a substantial change to how it was organized in order to be effective at defeating insurgencies.²⁹ Conventional military thought and an unwavering adherence to traditional

²⁵ Arreguin-Toft, 100.

²⁶ Arreguin-Toft, 111.

²⁷ Arreguin-Toft, 121.

²⁸ Arreguin-Toft, 123.

²⁹ Jeffrey Record, “Why the Strong Lose,” *U.S. Army War College* 35, no. 4 (December 2005): 30.

warfighting is cited as the problem, as well as an unwillingness to address the fact that opponents were adapting irregular warfare strategies to circumvent U.S. military might.³⁰ The most prominent point of Record's argument for why the United States was faltering in Iraq, however, was that democracies are especially vulnerable in protracted conflict. He argued that when the weaker competitor can bring a stronger will and counter strategy coupled with external assistance, it will likely prevail as the democratic body politic support base falters over time.³¹

The existing literature overwhelmingly supports the theory that authoritarian governments hold the political advantage in war. In "War and the Survival of Leaders," the authors tested seven quantitative hypotheses to determine the effect of international warfare on political leadership survival.³² The analysis demonstrated the domestic political hazard of warfare is mitigated for authoritarians, but both democratic and authoritarian leaders are subject to the fallout of high costs, and defeat on the battlefield.³³ However, a gap exists in the analysis. The authors examined warfare data from 1816–1980 but exclude several types including cases where casualty counts were not available and when there was no clear victor.³⁴ All of the case studies my thesis examines fall into the excluded categories because they occurred in the realm of IW.

The preceding literature makes several key observations regarding the nature of asymmetric conflict and recommends strategies for asymmetric warfare, but does not illuminate in detail the manner in which a weaker actor can prevail below the level of conventional armed conflict. In this thesis, I define conventional armed conflict as when two belligerents deploy conventional military forces to overtly engage in direct combat. Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom fall into the realm of conventional armed

³⁰ Record, 28–30.

³¹ Record, 30.

³² Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *The American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4 (1995): 846–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082512>.

³³ de Mesquita and Siverson, 852.

³⁴ de Mesquita and Siverson, 848.

conflict because the United States deployed conventional forces to defeat state and non-state actors. The ongoing conflict between Iran and the United States does not fall under this definition because the conflict is being fought utilizing irregular methods.

Additionally, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the preceding works did not examine low intensity struggles often fought in the covert realm. Obtaining data for these conflicts, which forego military attrition-based strategies for terrain and body counts, is especially difficult if not impossible in many cases. Irregular struggles involve fighting in the gray zone with multiple instruments of national power, and the winner may not always be clear.

3. Deterrence Theory

In the United States' effort to curtail Iran's pursuit of nuclear power and its adventurism across the Middle East, it seeks to coerce and deter through economic sanctions and military posturing; but Iran arguably never stops pushing back. Iran recognizes that it is the weaker party in a long-term asymmetric match for power in the Middle East. In admitting its position early on, it effectively adopted what Thomas Schelling referred to as erosion, or salami tactics.³⁵ In his theoretical perspective written in *Arms and Influence*, Thomas Schelling examined the state of affairs between the United States and the Soviet Union as they faced off in the early Cold War years. In his salami tactics concept, Schelling recognized that there are certain exploits that an actor may commit to assist their goals while staying below their adversaries' level of commitment. This technique can be risky as an opponent may overreact leading to a more violent outcome, but in life as well as politics, it a tested method for children dealing with parents to tardy tenants sidestepping landlords threatening eviction.³⁶ Schelling also makes excellent use of the Cuban Missile Crisis as an example of a time when the United States was tested to a point where it had to establish a red line and stand firmly behind it to end

³⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 67, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=3421294>.

³⁶ Schelling, 68.

the Soviet's tactic.³⁷ Schelling's analysis of actions to be taken by either the Soviets or United States to utilize or counter this tactic reflected the time in which it was written. A side effect of this is the lack of analysis of covert warfare, which is the preferred mechanism for this tactic by Iran.

In *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics*, Austin Carson examines how covert actions were utilized from WWI through the Soviet-Afghan war to keep wars limited. Carson posits that the secretive gamesmanship and back room dealings between leaders to control escalation helped avoid conflicts from heating up and may have kept the Cold War cold. However, he does point out that the secrecy can backfire when discovered by the body politic in democracies, and it favors authoritarians, who can deny the operations to their constituencies and the world.

In his concluding chapter, Carson begins an examination of Iran's covert war in post-2003 Iraq, exploring why Iran conducted it as well as why the United States did not overtly fight back. U.S. intelligence reporting beginning in 2004, alluded to Iranian smuggling of weapons and fighters into Iraq, which included the introduction of the explosively formed penetrator devices.³⁸ The fear through 2006, according to several cited reports, was that the QF was capable of substantially escalating the conflict if they or Iran itself was attacked.³⁹ Carson goes on to theorize that the United States would eventually confront Iran's covert action via the surge of 2007, where the solution was to put more boots on the ground to overwhelm the Sunni and Iran-backed Shiite insurgencies.⁴⁰ Carson admits that his theory is incomplete due to the unavailability of declassified source material available at the time he finished writing in 2018.

This thesis expands upon the foundation that the above literature establishes. There exists a gap in the literature regarding asymmetric conflict and deterrence theory when SOF is utilized. The QF and the manner in which it is employed by Iran is unique from

³⁷ Schelling, 80–82.

³⁸ Carson, *Secret Wars*, 292.

³⁹ Carson, 292–93.

⁴⁰ Carson, 294.

how any other nation utilizes its SOF. The QF's tactics, techniques, and procedures are studied in detail across six case studies to learn how the unit functions, the reasons, and how this compares to U.S. doctrine concerning IW. Additionally, this thesis surveys the social and political factors of the belligerents involved, and how that shaped the situation and outcomes of the irregular wars the QF have been involved in.

II. IRAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY OBJECTIVES

Before one can understand Iran's behavior, one must understand what its goals are. Iran champions itself in the media as guardians of the oppressed in a never-ending conflict to stop Western imperialism. It is an authoritarian theocracy with a constitution based on a specific interpretation of Shia Islam: *Velayat i Faqih* (principle of the jurist). There exist arguments that Iran bases its decision making on Islamic fundamentalism or pursuit of regional hegemony. Islamic ideology and pursuit of regional dominance do play into the regime's decision-making process but ultimately it is a revisionist state, surrounded by enemies who are aligned with the United States. Iran's behavior can be more understood in terms of strategy, security, and regional competition.⁴¹ In the post-9/11 era, the Islamic Republic of Iran's primary goal is regime survival.

Although it may often portray itself as being at the forefront of Islam, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a fundamentalist Islamic state, and its actions are not solely based on religious motivations.⁴² Islamism is alive in Iranian politics and cultural expectations, with women being required to wear a head scarf for example.⁴³ However, modern Iran's comparison with fundamentalism is more than likely the product of misguided media and erratic behavior during the 1980s. The Iranian regime maintains a fundamentalist stance on social issues, but there is a looseness in its system. Democratic principles are interwoven with theocracy in its constitution, and a more relaxed stance towards women's rights when compared to the laws of Saudi Arabia and Taliban controlled Afghanistan. Iran is an authoritarian theocracy where Shia Islam is a factor, but only one of several that drives its actions and foreign policy.⁴⁴ Significant evidence exists that other elements play into its decision-making process.

⁴¹ Afshon Ostovar, "Religion and Politics of Iran" (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, April 27, 2020).

⁴² Ostovar, "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy," 110.

⁴³ Ostovar, "Religion and Politics of Iran."

⁴⁴ Ostovar, "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy," 93.

One could present a case that Iran's exportation of the revolution's ideals, and emphasis on military development is based on attaining regional hegemony. Before solidifying power, Ruhollah Khomeini sought to entice a Shia uprising in Iraq to overthrow the regime, and unite with it under theocratic rule.⁴⁵ Iran spent tens of billions of dollars to further Hezbollah's grip in Lebanon, and keep Bashar Al-Assad in power in Syria. Saudi Arabia is its greatest rival in the Middle East with an arguably less effective military. If it were defeated, pacified, or removed from regional competition, could Iran then not gain regional hegemony? The answer, as pointed out in a 2019 study by Huda Raouf, is more than likely no. The presence of the United States, its support to Iran's adversaries, and deep sectarian issues amongst Middle Eastern states will continue to keep Iran from gaining regional hegemony.⁴⁶ In analysis of its military development, the model it chooses is primarily based on deterrence, and not offensive capabilities.⁴⁷ Numerous obstacles would need to be removed before the Islamic Republic could hope to become hegemonic.

The leadership of Iran is most concerned about survival. U.S. officials and diplomats have stated repeatedly that the Iranian regime should be removed. In President George W. Bush's 2006 State of the Union address, he made a call for change in Iran. In a veiled statement for regime change he said: "Let me speak directly to the citizens of Iran: America respects you, and we respect your country... We respect your right to choose your own future and win your own freedom."⁴⁸ In 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that the administration supported a philosophy of regime change. His successor Mike Pompeo in 2018 called into question the legitimacy of the Iranian regime and expressed hope of internal revolt.⁴⁹ A long-standing history of Western intervention from the Bay of

⁴⁵ Lyse Doucet, "Legacy of Iran-Iraq War Lives On," BBC, October 6, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34444337>.

⁴⁶ Huda Raouf, "Iranian Quest for Regional Hegemony: Motivations, Strategies and Constrains," *Review of Economics and Political Science* 4, no. 3 (April 23, 2019): 254–55.

⁴⁷ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 23.

⁴⁸ Guy Dinmore, "Bush 'Calling For Iran Regime Change,'" *Financial Times*, February 1, 2006, <https://www.ft.com/content/d3a86bf0-9358-11da-a978-0000779e2340>.

⁴⁹ Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options*, CRS Report No. RL32048 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 32–33, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32048>.

Pigs in Cuba, the British/American orchestrated coup of Prime Minister Mossadeq, and the overthrow of Saddam Hussain certainly weighs on the Iranian regime's concern.

Although the Supreme Leader exercises absolute power, his decisions are not monolithic. He must also keep the ruling constituency content. The Supreme Leader and the ruling elite of Iran face two threats: external invasion from the United States or an alliance of Western and regional allies, and internal dissention that could evolve into a revolution. To counter these threats, the Islamic Republic seeks to achieve four national security objectives (NSO) internally and abroad. These objectives are domestic control, expansion of regional influence, ensuring economic security, and removal of the United States from the Middle East. In achieving these objectives internally and externally, the Iranian regime can survive against all dangers. The following sections will elaborate on these NSOs and provide examples of methods Iran utilizes. First, I will provide an overview of Iran's internal security apparatus. Next, I will discuss Iran's strategy of regional expansion. The third section explains how Iran seeks to ensure economic security. Lastly, I will discuss Iran's effort to drive the United States out of the region.

A. NSO 1: DOMESTIC CONTROL

The Islamic Republic of Iran is unique in that its people meet at an intersection of ethno-linguistic identity, national identity, and Shia religious identity, which differentiates it from much of its Sunni-dominated surrounding region.⁵⁰ To maintain control and deter internal calls for reform that may result in regime change, the ruling elites of Iran must find ways to unite the identities of its population. Sometimes it is through rallying in the face of existential threats, at others it is through brutality, and sometimes it is through subversion of information.

This identity crisis that could have jeopardized Ruhollah Khomeini's seizure of power was most profound during the reorganization of the government in 1979. Ruhollah Khomeini began to seize power in 1979 amongst dissenters with nationalistic views. Persian nationalism did not align with their belief that Islam should be the only identity

⁵⁰ Alam Saleh and James Worrall, "Between Darius and Khomeini: Exploring Iran's National Identity Problematique," *National Identities* 17, no. 1 (2015): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2014.930426>.

under which Iranians held themselves.⁵¹ Iran had an identity crisis as it was collecting the rubble of the Revolution. It was also facing potential retaliation from the United States, an eager Soviet Union to the north and in Afghanistan, and unfriendly Sunni neighbors on both sides. In the face of external and internal threats to codifying clerical rule, the new government would find a mechanism for uniting the identities under common goals to circumvent these threats.

In the 1980 invasion of Iran by Iraqi Forces, Khomeini found the answer to his problem of rallying the people to the new Islamic Republic's flag pole. Originally a close ally of Khomeini, President Bani-Sadr began disagreeing with the pro-clerical leadership about how to fight the war and deal with the political situation.⁵² As Bani-Sadr, the commander in chief for armed forces at the time, attempted to stymie the Iraqi momentum, his populist support was being overwhelmed in the rear by the clerical Islamic Republican Party (IRP). The religious clout of the IRP proved to be a significant factor. What followed was a brief, but violent civil war with Khomeini rising to unfettered power. With the nationalist movement crushed, Khomeini united Iranians in an Islamic holy war against the invaders, using religious Shiite fervor to turn the tide of battle.⁵³ Khomeini's most profound apparatus during this time of internal and external conflict was the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The IRGC became the protectorate of the Islamic Revolution, subjugating those advancing nationalism or democracy over theocratic rule.

The success of the IRGC in late 1979 cemented Khomeini's grip on power and became the theocratic system's enforcer.⁵⁴ Over subsequent decades, the IRGC evolved to become a military force parallel to the regular armed forces. The effect of this was establishment of a protective measure in line with what James Quinlivan coined as "coup-

⁵¹ Saleh and Worrall, 86.

⁵² Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 69–71.

⁵³ Ostovar, 69–74.

⁵⁴ Ostovar, 61.

proofing.”⁵⁵ Quinlivan posits that a state can effectively become coup-proof when it has the following characteristics:

1. The effective exploitation of family, ethnic, and religious loyalties for coup-critical positions balanced with wider participation and less restrictive loyalty standards for the regime as a whole.
2. The creation of an armed force parallel to the regular military.
3. The development of multiple internal security agencies with overlapping jurisdiction that constantly monitor the loyalty of the military and one another with independent paths of communication to critical leaders.
4. The fostering of expertness in the regular military.
5. The financing of such measures.⁵⁶

The IRGC through the armed forces general staff have a direct line to the Supreme Leader. The paramilitary volunteer force known as the Basij is controlled by the IRGC and is their primary tool for countering internal dissent.⁵⁷ In the 1990s, the IRGC became invested in numerous state contracts, public works industry, and oil contracts. In these activities, the IRGC became intermingled with Iran’s economy.⁵⁸ This vested interest in economic success gave IRGC leadership a greater investment in ensuring that there would be no threat to the regime. The synergy between the IRGC and hardline leadership continues today as the IRGC leadership has financial, political, and cultural investment in muting internal calls for reform.

When rhetoric of a Western conspiracy causing the economic hardship of its people is no longer satisfactory, the government couples the narrative with brutality utilizing the IRGC and Basij. Following 2017 proposals by President Rouhani to increase funding for the IRGC and bonyads, protests erupted in more than 80 cities. The government’s response

⁵⁵ James T. Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,” *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 131–65.

⁵⁶ Quinlivan, 133; Quinlivan cites these characteristics as replicating principles found in: Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

⁵⁷ Marie Donovan, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick Kagan, *Iran’s Reserve of Last Resort: Uncovering the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Ground Forces Order of Battle* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2020), 3, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/20200121-Report-Iran%E2%80%99s-Reserve-of-Last-Resort.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 146–47.

eventually admitted some faults, but initially placed blame on covert action, and responded violently to protestors.⁵⁹ Placing blame on Western influence grants the regime a scapegoat for its failures and violent suppression of dissenters.

The internet is a double-edged sword for the Iranian government: on one hand, it allows the sharing of ideas and mobilization contradictory to what the regime advocates, but on the other it also allows the government to conduct surveillance on a grand scale. Iran was one of the first Middle Eastern countries to access the internet when it became commercially available. In it, Iranians found a mechanism to share ideas, expand their identities as a people, and listen to ideas from around the world. The Iranian government has struggled in many cases to filter incoming information as internally developed platforms proved far less attractive to those developed primarily in the United States, such as Facebook. However, it has succeeded in some cases of using applications to gain access to dissenter's information and effectively map resistance networks such as Telegram-Farsi.⁶⁰ There is also evidence that hardline leaders will utilize illicit cyber groups to spy on politicians and their family members for the purposes of control and curtailing reform.⁶¹ Because the internet brings people together to share ideas and discuss the issues that affect their lives, the hardline elites inside the regime effectively use that to influence and target those who may wish to see things change.

Iran is an authoritarian theocracy in a world where free flowing information champions individual rights and democracy. Therefore, the regime must quell any calls for significant reform to survive. The IRGC's unrelenting obedience to the Supreme Leader, coupled with a vested interest in keeping the principal ruling elites in power is a formidable tool for squashing dissent. The regime also understands the importance of controlling narratives, demonstrated in filtering of the internet, internal espionage to locate discord,

⁵⁹ Katzman, *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options*, 14.

⁶⁰ Karim Sadjadpour and Collin Anderson, *Iran's Cyber Threat: Espionage, Sabotage, and Revenge* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), 39–40, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/04/iran-s-cyber-threat-espionage-sabotage-and-revenge-pub-75134>.

⁶¹ Sadjadpour and Anderson, 41.

and blaming the West for all Iranian problems in the media. With a chained body politic, the regime is free to exercise its external activities that support its other objectives.

B. NSO 2: EXPANSION OF REGIONAL INFLUENCE

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been surrounded by adversaries. Iran is in a constant state of conflict with these adversaries because it believes continuing the revolution abroad is necessary for its survival. After the Iran-Iraq war, this state of conflict reflects a cold war where fighting mainly occurs between proxies, special operations, or covert action. Iran and its opponents have not engaged in conventional warfare since 1988, but it is continuously involved in regional conflict. Iran has a powerful military, but it cannot attain hegemony in the Middle East while the majority of countries have the ability to counter its actions, and the United States continues to support and protect Iran's rivals like Saudi Arabia.⁶² Remembering the intervention of the United States and Great Britain in 20th century Iranian affairs, alongside Soviet Union establishing autonomous republics in the region surrounding Iran, a core tenet of the IRGC became exportation of the revolution. This tenet served the purpose of remaining on the offense against Western interference as well as assisting the Muslim world in protecting itself.⁶³ Recognizing its asymmetric imbalance with the West, Iran utilizes the IRGC to follow a strategy of IW masked under the guise of a pan-Islamic strategy. Through methods such as covert action and training support to proxies, Iran can maintain plausible deniability in the face of failure and claim victory in the face of success.

Seeking to obtain allegiance or support from state and non-state actors, Iran finds a manner in which to strengthen itself against the possibility of foreign intervention. The IRGC is its primary apparatus for doing so. As a nation it is easy to contain, but with alliances linking it to the Mediterranean Sea, and proxies in Yemen on its enemy's doorstep, subversive activities become much harder to control. Its proxies and allies are in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Afghanistan, effectively creating a complex dilemma

⁶² Raouf, "Iranian Quest for Regional Hegemony," 242.

⁶³ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 103.

for the United States and its allies. In order to unite these groups and potential allies beyond its borders, a strategy masked as Pan-Islamic is used.

Rhetoric from Iranian leadership combined with support to predominantly Shia non-state actors demonstrate that it is biased to Shia causes, as long as those causes mutually support Iran's interests.⁶⁴ Ayatollah Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader, promotes the idea of Pan-Islam in his statements, but numerous avowals of other leaders continuously promote unification under Iran and Shiism as the only way. In 2010, President Ahmadinejad's chief of staff caused an uproar internally and abroad when he said "without Iran, Islam would be lost" and added, "If we want to present the truth of Islam to the world, we should raise the Iranian flag."⁶⁵ Former head of the QF, Qassem Soleimani, additionally asserted on multiple occasions that Iran was the only one who could unite the Islamic world.⁶⁶ Article 12 of Iran's constitution clearly defines Twelver Shiism as "the" religion, and the *Velayat i Faqih* (rule of the jurist), which states theocratic rule as the only option for ruling over Islam, is uniquely Iranian.⁶⁷ Perhaps their most sectarian action of the past 20 years was ensuring Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki was reinstated to maintain a grip over recovering Iraq.⁶⁸ This sectarian action would directly contribute to the instability of Iraqi forces during the rise of ISIS as it marginalized Sunni soldiers and promoted those who were Shia. Iran will support the goals of other actors and Islamic sects as long as they are mutually supporting. However, in masking these actions as part of a pan-Islamic strategy, they have been able to rally others to their cause while maintaining domestic control.

⁶⁴ Ostovar, "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy," 109–10.

⁶⁵ Robert Tait, "Iranian President's New 'Religious-Nationalism' Alienates Hard-Line Constituency," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, August 19, 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Iranian_Presidents_New_ReligiousNationalism_Alienates_HardLine_Constituency/2131415.html.

⁶⁶ Ostovar, "Sectarianism and Iranian Foreign Policy," 104.

⁶⁷ Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 624, 626, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1159541>.

⁶⁸ Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 68.

The Islamic Republic spreads its influence through methods including covert action, support to proxies, and subversion. This irregular strategy masked as one to unite the Islamic world can be effective as Iran's diplomatic reach is weak given sectarian issues, and overt use of its military against an ally of the United States would mobilize an overwhelming response. Significant evidence in rhetoric as well as bias towards select interventionism of Islamic struggles demonstrate that Iran's strategy cannot be labeled Pan-Islamic. This includes support to Bashar Al-Assad's brutal response to the rebellion in Syria because it served Iran's national security interests to keep him in power.⁶⁹ It has elements of pan-Islamic ideals but it is more about creating a rallying cry for the domestic population and those groups across the Middle East that have mutually supporting goals. In achievement of this NSO, Iran ensures that external actors must engage in a proverbial game of whack a mole against numerous allies and proxies. In effect, it counteracts the ability to invade Iran as the invader's interests throughout the Middle East would also be engulfed.

C. NSO 3: ENSURE ECONOMIC SECURITY

The Islamic Republic of Iran maintains strict control over the handling of its economy to preserve support from political-military elites and to circumvent undue influence from foreign investment. Due to its isolationism and violent behavior, foreign sanctions have taken a continuous economic toll. To ensure regime survival, it will often engage in illicit activities, including support to terrorism, that will expand its economic options. The history of its economy and the effect of sanctions reveal that it methodically supports elites with political power and will find exceptional methods to ensure its survival.

Following the 1979 revolution, Iran found itself isolated and has been faced with economic issues since that range from a lack of foreign investment to sanctions. The gross economic mismanagement of Shah Pahlavi was a major contributing factor to the 1979 revolution as it favored development of Western industry over assisting the poor. After

⁶⁹ Ariane M. Tabatabai, *Iran's National Security Debate: Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations*, PE-344-RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 18–19, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE344.html>.

Ruhollah Khomeini seized power, the government nationalized most industry and the economy was plagued with issues from the start.⁷⁰ Iran began to isolate itself, seize assets, and adopt restrictive policies during the costly war with Iraq, removing the attractiveness of foreign investment.⁷¹ Following the end of the Iran-Iraq war, which cost between \$43 and \$45 billion in the first five years of the war alone, the next two administrations focused on economic growth.⁷² Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, promising to redistribute wealth, but ultimately was undermined by the beginning of the United States and United Nations' efforts to halt Iran's nuclear program.⁷³ Without sanctions relief from President Trump's maximum pressure strategy, Iran will likely continue to suffer with expected negative economic growth, coupled with high inflation.⁷⁴ However, evidence suggests that sanctions alone will not force the Iranian government to change course as long as it views the cost as low in the long run; especially when the United States and Europe disagree on how to implement the costs.⁷⁵ According to author Richard Haass, sanctions can be particularly ineffective with authoritarian regimes, which historically demonstrate an ability to weather the storm. Additionally, the stricter control of information can create a "rally around the flag" effect in the body politic instead of coercion.⁷⁶ To expand its economic options through unconventional, and in many cases, criminal ways, the IRGC is utilized.

The IRGC has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo regarding how the economy is handled. This branch of the military is the mechanism with which Iran is able to manipulate its neighbors, conduct terrorist activities, and protect the supreme leader's

⁷⁰ Seth Jones, *Containing Tehran: Understanding Iran's Power and Exploiting Its Vulnerabilities* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), 29, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/containing-tehran-understanding-irans-power-and-exploiting-its-vulnerabilities>.

⁷¹ Jones, 29.

⁷² Jones, 29.

⁷³ Jones, 29–30.

⁷⁴ Jones, 32.

⁷⁵ Patrick Clawson, "Iran," in *Economic Sanctions and American Diplomacy*, ed. Richard Haass (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2019), 101–2.

⁷⁶ Richard Haass, ed., *Economic Sanctions on American Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1998), 203.

hold on power. Ayatollah Khomeini once remarked that “If there did not exist the Guard Corps, there would not exist a country either.”⁷⁷ According to a 2015 Bloomberg News article by Ladane Nasser and Golnar Motevalli, The IRGC and bonyads (Islamic charitable foundations) control up to 70 percent of the economy.⁷⁸ As a method of keeping the elites within the IRGC satisfied, “the regime prioritizes political control and rewarding its supporters over economic efficiency.”⁷⁹ Providing the IRGC with an economic motivation, the regime ensures its loyalty and investment in regime continuation.

To survive in the face of international sanctions without becoming a hermit kingdom the likes of North Korea, Iran must look for economic opportunities. Its methods are typically through illicit means and assist in explaining certain actions. Through the QF, Iran engages in financing schemes to terrorist organizations including Hezbollah and Hamas. In one instance, the QF exploited the United Arab Emirates currency exchange market to transfer several hundred million U.S. dollars.⁸⁰ This funding stream enabled Iran’s proxies to continue activities supporting other national security objectives including increasing regional influence. In a separate case linked to the QF, the United States identified a scheme to obtain parts necessary for Iran’s dual military-civilian use Mahan Airlines. From 2011–2018, through a series of front companies in South East Asia, Iran was able to acquire aircraft parts, which sanctions sought to prohibit. The materials enabled Mahan Airlines to keep flying commercially, while also delivering weapons, fighters, and materials to proxies and allies across the Middle East.⁸¹ Iran’s methods for circumventing economic boundaries explain many cases in its illicit behavior, but it is not alone in conducting this subversive behavior.

⁷⁷ “Imam Khomeini’s Quotes,” International Affairs Department The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Quotes, accessed December 8, 2019, http://en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/c103_30723/Quotes-in-photo-descriptions/IRGC-in-Imam-Khomeini-s-quotes.

⁷⁸ Ladane Nasser and Golnar Motevalli, “Investing in Iran? You’d Better Like Tea, Cake and Bureaucracy,” Bloomberg, October 7, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-05/investing-in-iran-you-d-better-like-tea-cake-and-bureaucracy>.

⁷⁹ Jones, *Containing Tehran*, 3.

⁸⁰ Iran Action Group, *Outlaw Regime*, 23.

⁸¹ Justin Rohrlach, “Smuggling in Plain Sight: How Foreign Businesses Help Iran Violate U.S. Sanctions,” Quartz, December 17, 2019, <https://qz.com/1769789/how-iranian-airlines-evade-us-sanctions/>; Iran Action Group, *Outlaw Regime*, 25.

In addition to utilizing the QF, Iran will collaborate with others to evade restrictions. Iran's primary source of income is its oil reserves, which are the fourth largest in the world.⁸² Exportation is vital to the economy and Iran will go to significant lengths to ensure it is able to sell it. China continues to receive Iranian oil, but is reporting less. On the surface this appears to be to comply with sanctions, but evidence suggests everything may not be as it seems. Data compiled during an October 2019 report by Bourse and Bazaar suggested that oil was still moving in similar quantities, but that it may be transferred to Malaysia first. This method allows China to overcome sanctions through showing customs data that imports are coming from Malaysia instead.⁸³

The Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to continuously expand its economic options to protect the regime and ruling elites from external and internal threats. It steals and funnels money to terrorist organizations, obtains exports through subversive measures, and goes at great lengths to export oil. It is a political objective that is not limited to countries sharing its ideological values such as in the case of China. It is an NSO essential to keeping not only the political and military elitists content, but also the body politic who may seek regime change if the economy crumbles.

D. NSO 4: REMOVE THE UNITED STATES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

Since 1979, Iran's leaders have feared that their regime would be toppled by the United States. Previous experiences with Western interference shape Iranian foreign policy, including how its military was constructed and utilized. It became clear immediately following the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran that it would not be able to compete symmetrically with the United States, but Iran needed the United States removed from the Middle East.

Western democracies have a history interfering with weaker countries like Iran to obtain more auspicious conditions. In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and

⁸² Jones, *Containing Tehran*, 35.

⁸³ Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, "China's Declared Imports of Iranian Oil Hit a (Deceptive) New Low," Bourse & Bazaar, October 23, 2019, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/10/23/chinas-declared-imports-of-iranian-oil-hit-new-low-but-dont-believe-it>.

MI6 (British Secret Intelligence Service) orchestrated a coup of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadeq over fears that an oil dispute could push Iran towards Soviet influence.⁸⁴ In 1980, the United States launched Operation EAGLE CLAW, an audacious hostage rescue attempt to infiltrate hundreds of forces into Iran to retrieve American hostages being held by the new regime for bargaining purposes. The message was clear, the West would intervene, forcibly if necessary, into Iranian territory if its interests were jeopardized.

From 1980 to 1988, the newborn Islamic Republic fought a costly and destructive war of attrition riled with periods of stalemate. Iran engaged a peer force on the battlefield for eight years, and the only results yielded were stalemate and scores of dead. In 1991, the United States and a coalition of allies sacked the Iraqi force that had stalemated Iran's. What was worse was that this defeat took just over a month. The conventional might of the United States was put on display again in 2003 when it destroyed the Iraqi military and overthrew its government in one month.

From these lessons, Iran learned that the United States' military was a force to be reckoned with and that following the strategy of Iraq would be disastrous. It needed to remove the United States from the Middle East physically and erode its influence. To compete, Iran adopted a strategy that focused primarily on IW.⁸⁵ IW emphasizes mostly covert techniques that seek to erode an adversary's will to continue conflict participation. These techniques typically involve using proxy forces as the adversary is less likely to retaliate against the state sponsor if deniability can be maintained. These techniques allow Iran to punish U.S. forces and interests without resulting in an overwhelming military response.

The U.S. occupation of Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussain's government is perhaps one of the greatest short-term successes Iran has had using IW to remove the United States from the area. Sometime after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran infiltrated exiled Shia, alongside QF members into Iraq to sow chaos through sectarian

⁸⁴ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 34.

⁸⁵ Jones, *Containing Tehran*, 7.

violence, and support Shia militia groups. These groups waged an arduous insurgency against the United States and its allies who were fighting Sunni insurgencies simultaneously. With this support to Shia militias came the now infamous improvised explosive devices and, eventually, the even more deadly explosively formed penetrator versions that would result in hundreds of U.S. servicemember deaths.⁸⁶ Concurrently, Iran subverted the political process through supporting politicians who could be manipulated. Nouri Al-Maliki, a member of the Islamist organization known as the Dawa Party, was an effective puppet of the IRGC, aggravating U.S. attempts to curtail Iran's support to Shia insurgents, while making sure Shia politicians and military officers ascended to higher power.⁸⁷ However, Maliki's sectarian actions, motivated by the IRGC leadership, would ultimately accelerate the rise of ISIS and demonstrate the damage done to the Iraqi military with the marginalization of Sunni leaders.⁸⁸ Iran would learn the lesson the hard way from its sectarian actions, as it not only forced Iran to confront ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but also caused the return of the U.S. military to Iraq.

Iran's true obstacle to becoming the hegemonic power in the Middle East is the continuous presence of the United States' military and diplomacy. Gaining influence over other countries with numerous sectarian issues is also an obstacle, which is exacerbated through the influence the United States wields.⁸⁹ Removing the United States from Middle Eastern affairs is an NSO that is demonstrated in many of Iran's activities such as support Shia insurgencies and political subversion during the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Iran's hard line leaders still remember Western interventionism throughout the 19th century in Iranian affairs and believe that security can only be attained when the United States is removed. It is likely that many of the IRGC's activities will remain focused on achieving this NSO.

⁸⁶ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 46–47, 50–51; Carson, *Secret Wars*, 289–91.

⁸⁷ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 36, 54.

⁸⁸ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 220–21.

⁸⁹ Raouf, "Iranian Quest for Regional Hegemony," 242.

III. IRAN'S UNACCEPTABLE COST OF CONFLICT

Determining the qualitative measurement for what an authoritarian government like Iran uses for defining its acceptable cost for conflict is difficult given the lack of open source data. Iranian leadership has supported terrorism, relied on human wave tactics in the Iran-Iraq War, apparently accepted conspiracy theories such as President Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust, and Ayatollah Khamenei's advocacy that the United States created the COVID-19 virus, and constant violent oratory in the media all suggest that its leadership are illogical. If Iran was truly and irrational actor, developing a model for its acceptable threshold for conflict would not be possible. However, there is significant evidence that Iran's leaders, are in fact, calculating and base their decisions on avoiding escalation past a certain level.

Many examining the activities of Iran point to the rhetoric of its leaders regarding politics, warfare, and ideology as evidence that it is an irrational actor.⁹⁰ Iran has on several occasions threatened action against the United States that would result in a form of total war, which it had no hope of winning. Iran's foreign minister Javad Zarif threatened the United States and Saudi Arabia with "all-out war" should there be reprisals for an Iranian proxy linked drone strike against Saudi oil fields in September 2019.⁹¹ The IRGC through its propaganda news service, Tasnim News Agency, almost daily flaunts capabilities for decisive action against the United States that is far-fetched, and the remarks of its leadership demonstrate absurd decision making for their capacity to compete with the West militarily.⁹² In response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in the winter of 2020, Ayatollah Khamenei suggested a conspiracy theory via his Twitter account on March 12

⁹⁰ Ariane M. Tabatabai and Annie Tracy Samuel, "What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us about the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (August 10, 2017): 152–85.

⁹¹ Nick Paton Walsh, "Exclusive: Zarif Threatens 'All-out War' in Case of Military Strike on Iran," CNN, September 20, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/19/middleeast/iran-zarif-saudi-intl/index.html>.

⁹² For examples see: "Enemies Horrified by Iran's Deterrent Power: General Staff," Tasnim News Agency, March 30, 2020, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/03/30/2233375/enemies-horrified-by-iran-s-deterrent-power-general-staff>; "Iran to Give 'Destructive Response' to Enemies' Slightest Mistake: IRGC," Tasnim News Agency, March 31, 2020, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/03/31/2234134/iran-to-give-destructive-response-to-enemies-slightest-mistake-irgc>.

and 22, 2020. In these tweets he went to far as to suggest the crisis in Iran was a biological attack orchestrated by the United States, aimed at damaging its enemies, notwithstanding internationally validated evidence that the virus began in China, and the United States was also facing consequences of the pandemic.⁹³ Despite this grandiloquence, Iranian leadership demonstrates aptitude for political maneuvering to attain its NSOs and survive. One should recognize that U.S. officials also routinely circulate conspiracy theories and antagonistic rhetoric via Twitter and other social media. The aggressive rhetoric is more of a propaganda tool, and a method for obtaining concessions from governments who are more likely to blink in the face of threats.

There are two prime examples in the past ten years that demonstrate Iranian leaders walk back of rhetoric and concessions in the face of potentially catastrophic consequences. The first being the Supreme Leader's acceptance of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite originally saying that there would be no agreement in which sanctions remained.⁹⁴ By accepting the deal, the Supreme Leader and the IRGC obtained victories. The IRGC continued its support to proxies throughout the Middle East, its ballistic missile testing was not halted, and it obtained significant monetary gain in a concession from the United States regarding unfulfilled delivery of military equipment from pre-revolution dealings.⁹⁵ Ayatollah Khamenei also achieved political gain by on one hand being able to take credit for economic relief and on the other hand distancing himself from President Rouhani; who could be blamed if the deal ended up yielding poor results.⁹⁶ Despite intense statements that suggested an unwillingness to cooperate with the Western alliance, Iran's leaders demonstrated political maneuvering that allowed them to receive concessions, while only slowing their nuclear program.

⁹³ Khamenei.ir (@khamenei_ir), "Biological Attack," Twitter, March 12, 2020, 1:26 A.M., https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1238247756780785666; Khamenei.ir (@khamenei_ir), "Coronavirus Accusation," Twitter, March 22, 2020, 4:47 P.M. https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1241642515943620610.

⁹⁴ Tabatabai, *Iran's National Security Debate*, 4.

⁹⁵ Katzman, *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options*, 23.

⁹⁶ Tabatabai and Samuel, "What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us."

The aftermath of the January 2020 targeted killing of the QF commander Qassem Soleimani also demonstrates Iran's rational behavior counter to irrational statements. The United States retaliated against QF support to attacks on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, and a reported pending attack being formed by the QF against American interests. Iran needed to respond to such an overt attack on one of its own, and especially one like General Soleimani, who held such power and influence. In the days following his death, General Hamid Sarkheili of the IRGC spoke of revenge and the ability to strike U.S. targets across the Middle East.⁹⁷ On January 2, 2020, Ayatollah Khamenei tweeted “#SevereRevenge awaits the criminals who have stained their hands with his [Soleimani] and the other martyrs' blood.”⁹⁸ However, the response that came was far from the vengeance alluded to. Iran retaliated with a volley of ballistic missiles, landing on or near a U.S. base with the U.S. military having advance warning. There was potential for inflicting U.S. deaths, but the proximity of the impact sites demonstrated Iran knew it had to avoid casualties to prevent further escalation. Iran could say they responded for General Soleimani's death, but the response was little more than an annoyance to U.S. military forces in Iraq. This effectively demonstrated that Iranian leaders knew the consequences of enacting the hardline speeches, and they made a calculated decision to avoid following through with their words.

Assuming that it is an irrational entity is misplaced and improper for determining how far it is willing to go to attain its four national security objectives. Iran's leaders may voice outlandish statements, but they are perhaps more about riling up hard liner support, and making less powerful governments blink. Democratic leaders are also not immune from criticism to their statements. President Donald Trump's statements particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic were critiqued daily for rationality by U.S. media outlets with dissenting views. So, if it is in fact a rational actor, how does one determine or at least estimate the costs it is willing to incur for its revisionist actions?

⁹⁷ Farnaz Fassihi and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Khamenei Wants to Put Iran's Stamp on Reprisal for U.S. Killing of Top General,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/middleeast/iran-khamenei-general-soleimani.html>.

⁹⁸ Khamenei.ir (@khamenei_ir), “Revenge,” Twitter, January 2, 2020, 11:14 P.M., https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1212995728395636736.

The answer lies in examining the two events that shaped the Islamic Republic of Iran during its infancy: the revolution itself and the Iran-Iraq War. Both represent times where the survival of the government was truly in jeopardy. As the Islamic Republic sought to rebuild itself in the 1990s, it began to demonstrate that it would support illicit actors and activities to attain its NSOs. However, it also demonstrated when faced with a counter-action that would likely lead to a repeat of any of the two aforementioned events, it would pull back as a return to those circumstances are seen as too dangerous for the regime.

A. THE REVOLUTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a nation born from revolution, and because of the nation's young age, all of the senior leaders were present for it. These leaders remember the overthrow of the Shah, the splintering of the nation, and the violence that went along with groups vying for power. The regime cannot and will not allow another revolution to birth; its survival depends on this. Therefore, the question becomes: at what point does the internal strife becomes so great that the regime is forced to concede significant changes?

The advent of widespread protests seeking reform began in 1999, and have occurred roughly every ten years since, with increasingly tense turnout and violence. President Khatami's inability to create real reforms, coupled with the shutdown of the reformist newspaper *Salam* led to five days of protests in 1999. These protests saw thousands of students descend upon the streets of Tehran and other parts of the country. The IRGC unleashed the Basij to subdue the protestors. This event was the largest social upheaval against the government since 1979, but the regime survived without having to give in to reforms.⁹⁹ IRGC leadership criticized Khatami's handling of the situation, and reluctance to quash the protests. They saw these protests as potentially spilling out of control, putting theocratic rule at risk. This became the point where the IRGC truly asserted itself as a political force against reform.¹⁰⁰ The IRGC, with its tether to ensuring regime survival, would not allow internal strife to gain traction. They remembered the revolution, and what it would mean if they allowed one to develop.

⁹⁹ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 295.

¹⁰⁰ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 157–58.

In 2009, the moderate presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi was expected to replace conservative hardliner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but this did not occur. In what would be coined “the green movement,” millions of protestors again took to the streets against suspected election fraud. Unlike 1999 however, these went on for three months and the IRGC’s reaction was even harsher.¹⁰¹ The IRGC saw the turmoil as a direct threat to the regime, and voiced it as being caused by a Western conspiracy.¹⁰²

In response to an escalation in protests over a 50% rise in fuel prices in November 2019, the Iranian Government shut down the internet in the country for five days to limit popular organization and the ability to counter the government’s narrative to the outside world. External organizations received some information and images, estimating casualties in the hundreds.¹⁰³ The regime blamed the riots on a Western conspiracy just as they had in 2009. Khamenei stated that “the whole centers of evil in the world have mobilized efforts in recent days to encourage unrest in Iran.”¹⁰⁴ Just before the internet was blocked, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Seyed Abbas Mousavi claimed Iranians did not want support in reforms being voiced by Western leaders stating: “The dignified people of Iran are well aware that such hypocritical and spurious comments [from Pompeo] do not embody any sincere and affectionate sympathy.”¹⁰⁵ The regime was once again faced with an internal crisis, but in terms of turnout and destruction, things were getting worse. The access to information via the internet made narratives harder to control and allowed the world to witness the regime’s solution to free speech: violent retribution.

All three events resulted in the yielding of little reform by the Iranian government. The current president, Hasan Rouhani is more moderate than his predecessor, but he appears to be unable to enact a new approach to Iran’s foreign and domestic policy. The

¹⁰¹ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 297.

¹⁰² Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 186–88.

¹⁰³ Parisa Hafezi, “Iran Begins Reconnecting Internet After Shutdown over Protests,” Reuters, November 21, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-gasoline-protests-internet/iran-begins-reconnecting-internet-after-shutdown-over-protests-idUSKBN1XV19R>.

¹⁰⁴ “Iran Condemns U.S. Support for Iran,” Tasnim News Agency, November 18, 2019, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2019/11/18/2142231/iran-condemns-us-support-for-iran-unrest>.

¹⁰⁵ Tasnim News Agency.

government's foreign policy favors security over the economy, and its projection of hard power is often to the detriment of its soft power options.¹⁰⁶ While the supreme leader and ruling elites do not seem to be changing their ways, what is clear is domestic grievances are yielding more dynamic protests over the years, and they are being aided by advances in technology. The IRGC sees them as a direct threat to the foundation of the country and will violently suppress them.

With no true examples of large reformist concessions to popular uprisings, one cannot determine the level of domestic disarray the regime sees as too great. However, what is clear is that popular uprisings calling into question the government and theocratic rule are to be dealt with harshly. Allowing a movement to birth and grow is an unacceptable cost to the regime.

B. THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The Iran-Iraq war, which many Iranians refer to as the “imposed war,” began with an invasion of Iranian lands, but one would be mistaken to not recognize Iran's role in poking the Iraqi tiger. Iran refused to return land specified in the 1975 Algiers accord, and Ruhollah Khomeini was too eager to spread the revolution, throwing his support Iraq's senior Shia cleric, Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr, who advocated for regime change in Iraq. The spread of the revolution was voiced as the struggle to free the oppressed Shia of the Middle East, and this was a direct threat to Saddam Hussein's control of Iraq.¹⁰⁷ Iranian leadership assisted Iraq's reasoning to go to war, and the next eight years devastated Iran in blood and treasure. The exact cost in lives and money is not known. It is estimated that over a half million Iranians were killed, and approximately \$228 billion was spent between both sides, not accounting for infrastructure damage.¹⁰⁸ The government and military were devastated, and it became clear to the regime that no one was coming to help after the U.S.

¹⁰⁶ Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Prospects for Change in Iranian Foreign Policy,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 20, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/20/prospects-for-change-in-iranian-foreign-policy-pub-75569>.

¹⁰⁷ Tabatabai and Samuel, “What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us.”

¹⁰⁸ History, “Iran-Iraq War,” History, August 24, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/iran-iraq-war>.

Navy mistakenly shot down an Iranian civilian airliner with no repercussions. Khomeini was forced to accept a cease fire on July 20, 1988 with his “poison chalice” speech.¹⁰⁹ Iranian leadership remained in power, but at an unforeseen cost. The future political and military leaders would be shaped by the devastation, thirst for revenge, and reflections of what went wrong.

The Iran-Iraq war shaped a generation of Iranians, and the majority of its political and military leaders today took part in, or suffered as civilians during the war.¹¹⁰ To discount the experiences of Iran’s leaders from this conflict, and the evolution of its military facing terrible losses, and exacerbated by a demonstration of U.S. military might against Iraq in 1991, would be only to the detriment of critical analysis. As stated in a 2001 IRGC volume on the war, “The Iran-Iraq War, . . . because of its vast impact and outcomes, will affect every issue of internal and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran for at least the next several decades.”¹¹¹ The military’s change to an irregular warfare offense, and conventional warfare defense demonstrate that its leaders recognized that it could ill afford another total war due to a lack of outside support and technological capability.

A journal overseen by IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaee stressed the lessons of the conflict saying “Considering the substantial impact Iraq’s war against Iran had on . . . the country, it is necessary to [examine] this war . . . in order to adopt appropriate measures. . . to prevent or lessen the damages that competitors of the Islamic Republic of Iran might impose on the country.”¹¹² When faced with crossing a red line of the United States, and arguably Israel, Iran will pull back because its leaders reflect on the consequences of Ayatollah Khomeini overly aggravating Iraq, and giving Saddam Hussein sufficient reason

¹⁰⁹ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 177–78.

¹¹⁰ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), Ch. 9, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=449341>.

¹¹¹ Tabatabai and Samuel, “What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us,” 154. Translated by authors from: *Tajziyah va tahlil-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2001/02), p. 15.

¹¹² Tabatabai and Samuel, 163–64. Translated by authors from: *Tajziyah va tahlil-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2001/02), p. 12.

for invasion. This was demonstrated in the acceptance of the JCPOA, lack of retaliation for the targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani, and non-reciprocal action against the Israeli striking of 16 QF installations in Syria in the spring of 2018.¹¹³ The Iran-Iraq war shaped an entire generation as civilians and soldiers experienced it firsthand. It should be considered at the forefront of the regime's mind in considering the consequences for its actions. A return to the destruction of those eight years would be an unacceptable cost of conflict.

¹¹³ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 89.

IV. CASE STUDIES IN QUDS FORCE CAMPAIGNS

This chapter analyzes six case studies of Quds Force (QF) irregular warfare (IW) campaigns: The Balkans, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Yemen Civil War, the Syrian Civil War, the war against ISIS in Iraq, and Iran's support to and use of terrorism. Analysis of these case studies determines what independent variables have the greatest impact on the effectiveness of QF IW campaigns. After identifying these variables, one can develop a counter strategy to defeat these campaigns. As I discussed in Chapter II, determining success or failure in a traditional manner is not possible in most of these cases. The latter four are still ongoing. However, one can utilize achievement of Iran's NSOs at an acceptable cost as the dependent variable.

In each case study I provide an overview of the social-political situation during the time of conflict for each participant. I then observe the activities conducted by the QF during the conflict. Next, I examine the reactions to QF operations of the parties involved, whether they be non-state actors, social organizations, or nations. Finally, using the evidence at hand, I determine if Iran's use of the QF was able to successfully advance its national security objectives (NSOs) at an acceptable cost. The qualitative data gathered from the outcome of each of these studies enables determination of which independent variables lead to success or failure in achieving objectives for QF IW campaigns.

A. THE BALKANS, 1992–1996

The first known action by the QF outside of Iran was in the Balkans during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. At the heart of the conflict was the Bosnian Civil War. The QF's apparent intention was to ignite a movement that mimicked the Iranian revolution with Bosnian Muslims who were facing subjugation and genocide at the hands of Bosnian Serbs. This campaign failed to achieve any lasting gains concerning Iran's four NSOs, but it ultimately shaped the QF's IW construct in future conflict. The case of the Balkans was a sort of dress rehearsal for developing proxy forces and influencing politics, while avoiding unnecessary attention. Conducted in the gray zone of the conflict spectrum,

the QF's campaign manipulated political systems, trained jihadis, and kept the domestic population ignorant of its activities.

The case of the Balkans differs from the majority of known QF campaigns as it occurred well outside Iran's region of interest. The probability of success throughout the campaign was low given the involvement of major world powers in the conflict and a tremendous mix of socio-ethnic societies that had no interest in establishing a government modeled after the Islamic Republic. Despite the low chance of success, Iranian leadership likely saw several factors that worked in its favor. These included Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic's party of being a staunch supporters of the Iranian regime, previously established Yugoslavian student exchanges that sent hundreds of Yugoslavian Muslims to Iranian schools each year, and the ability to subvert influence of Sunni rival governments attempting to gain footing in Europe's underbelly.¹¹⁴ Iran additionally intervened to support the same population as NATO, lessening the likely hood that QF operatives would come into conflict with NATO forces. Gaining a foothold in Eastern Europe for easier infiltration of agents into Europe was also a likely strategic goal and investment in ties to Bosnia continue. The Iranian embassy in Sarajevo is the largest Iranian embassy in Europe and Iran has established numerous academic and charitable exchanges in Bosnia including the Persian-Bosnian College.¹¹⁵ While the strategic value for Iranian support to a community in Europe can be speculated, the case demonstrates that the campaign provided lessons for the QF that would be incorporated in campaigns down the road, and I discuss these in the second and third section of this case study. The low cost in testing the QF's IW construct is itself, strategically valuable.

1. Social-Political Situation

a. The Balkans

The breakup of Yugoslavia, beginning with the separation of Slovenia in 1991 began a lengthy conflict between groups fighting for identity, nationalism, and

¹¹⁴ Gordon N. Bardos, "Iran in the Balkans: A History and a Forecast," *World Affairs* 175, no. 5 (2013): 61–62.

¹¹⁵ Bardos, 65.

independence. Slovenia and Macedonia broke away and formed relatively peacefully, but Bosnia erupted into war and genocide. Cultural and religious divides fermented into all-out war that threatened to tear Europe's underbelly apart. The three main groups: Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs are all ethnically the same and speak the same language. Differences between the groups stems from religion and culture. The breakup culminated in April 1992 when Bosnia declared itself independent from Yugoslavia, which was to the dismay of the Bosnian Serb population. A civil war began between Serbs and government forces with various groups caught in the middle. These groups included a Muslim population, known as the Bosniaks, that accounted for an estimated 44% of the Bosnia-Herzegovina populace.¹¹⁶ Bosnian Serbs with greater weaponry and resources began to expel and commit atrocities against the non-Serbian population including Muslims. Bosnian Serbs sought to create their own country while forcing other ethnicities and religious sects to leave.¹¹⁷ The Bosnian government was not prepared, and the Serbs soon cut out their own country: the Serb Republic. Bosnian Serbs surrounded the capital of Sarajevo and eventually control up to 70% of the country.¹¹⁸ Prevalence of ethnic cleansing and other war crimes gained the West's attention, resulting in NATO's first ever offensive campaign, led by the United States.

b. *The United States and NATO*

The role the United States would assume as the World's only superpower was in flux after the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The proverbial boogeyman was defeated and what the future of NATO would look like was unknown. Bill Clinton assumed the U.S. presidency in 1992, advancing policies to reinvest in U.S. infrastructure over a grand military. However, his administration was also faced with various foreign policy issues. For example, military intervention in the name of humanitarianism in Somalia ended in a disaster, and North Korea was about to obtain a nuclear weapon. Additionally,

¹¹⁶ R. Cody Phillips, *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The U.S. Army's Role in Peace Enforcement Operations 1995–2004*, Center of Military History Publication 70–97-1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2007), 9–10, https://history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-97-1/cmhPub_70-97-1.pdf.

¹¹⁷ Phillips, 9–11.

¹¹⁸ Phillips, 9–10.

international terrorism began hitting the U.S. homeland for the first time in 1993 with the World Trade Center bombing. In 1992, the situation in the Balkans cascaded into a civil war in Bosnia that only grew more devastating in 1993. This crisis only added more foreign problem sets to the administration's plate. The American people were witnessing images of Serbs killing scores of Muslims in Bosnia in the media every day. The American body politic wanted something done; however, the United Nations seemed incapable, and NATO did not appear ready to take the lead, at least from the U.S. point of view.

After five months of British led negotiations with the parties involved in the Bosnian Civil War, beginning in September of 1992, President Clinton did not accept the Vance-Owen plan for peace in the Balkans and elected to intervene. The president saw more needed to be done to deter the Serbs and help the Muslims.¹¹⁹ The Clinton administration proceeded to sideline NATO allies in negotiations and embolden the three main actors in the Bosnian Civil War, the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims.¹²⁰ The administration's decision to intervene in yet another conflict led to more foreign dilemmas on the U.S. plate. As the war dragged on, President Clinton's later decisions to turn a blind eye to Iran's activities may be in part based on a sense that the United States wanted out to refocus on other foreign issues.

c. Iran

The early and mid-1990s were a time of reflection and experimentation for the Iranian government and the IRGC. The country was rebuilding after eight years of war with Iraq, the death of its founder in the summer of 1989, and continued isolation from most of the international world. Ayatollah Khamenei ascended to power, and President Rafsanjani effectively supported the new supreme leader in reconstruction efforts aimed at modernizing certain sectors and promotion of reliance of domestic industry.¹²¹ Included

¹¹⁹ Charles Krauthammer, "By Rejecting Vance-Owen Plan, U.S. Now Responsible for Peace," *Deseret News*, February 14, 1993, <https://www.deseret.com/1993/2/14/19032002/by-rejecting-vance-owen-plan-u-s-now-responsible-for-peace>.

¹²⁰ Ted Galen Carpenter, "How U.S. Meddling in the Bosnia Conflict Changed the Face of NATO," *The National Interest*, May 9, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/how-us-meddling-the-bosnia-conflict-changed-the-face-nato-20586>.

¹²¹ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 141–45.

in this period of reconstruction was also significant inclusion of the IRGC in economic opportunities. This inclusion helped cement the IRGC as a player in the internal and external politics of Iran.¹²² The IRGC now had significant interest in “coup proofing” the regime internally, while also examining new areas to enact its core tenant of spreading the revolution abroad. However, still rearing from its losses during the Iran-Iraq War and the looming fear of U.S. intervention, the IRGC needed a plan that did not draw discontent from an Iranian population still recovering.

In the early 1990s, the IRGC saw an opportunity to create an Islamic revolution like that of its own in Bosnia. There was also an opportunity to gain influence over Saudi Arabia, its archrival, for support from a significant Muslim population in Europe’s underbelly.¹²³ The Muslim president of the Bosnian government, Alija Izetbegovic, found no timely military support from Western powers to repel the well-armed Serbian forces. President Izetbegovic turned to Iran for support as Iran’s influence over him and his political party began many years before.

Turning to Iran for assistance was easy because Izetbegovic and several of his political party’s core members were supporters of the Islamic Revolution and traveled to Iran in 1982 to attend anniversary celebrations.¹²⁴ Izetbegovic wrote a political manifesto in 1970, titled the “Islamic Declaration.” This manifesto stated that Islamic and non-Islamic institutions could not coincide in the interest of peace.¹²⁵ His manifesto and 1982 trip to Iran earned him and other Islamic activists a prison term in 1970 and 1983. Several of those interred with him would be in his inner circle when he became president.¹²⁶ The political alignment with Iran’s goals enabled access and placement for Iranian agents and QF operatives as Iran sought to insert itself into the Bosnian conflict.

¹²² Ostovar, 146–47.

¹²³ John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qa’ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Saint Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007), 132.

¹²⁴ Bardos, “Iran in the Balkans History,” 61.

¹²⁵ Bardos, 61.

¹²⁶ Bardos, 61–62.

As the IRGC planned how its newly established QF branch could spread the revolution abroad in the post Iran-Iraq War era, it looked back at an earlier success story. In 1982, the QF's predecessor, the Office for Liberation Movements, sent 1500 IRGC soldiers to establish a base of operations on the Lebanese border in Syria.¹²⁷ IRGC Soldiers armed, trained, and indoctrinated disenfranchised Lebanese youth during a time of civil war and occupation by Israel. The IRGC did not have to fight, it could get the indigenous population to do that with enough support. This action would ultimately yield Hezbollah (The Party of God), who is arguably the IRGC's greatest success story at exporting the revolution.¹²⁸ In this model, the IRGC found a method for furthering Iran's extraterritorial objectives. This method is mostly covert, cheaper, less risky for Iranian soldiers, and was less likely to receive criticism from the Iranian people, or retaliation from Western powers, than deployment of traditional combat forces.

2. QF Operations

Iran's strategy in the Bosnian Civil War was to utilize the QF to arm, train, and support Muslim groups fighting Bosnian Serbs. They would also influence social and political institutions through establishing charitable foundations as cover for agents.¹²⁹ It is unclear which agents were QF operatives and which fell under Iran's foreign intelligence service, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), but they worked to the same goals. Others including Turkey and Saudi Arabia sought to support the Muslim struggle.¹³⁰ The majority of Bosnian Muslims were in fact Sunni. However, evidence suggests Iran outperformed both competitors, and saw the benefits of ignoring sectarianism in order to

¹²⁷ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 134.

¹²⁸ Ghattas, 136.

¹²⁹ Omid Montazeri and Ziyar Gol, "The Secret History of the Presence of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards in the Bosnian War," trans. Christopher Smith using Google Translate, BBC News Farsi, June 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-48511526>; James Risen, "Iran Gave Bosnia Leader \$500,000, CIA Alleges," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-12-31-mn-14139-story.html>.

¹³⁰ Bardos, "Iran in the Balkans History," 62.

further its goals.¹³¹ Open source reporting regarding Iran's support to Muslim groups in the conflict began in late 1992, but its activities did not warrant an overt response from Western nations who were stuck in debate of how to solve the crisis. Iran was also supporting the same group NATO intervened on the behalf of, so there was little threat of a direct confrontation.

Iranian operations conducted by the QF and MOIS were not limited to arming and training Islamic fighters. To gain access to political and social institutions, Iran utilized what is known as "soft power." In using soft power techniques, narratives and perception are shaped through cooperation and incentive versus coercion. Iran established cultural, media, and religious establishments. Infiltrating these establishments enabled agents to further pro-Iranian narratives, move into positions that brought better intelligence gathering, and fronts for covert operations.¹³² Iran's political influence went to the highest level as the CIA discovered President Izetbegovic was personally on Iran's payroll.¹³³ Iranian operatives also utilized legitimate organizations as cover for moving into and through the Balkans. In an April 2019 interview with Iranian internet channel Aparat, retired IRGC general Saeed Qassemi stated that he used Iran's Red Crescent Society uniform as part of his cover while training and supporting Bosnian Muslims during the civil war.¹³⁴ It is unknown if Western intelligence knew of this cover at the time, but it is a clear violation of international law. Utilization of soft power mechanisms and cover for action through legitimate organizations like the Red Crescent proved useful for the QF, and no known impacts to their operations occurred until the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement.

¹³¹ Matteo Pugliese, "Iran in the Balkans," *Limes* (blog), October 7, 2015, <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/liran-nei-balceni>; English translation available at: https://www.academia.edu/21163179/Iran_in_the_Balkans; Bardos, "Iran in the Balkans History," 62.

¹³² Risen, "Iran Gave Bosnia Leader \$500,000"; Muhammed Khatab, *Iran's Influence in Bosnia, a Dagger in the Flank of Europe* (Istanbul, Turkey: Middle East and North Africa Research and Study Center, 2019), <https://mena-studies.org/irans-influence-in-bosnia-a-dagger-in-the-flank-of-europe/>.

¹³³ Risen, "Iran Gave Bosnia Leader \$500,000."

¹³⁴ "Ex-General Says IRGC Was in Bosnia Disguised as Aid Workers," Voice of America News, April 17, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east/voa-news-iran/ex-general-says-irgc-was-bosnia-disguised-aid-workers>; Montazeri and Gol, "Secret History of the Presence of the Quds Force."

Other QF operations, however, tested the threshold for retaliation by the United States and NATO as Iran could be directly linked to arms smuggling and training jihadis. In September 1992, Croatian officials seized an Iranian Boeing 747 that was supposed to be delivering relief supplies into Bosnia. Upon inspection, 4,000 weapons, over a million rounds of ammunition, and 20–40 Iranians were discovered.¹³⁵ By at least mid-1993, U.S. intelligence began to recognize the potential long-term threats posed by QF operations. A report by the CIA stated that “Over the long term, Bosnian Muslims, who are likely to be the biggest losers and to blame the West, may become the biggest threat [to U.S. Forces].” The report estimated that 150 IRGC personnel were operating in Bosnia, and that Iran backed Hezbollah was expected to have a terrorist cell established.¹³⁶ In 1995, a CIA station chief’s identity was revealed by Bosnian intelligence to Iranian agents. He was evacuated before a reported assassination attempt could manifest.¹³⁷ Despite, the bravado of some of these activities, little was done by the West to combat the QF’s efforts.

3. Reaction to QF Operations

Iran did not receive any significant pushback for its efforts in the Balkans because United States foreign policy supported the Muslim cause, there was little concern for terrorism spilling out of the Balkans, and United States led NATO wanted an end to the conflict. Atrocities were committed by all sides during the Bosnian civil war, but it was those committed by the Serbs who gained attention in the media. Concern for terrorist camps and violations of international law by Iranians was marginal compared to the scale of ethnic cleansing being reported.

Support for the embattled Muslim community of Bosnia came from both the U.S. democratic administration and republicans alike. While some such as senate minority

¹³⁵ Michael R. Gordon, “Iran Said to Send Arms to Bosnians,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/10/world/iran-said-to-send-arms-to-bosnians.html>.

¹³⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, *Combatant Forces in the Former Yugoslavia*, Report No. C05621706 (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1993), 51, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1993-07-01b.pdf>.

¹³⁷ James Risen, “Bosnia Reportedly Told Iran of U.S. Spy,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 1997, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-01-15-mn-18698-story.html>; Bardos, “Iran in the Balkans History,” 63.

leader Bob Dole favored direct intervention, President Clinton favored a policy of lifting the arms embargo and air strikes against the Serb military.¹³⁸ NATO launched its air campaign in the summer of 1995 following the massacre of several thousand Bosnian Muslims near Srebrenica, Bosnia.¹³⁹ This operation forced the Serbs into a resolution at the end of 1995. Assistance to President Izetbegovic, however, came much earlier when President Clinton reportedly decided to turn a blind eye to the arms shipments Iran was funneling into Bosnia. This decision was not voiced to the CIA and discounted its concern for the threat further Iranian influence would bring.¹⁴⁰ This disconnect with the intelligence assessment was one of several. Supporting the Muslim struggle in Bosnia and enabling a cease fire was perceived by the administration as far outweighing the threat Iran posed.

There appeared to be a sharp disconnect between the White House and State Department with the CIA over the threat Iran warranted.¹⁴¹ Two declassified reports from U.S. National Security Council meetings in September and December 1995 demonstrate the U.S. intelligence assessment that QF and MOIS operatives posed a threat to U.S. peacekeepers. Both reports also doubted President Izetbegovic would follow through with expulsion of all Iranian military members within 30 days of the Dayton Peace Agreement being signed.¹⁴² In the end, all President Izetbegovic was required to do to receive \$100 million in aid from the United States was expel 200 Iranians from Bosnia and fire his deputy defense minister, Hasan Cengic, who was thoroughly involved with Iranian intelligence.¹⁴³ Upon fulfilling these two requirements, the United States and NATO gave

¹³⁸ Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qa'ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad*, 112–13.

¹³⁹ Schindler, 213.

¹⁴⁰ Pugliese, “Iran in the Balkans”; Risen, “Iran Gave Bosnia Leader \$500,000.”

¹⁴¹ Risen, “Iran Gave Bosnia Leader \$500,000.”

¹⁴² U.S. National Security Council, *Assessment: The Bosnian Government Divisions Show Confusion In Peace Negotiations*, Report No. 5235e80d993294098d51753d (Washington, DC: The White House, 1995), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/5235e80d993294098d51753d>; U.S. National Security Council, *Dealing With The Terrorist Threat To U.S. Forces*, Report No. 5235e80d993294098d517575 (Washington, DC: The White House, 1995), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/5235e80d993294098d517575>.

¹⁴³ Bardos, “Iran in the Balkans History,” 64; Risen, “Iran Gave Bosnia Leader \$500,000.”

the appearance that they were satisfied with Izetbegovic owning up to the Dayton Peace Agreement.

Although the appearance of abiding by the peace agreement was demonstrated, the QF were not done in Bosnia. In February 1996, NATO forces conducted a raid near Sarajevo where they detained 11 individuals with bomb materials, various weapons, and maps of peacekeeper bases. Three of the individuals were Iranian and one had a diplomatic passport. Iran did not deny the event and stated it would continue to support the struggle of Bosnian Muslims.¹⁴⁴ NATO did not seek more than expulsion of the individuals because it did not want to upset the fragile peace that NATO forces were enforcing with success. Iranian forces demonstrated no further threats to NATO peacekeepers and Iranian agents appeared to return to a soft power strategy.

4. Iran's NSOs Advancement

The QF's campaign in the Balkans did not succeed in attaining gains in Iran's four NSOs, but it did provide the organization with a framework for conducting IW without garnering retaliation. Several variables present should have acquired success. For example, the United States and NATO did not retaliate militarily, economically, or diplomatically against Iran significantly because QF and MOIS operations were not seen as threatening enough to warrant a response. The Clinton administration was faced with numerous foreign policy issues and its decision to not let NATO lead eventually lead to a "just get it done so we can move on" mentality. There were sharp disagreements between the Clinton administration and U.S. intelligence. Ignoring the Bosnian government's relationship with Iran, including failing to expel all Iranian operatives, were acceptable as a cease fire was attained.

These variables, however, did not contribute to supporting Iran's NSOs given the appetite in Bosnia and other Balkan states for following Iran's model. Despite its significant political influence over President Izetbegovic, investment in soft power projects, and lack of resistance from NATO, the QF's campaign failed to plant Iranian

¹⁴⁴ "Bosnia - Iranian Reaction To Raid Of Base," February 17, 1996, Associated Press, video, 2:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF1fcAK-aZ4>.

ideology in Bosnia. Between 1994 and 1996, Iran reportedly invested more than \$200 million in Bosnia.¹⁴⁵ The Muslim population, although significant, was also only one of several in Bosnia, and no others showed support for Iran. The fact that NATO peacekeepers had to remain for over 10 years demonstrates the strong ethnic divides in the country. There is evidence that Iran followed a purely soft power strategy soon after in Albania, mimicking techniques used in Bosnia, but little gains from this venture are apparent.¹⁴⁶ Iran cannot compete with Western powers when it comes to the ability to wield economic and diplomatic influence when the target audience does not align ideologically with Iran. However, the one concern Iran's efforts in the Balkans presents is the potential for activating cells in Europe's underbelly.¹⁴⁷ Borders between so many nations remain porous and represent a point to starburst terrorist activities across Europe given Iran's political presence in Sarajevo alone.¹⁴⁸ The QF's campaign in the Balkans may not have succeeded outright, but it has the potential to be simply dormant, waiting for reactivation to meet Iranian objectives in Europe.

B. THE U.S. OCCUPATION OF IRAQ, 2003–2011

Quds Force operations countering the U.S. occupation and stabilization of Iraq is a key example of overstepping victory. Iran's intervention in the U.S. led Operation IRAQI FREEDOM led to significant gains in all four of Iran's NSOs. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 presented Iran with an opportunity to expand its influence in Iraq and turn its former adversary into a partner.¹⁴⁹ The United States removed Iran's top rival in the Middle East for Iran and opened greater access to the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.¹⁵⁰ The U.S. military's lack of preparation for combating insurgencies allowed the QF to devastate the American will to continue. However, the overreach of QF activities in

¹⁴⁵ Montazeri and Gol, "Secret History of the Presence of the Quds Force."

¹⁴⁶ Bardos, "Iran in the Balkans History," 66; Pugliese, "Iran in the Balkans."

¹⁴⁷ Bardos, "Iran in the Balkans History," 66.

¹⁴⁸ Bardos, 65.

¹⁴⁹ Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," The Iran Primer, August 2015, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-iraq>.

¹⁵⁰ Eisenstadt.

Iraq following the U.S. withdrawal in 2011 ultimately reversed many of Iran's gains and contributed to the rise of ISIS.

1. Social-Political Situation

a. Iraq

Prior to the 2003 invasion, Iraq was an ostensibly secular country united under a brutal dictatorship bent on survival above all else. The country was and is mostly Arab, with a large Kurdish population. The majority followed the Islamic faith and religious rivalries were somewhat controlled under the finger of the oppressive Baathist regime.¹⁵¹ The regime violently quelled any reformers or dissenters. After the Iran-Iraq War, both Arab Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north conducted an unsuccessful rebellion against Saddam Hussein's Baathist party. They were violently subdued and marginalized from any political power.¹⁵² After Saddam's regime was toppled in 2003 and the Iraqi army was dismantled, the secular grudges proved disastrous for the U.S. led coalition. As time passed, sectarian actions such as the Al-Qaeda attack on the Shia shrine in Samarra in 2006 exacerbated the violence. Shia and Sunni groups attacked each other in the name of justice, and coalition forces were caught in the crossfire. They soon became the targets when there was no domestic force to control the chaos and provide relief. However, the Iranians effectively exploited these grudges, particularly those of the marginalized Shia, to subvert stabilization of the country's military and political redesign.

b. The United States

The decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein with no plan for establishing an effective and friendly government post conflict is a clear mistake of the Bush administration. The United States' reasoning behind the invasion reflects American sentiment in the post 9/11 era. According to the U.S. State Department following the overthrow of Saddam, the goal in Iraq was to "[defeat] a regime that developed and used

¹⁵¹ Alissa J. Rubin, "Iraq Before the War: A Fractured, Pent-Up Society," *New York Times*, July 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/britain-inquiry-iraq-war/iraq-society/>.

¹⁵² Rubin.

weapons of mass destruction, that harbored and supported terrorists, committed outrageous human rights abuses, and defied the just demands of the United Nations and the world.”¹⁵³ The Bush administration began seeking coercion against Iraq via the United Nations in 2002 for the reasons the State Department gave, but there were more reasons. These included perceived success in Afghanistan, a bipartisan congress motivated by constituents wanting to see justice brought to terrorists, a sense that the Middle East would accept democracy, and the fact that Saddam would always be able to fund trouble in the Middle East with Iraq’s oil reserves.¹⁵⁴ Many factors contributed to the approval for the U.S. invasion, but the decision making and support that went behind the approval both from Congress and the American body politic was short sighted.

The American people expected a short decisive war with minimal casualties; it did not go as planned. By the end of 2006 it became apparent that the war was going poorly and popular support was withering. Attacks on U.S. forces in October 2006 doubled over 10 months to an average of 180 per day.¹⁵⁵ U.S. Soldiers were being targeted by both Sunni and Shia insurgents, while also being caught in the middle between both groups fighting each other.¹⁵⁶ The Iraqi Army, touted by the administration as being the ones who would be ready to take over security were performing poorly. The 2006 *Iraq Study Group Report* called into concern everything from ethnic loyalties, refusals to carry out missions, low readiness rates, and an inability to sustain themselves.¹⁵⁷ The disenchantment between the Bush administration and the body politic resulted in the republicans losing control of the Senate and House of Representatives.¹⁵⁸ The loss of faith in the Iraq strategy continued

¹⁵³ U.S. State Department Public Affairs Office, *Winning the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: U.S. State Department, 2003), <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/24172.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ Victor Davis Hanson, “Why Did We Invade Iraq?,” *The National Review*, March 26, 2013, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2013/03/why-did-we-invade-iraq-victor-davis-hanson/>.

¹⁵⁵ James III Baker et al., *The Iraq Study Group Report* (Washington, DC, 2006), 10, <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA459111>.

¹⁵⁶ Baker et al., 10.

¹⁵⁷ Baker et al., 12–13.

¹⁵⁸ Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Jim Rutenberg, “Rumsfeld Resigns as Defense Secretary After Big Election Gains for Democrats,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/08/us/politics/09BUSHCND.html>.

to have political ramifications and was exacerbated by other crises including the 2008 U.S. housing crisis. Barack Obama ran on a promise to end the war in Iraq in 2008 and saw his promise fulfilled in 2011. His decision to withdraw all forces in 2011 as purely political is debatable.¹⁵⁹ What is not debated, however, is that the majority wanted out as they had lost faith in the outcome that President Bush touted in 2003. Over 4,000 Americans were dead, and the world's strongest military was leaving. The termination of the American experiment in nation building came about in large part from QF operations exploiting political fissures and U.S. Military unpreparedness.

c. Iran

The years leading up to the 9/11 terror attacks and the invasion of Iraq included the emergence of liberalism and conservative efforts to quash it in Iran.¹⁶⁰ Mohammad Khatami won the Iranian presidency in 1997 with a staggering 70 percent of the vote, alarming Ayatollah Khamenei, the IRGC, and other conservatives.¹⁶¹ President Khatami sought to make reforms but was rebuffed at almost every turn by conservatives, claiming his policies sought to weaken Iran in the interest of its enemies.¹⁶² In July 1999, the conflict between the reformist and conservative movements boiled over.

In 1999, Iran experienced its first significant upheaval since the 1979 revolution when the reformist newspaper *Salam* was shutdown. The newspaper published an article concerning a conservative conspiracy bent on stopping Khatami's reforms. For five days, thousands of protestors clashed with the Basij and other pro-government organizations.¹⁶³ The uprising was subdued and led to the IRGC asserting more control in the

¹⁵⁹ Mark Landler, "U.S. Troops to Leave Iraq by Year's End, Obama Says," *New York Times*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/middleeast/president-obama-announces-end-of-war-in-iraq.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 152–56.

¹⁶¹ Ostovar, 156.

¹⁶² Ostovar, 156–57.

¹⁶³ Ostovar, 157; Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 295.

government.¹⁶⁴ The event frightened the conservative hardliners in Iran, and the regime could not allow a movement to form that could lead to a second revolution.

The conservatives' control over Iran was reestablished in the mid-2000s, thanks in part to tense relations with the United States. In January 2002, despite intelligence sharing with the United States regarding Al-Qaeda, President Bush labeled Iran a member of the "axis of evil." Iranian conservatives found in this policy their so-called evidence to show that liberalism was a U.S. tool to overthrow the regime. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 only further aided the conservative argument. Additionally, the Bush administration's rejection of Khatami's resolution to prevent conflict over the discovery of Iran's nuclear program further damaged Khatami's standing.¹⁶⁵ U.S. aggression enabled conservatives to reassert power and setup ultra conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for the 2005 presidential election.¹⁶⁶ The conservative control of Iran enabled the IRGC to enact its campaign against the United States led coalition in Iraq. President Bush failed to recognize the damaging effects of forgoing diplomacy in the interest of firing up domestic support with saber rattling.

Iran's intervention in Iraq was designed as a covert operation that could maintain plausible deniability with the domestic population and the international world. Conventional soldiers were not deployed, and QF operations inside Iraq were not openly publicized. This deniability and use of only SOF kept any public casualty figures low. The political fallout of the 2006 U.S. elections and wide debate regarding the 2007 surge in Iraq pointed to a U.S. population sick of the war and in no mood to accept escalation. QF military and political operations could continue unimpeded because the Iranian population was unaffected and the Iranian regime had every reason to believe the American people would not accept another war as long as the homeland was safe.

In 2009 the U.S. had an opportunity to bridge build with Iran, but instead U.S. policies continued to enable the conservative narrative. Amid reports of election fraud,

¹⁶⁴ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 157–58.

¹⁶⁵ Ostovar, 164–65.

¹⁶⁶ Ostovar, 160–61.

Iranian President Ahmadinejad, was reelected in 2009.¹⁶⁷ The opposition formed into “the Green Movement.” The movement did not accept the election results and clashed with the IRGC and Basij in the streets all over Iran.¹⁶⁸ However, U.S. policies advocating support to the Green Movement were once again used by hardliners to demonstrate a Western conspiracy to overthrow the regime. Support to an anti-regime movement as opposed to pushing for cooperation between nations soured relations.¹⁶⁹ QF and MOIS operations in Iraq continued as the regime could still point to the prospect of a Western conspiracy, and President Obama promised the American people to withdraw.

2. QF Operations

The QF campaign to subvert U.S. efforts in Iraq included military, cultural, and political mechanisms.¹⁷⁰ Iran built its strategy for Iraq in recognition that it had cultural advantages with the Iraqi Shia and admittance that it was at a gross asymmetric disadvantage with the U.S. Military. Preparation for the campaign began post September 11, 2001, when Iran and its proxies recognized the likelihood of the United States invading or forcing a regime change in Iraq. A 2002 Iraqi report indicates that Iranian agents were working with at least one of its proxies, the Badr Brigade, to form “open” and “secret” groups to operate inside Iraq post-U.S. intervention.¹⁷¹ The QF’s links to Shia groups and a porous border with which to move supplies across proved deadly for coalition forces attempting to stabilize Iraq post-defeat of Saddam’s regime.

In order to conduct counter coalition operations militarily, the QF utilized several Shia groups who were in Iraq before the 2003 invasion, or infiltrated the open border soon after. These groups included the Badr Brigade, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI),

¹⁶⁷ Ostovar, 181–82.

¹⁶⁸ Ostovar, 182–85.

¹⁶⁹ Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Shahir ShahidSaless, *Iran and the United States: An Insider’s View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* (United States: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 234–35.

¹⁷⁰ Yoel Guzansky, “Made in Iran: The Iranian Involvement in Iraq,” *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 4 (January 2011): 86.

¹⁷¹ Iraqi Intelligence Services, *Iraqi Intelligence Study of Badr Corps* 9, Report Reference Number: ISGQ-2005-00038283 (Iraq: Iraqi Intelligence Services, 2002), 70–71, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Iraqi-Intelligence-Study-about-the-Badr-Corps-Translation.pdf>.

Dawa, and those under the leadership of Shia cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr.¹⁷² These groups engaged in attacks on coalition and Iraqi security forces, while also infiltrating Iraqi security forces and government positions.¹⁷³ The Badr Brigade successfully infiltrated the ranks of the Iraqi Ministry of Intelligence, army, and special forces units enabling intelligence collection to be passed to the QF and other Shia groups.¹⁷⁴ Actions by these groups could be linked to Iran as the conflict grew, but political unwillingness to attack Iranians directly and chaos inside Iraq kept coalition forces occupied.

The QF primarily supplied, trained and guided these forces in an effort to promote instability, inflict U.S. casualties, and increase control over the Shia population. By using proxies and remaining in the shadows, Iran could maintain a level of plausible deniability.¹⁷⁵ At first, Iran primarily funneled weapons including improvised explosive devices (IED) and evolved them concurrent with coalition efforts to defeat them. This included explosively formed penetrators (EFP), and improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAM). These weapons proved difficult to defeat, and killed hundreds of U.S. servicemembers.¹⁷⁶ By 2005, the coalition had intelligence linking Iran to the chaos, but how to target QF operations could not be agreed upon. By 2006, Iranian involvement became more pronounced as Iraq showed little signs of stabilizing. The QF ramped up activities for two likely reasons: The Iranian regime believed Iran was no longer a feasible target for U.S. invasion, and to undermine U.S. efforts to ensure power was shared with Iraqi Sunnis in the new government.¹⁷⁷ Intelligence efforts aimed at targeting Iranian influence began to grow as QF involvement became readily apparent.

While orchestrating proxies from the shadows was the QF's preferred method, in several instances QF operatives were directly linked to operations. Graves found following

¹⁷² Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," 2.

¹⁷³ Eisenstadt, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Michael Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 3, no. 11 (November 1, 2010): 13.

¹⁷⁵ Joel Rayburn, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War Volume II* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, 2019), 66, <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo121367/gpo121367.htm>.

¹⁷⁶ Rayburn, 620.

¹⁷⁷ Rayburn, 66–67.

the coalition offensive in Najaf in 2004 were marked with glass jars. Inside the jars were names of the dead and their addresses, many with Tehran, the Iranian capital.¹⁷⁸ In 2006, two senior QF officers were captured during a raid in Basra, Iraq.¹⁷⁹ A Hezbollah commander captured in Basra, Iraq in March 2007 discussed QF involvement in a high-profile raid resulting in five U.S. soldier deaths.¹⁸⁰ In January 2007, QF operatives participated in or provided direct support to the raid. The assault force used forged identity cards, U.S. uniforms, and vehicles typically used by U.S. forces to gain entry to a U.S. base. The assault force ambushed a group of Americans, killing one at the scene, and capturing four. The four were later found dead and left on the side of a road.¹⁸¹ This raid was believed to have been in response to coalition special operations unit Task Force-17's capture of five QF officers in Erbil a week prior.¹⁸² QF Commander Qassem Soleimani sent a personal message to U.S. General David Petraeus, stating that he was in control of Iran's extraterritorial policies. He then followed up with publicized visits to Shia groups fighting in Iraq.¹⁸³ Despite intelligence implicating Iran in numerous attacks, the coalition did not do more than utilize Task Force 17 to target proxy leadership. These efforts, however, fell flat because of the QF's hold on Iraqi politicians controlling the judicial system.¹⁸⁴ In Iraq, the QF were impeded minimally, and could operate more openly as the war dragged on.

Although Iran's proxy groups shared a Shia ideology and worked towards the same goals, operations were not without contention. Muqtada Al-Sadr did not always agree with

¹⁷⁸ Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *New Yorker*, September 23, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>.

¹⁷⁹ William Branigin, "Iran's Quds Force Was Blamed for Attacks on U.S. Troops in Iraq," *Washington Post*, accessed June 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/irans-quds-force-was-blamed-for-attacks-on-us-troops-in-iraq/2011/10/11/gIQAPqv0dL_story.html.

¹⁸⁰ John F. Burns and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Says Iran Helped Iraqis Kill Five G.I.'s," *New York Times*, July 3, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/03/world/middleeast/03iraq.html>.

¹⁸¹ Burns and Gordon; Branigin, "Iran's Quds Force Was Blamed for Attacks on U.S. Troops in Iraq."

¹⁸² Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 58.

¹⁸³ Liz Sly, "Five Thoughts Petraeus Has About the Future of the Middle East," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/20/what-petraeus-thinks-about-the-islamic-state-and-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>.

¹⁸⁴ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 59.

guidance from Iran, and the main Sadrist group, Jaysh Al-Mahdi, sometimes acted unilaterally.¹⁸⁵ There existed a division between the authority of Iranian ideology and the guidance of prominent Shia clerics such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Ayatollah Sistani vehemently disagrees with the *Velayat i Faqih* (principle of the jurist), which is the foundation of Iran's government.¹⁸⁶ In 2008, Jaysh Al-Mahdi took on U.S. and Iraqi forces alone at the battle of Basra, suffering such a significant defeat that Muqtada Al-Sadr took up a more political approach afterwards.¹⁸⁷ The group also clashed with other Iranian proxies including the ISCI. All of the groups, however, were reliant on Iran for continued support and the QF stepped in when required to do so. In response to a series of 2007 Shia-Shia killings using EFPs in Karbala, the QF narrowed its support for groups receiving EFPs, denying them to those who used them for other goals.¹⁸⁸ The QF commander, Qassem Soleimani, demonstrated his influence over the groups when he negotiated cease fires between Jaysh Al-Mahdi and the ISCI in 2007.¹⁸⁹ The QF, in its advisory and support role was able to keep the groups in check enough to maintain a sufficiently cohesive effort.

The QF's cultural efforts were equally as important as the military aspect of the strategy to subvert the coalition and gain control over Iraq. Iran played upon the subjugation of Shia under Saddam's rule, stoking calls to arms against Sunnis and the coalition. Al-Qaeda's bombing of the Imam Ali Mosque led to several Shia groups taking up arms against Sunnis and leading to widespread sectarian violence.¹⁹⁰ As sectarian conflict spread, sowing more chaos for the coalition, Iran then assured that the new military and government became Shia dominated.

The QF began inserting agents into the Iraqi government immediately following the establishment of a transitional government. Two of the Iranian ambassadors, post 2003,

¹⁸⁵ Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," 3; Knights, "Evolution of Iran's Special Groups," 13.

¹⁸⁶ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 53.

¹⁸⁷ Guzansky, "Made in Iran," 87.

¹⁸⁸ Knights, "Evolution of Iran's Special Groups," 14.

¹⁸⁹ Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," 4.

¹⁹⁰ Bobby Ghosh, "Twelve Years on, Remembering the Bomb That Started the Middle East's Sectarian War," Quartz, August 28, 2015, <https://qz.com/476191/remembering-the-bomb-that-started-the-middle-east-sectarian-war/>.

Hassan Kazemi-Qomi and Hassan Danaifar were both QF members, and from their positions, were able to wield diplomatic influence.¹⁹¹ In 2005 and 2009, Iran reportedly influenced political elections through funding and advisement.¹⁹² Iran inserted a Dawa Party member, Nouri Al-Maliki into the position of Iraqi prime minister and this action paid dividends for the QF's campaign.

The QF effectively controlled the government of Iraq by assuring its puppet was placed at the head of the government and that Shias dominated the legislature. Factions between the Shia members of parliament still existed, but Iran wielded sufficient influence. Qassem Soleimani reportedly orchestrated Nouri Al-Maliki's attainment of Iraq's first prime minister, and Maliki demonstrated clear alignment with Iranian goals in that position.¹⁹³ The June 2009 U.S.-Iraq security agreement forbade unilateral U.S. action in Iraqi cities. Maliki further curtailed counter QF operations by having a veto power on Iraq's counterterrorism command, effectively ending U.S. special operations raids. Concurrently, Shia proxy leaders under Iraqi custody were released in greater numbers.¹⁹⁴ Maliki further demonstrated the level of influence held over him by the QF when he allowed senior operative Mustafa Al-Sheibani to return to Iraq, ignoring a warrant against him for leading an IED smuggling ring.¹⁹⁵ The QF's political hold over Iraq and its increase in violent activities after 2005 demonstrated an exceptional level of Iranian influence. The U.S. led coalition developed some options, but political will was falling fast.

3. Reaction to QF Operations

A series of blunders after the Iraqi regime was toppled sowed the seeds of mistrust between the American people, military leadership, and the administration. This series of missteps withered support for the war, weakened the U.S. military's ability to respond to other threats, and enabled Iranian exploitation. President Bush declared an end to major

¹⁹¹ Guzansky, "Made in Iran," 87; Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," 3.

¹⁹² Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," 4.

¹⁹³ Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

¹⁹⁴ Knights, "Evolution of Iran's Special Groups," 12.

¹⁹⁵ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 54–55.

combat operations on May 1, 2003. The Iraqi military was disbanded later that month under the auspice that a fresh start was what the military needed and that the situation was stable. However, combat was far from over as the violence did not subside and instead morphed into an organized resistance. The country erupted throughout 2004 and 2005 with events such as the Abu Gharib Prison scandal, the battle of Fallujah, and violence surrounding the 2005 Iraqi elections.¹⁹⁶ By mid 2006 it was clear that the war was far from over and that the strategy was failing.

The realities of the Iraq War took its toll on the U.S. military and political system in 2006. President Bush's republican administration lost the House of Representatives and the Senate. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was forced to resign as the president believed the political fallout was due to the war, stating: "many Americans voted last night to register their displeasure with the lack of progress [in Iraq]."¹⁹⁷ The election ended six years of a republican dominated U.S. government.¹⁹⁸ Frustration with the situation led to a rift between leadership as a new strategy was formulated. The National Security Council, General's Raymond Odierno, and David Petraeus argued for an approach that required 5 to 10 additional brigades to secure Iraq.¹⁹⁹ The joint chiefs of staff, the State Department, and the Central Command (CENTCOM) commander did not agree.²⁰⁰ The CENTCOM commander, Admiral William Fallon, was concerned that a surge of forces to Iraq would leave the military incapable of meeting other threats outside Iraq including Iran.²⁰¹ Numerous democrats opposed the surge including future U.S. President Barack Obama.²⁰² The stark divides caused by the 2006 U.S. elections led to the surge being an "all in"

¹⁹⁶ "The Iraq War," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>.

¹⁹⁷ Stolberg and Rutenberg, "Rumsfeld Resigns."

¹⁹⁸ Stolberg and Rutenberg.

¹⁹⁹ Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History*, First American Edition (New York, NY: Encounter Books, 2009), 27.

²⁰⁰ Kevin P. Marsh, "The Intersection of War and Politics: The Iraq War Troop Surge and Bureaucratic Politics," *Armed Forces & Society* 38, no. 3 (July 1, 2012): 418–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X11415492>.

²⁰¹ Marsh, 421.

²⁰² Marsh, 422.

strategy. The administration needed the war to end, the American people were disenchanted, the military was overstretched, and the democrats found in the continuing conflict a rallying point as they prepared for the 2008 presidential election.

The surge was approved and in 2007 thousands more U.S. Soldiers flooded into Iraq to defeat Sunni Al-Qaeda and the Shia militia groups. Militarily successful, the campaign secured Iraqi territory and some groups were decisively defeated.²⁰³ Defeat on the battlefield, however, did not dismantle any of the QF's proxies. Instead, several adopted new strategies including Moqtada Al-Sadr adopting a political approach. The political approach worked as Prime Minister Maliki reached out to reconcile with Sadr's groups including Jaysh Al-Mahdi, without any consultation with U.S. diplomats or commanders.²⁰⁴

In late 2007, some U.S. Senators sought to grant President Bush additional authorities to combat Iranian forces inside Iraq with amendment 3017 to the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act. Designated as the "Lieberman-Kyl amendment," the amendment's purpose was "to express the sense of the Senate regarding Iran."²⁰⁵ The amendment sighted testimony from several reports and testimony regarding Iran's efforts to destabilize Iraq and target U.S. soldiers. Paragraphs three and four essentially authorized expansion of counter-Iran efforts with paragraph three stating: "it should be the policy of the United States to combat, contain, and roll back the violent activities and destabilizing influence inside Iraq of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, its foreign facilitators such as Lebanese Hezbollah, and its indigenous Iraqi proxies."²⁰⁶ Paragraph four called for the "prudent and calibrated use of all instruments of U.S. national power."²⁰⁷ These aspects of the amendment were met with sharp criticism from democrats

²⁰³ Rayburn, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War Volume II*, 398.

²⁰⁴ Rayburn, 399–400.

²⁰⁵ The record of the amendment can be found in the Senate records at: "Proceedings and Debates of the 110th Congress, First Session," *Congressional Record* 153, no. 140 (September 20, 2007), <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2007/9/20/senate-section/article/S11785-1>.

²⁰⁶ U.S. Congress.

²⁰⁷ U.S. Congress.

and paragraphs three and four were ultimately cut. Instead, the senate provided the president with a non-binding resolution that supported declaring the IRGC a terrorist organization.²⁰⁸ With the democrats controlling both congressional houses and the 2008 election year looming, there was little motivation to allow escalation with Iran. The QF remained unimpeded.

In addition to the surge, the coalition utilized SOF to target QF support and mission command networks. While successful tactically, these operations typically fell flat because Iranian political influence led to the release of captured individuals and ignored coalition evidence. *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War* recounts the circumstances surrounding one of these operations: coalition special operations conducted a raid in December 2006 on a Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) compound. They captured the intended target Mohsen Chizari, head of the QF operations department. Evidence from the raid clearly pointed to Badr and SCIRI involvement with the QF. This came to the shock of President Bush as the SCIRI leader, Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, was a guest of the White House earlier in December. The evidence clearly pointed to QF intentions in Iraq, but Prime Minister Maliki released the prisoners with Iranian ties.²⁰⁹ Without the ability to waive diplomatic power over Maliki's Shia dominated government, U.S. efforts yielded no lasting results against QF operations.

Iran recognized effects of the 2006 elections on the U.S. political leadership, the repercussions it had concerning the U.S. military's constrained capacity to escalate in the region, and the will of the American people to accept the costs. The Iranian regime, recognizing the American lack of will to confront it directly, increased its destabilizing efforts. Every U.S. strategy was thwarted as the QF maintained plausible deniability and was backed up by a puppet government. Without correcting the political issues, the U.S. strategy had no hope of succeeding.

²⁰⁸ David M. Herszenhorn, "Senate Urges Bush to Declare Iran Guard a Terrorist Group," *New York Times*, September 27, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/27/washington/27cong.html>; "BREAKING: Lieberman-Kyl's Iran Amendment Passes.," Think Progress, September 26, 2007, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/breaking-lieberman-kyls-iran-amendment-passes-44ab3a7b1182/>.

²⁰⁹ Rayburn, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War Volume II*, 72–73.

According to the 2019 study, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, the U.S. never developed a coherent strategy to deal with Iranian destabilization. The U.S. government seemed to think from the beginning, that regional actors would not react to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Once it realized the fallacy, it could only come up with tactical and operational level responses, ignoring the need for strategic action unified between military and politics.²¹⁰ The Iranian strategy worked because it made sure its strategy complimented military and political mechanisms so that it could subvert the U.S. led coalition despite its asymmetric disadvantage.

4. Iran's NSOs Advancement

Iran's use of the QF during the U.S. occupation of Iraq resulted in Iran advancing all four of its NSOs at an acceptable cost. Domestic control was assured as the QF campaign incurred no significant costs or protests from the Iranian people. U.S. rhetoric from 2002–2008 was vehemently anti-Iran, so the regime could always point to the proverbial boogeyman in Iraq waiting to strike Iran as justification. Iran's regional influence increased as it turned an enemy into an ally. The QFs placement of political officials including Prime Minister Maliki, and Shia dominated parliament ensured it had a grip on the future of Iraq's policies. Iran also had a bridge now to its Syrian ally, and to its archrival, Saudi Arabia. Although Iran does not disclose complete economic figures, several statistics demonstrate the gains from opening trade with Iraq. From 2003–2007, trade between Iran-Iraq grew 30 percent each year.²¹¹ Iranian statistics show that between 2013–2014 trade amounted to \$6 billion, mostly involving exports to Iraq.²¹² Iran also supplies 5–10 percent of Iraq's electricity, and uses Iraq for unloading cheap, subsidized products.²¹³ The QF's campaign defeated the U.S. military in Iraq and removed those forces from the Middle East. The campaign demonstrated that the QF was an effective military and political mechanism to avoid red lines. QF activities killed hundreds of U.S.

²¹⁰ Rayburn, 620–21.

²¹¹ Edward Wong, "Iran Is Playing a Growing Role in Iraq Economy," *New York Times*, March 17, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/17/world/middleeast/17iran.html>.

²¹² Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," 5–6.

²¹³ Eisenstadt, 5–6.

service members and coalition soldiers, while receiving no significant retaliation. The QF could do so because of plausible deniability, control of the political-judicial system, and the unwillingness of the United States to decisively engage after the 2006 elections.

The continuation of the campaign to gain further control of Iraq, however, is an example of overreaching leading to reversing gains. Iran's continued subversion of the Sunni to ensure Shia dominance disrupted the military and created resentment that allowed ISIS ideology to grow. Marginalization of Sunnis in the government and advancement of less qualified Shia military officials contributed to the near collapse of Iraq. The dislodgement of the Iraqi military from cities like Mosul, and its encroachment on Baghdad brought the U.S. military back in force to save Iraq, in addition to incurring economic, and influence costs. I further analyze the consequences of Iran's overreach in a separate case study.

C. THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR, 2011–2020

Iran's intervention in the Syrian Civil War demonstrates the capabilities and limitations of the IRGC's expeditionary force. QF participation in the effort to save the Syrian regime began as a small package but eventually grew to include tens of thousands of regular and irregular soldiers, as well as the assistance of Russia to defeat the enemies of the regime. Currently, the QF's campaign in Syria along with the intervention of Russia has succeeded in preserving President Bashar Al-Assad's regime. The campaign has increased Iran's regional influence through power projection in Israel's back yard and soft power mechanisms. However, the campaign has not made gains in Iran's other three NSOs. The conflict has been costly in blood and treasure. In addition to revealing the limitations of the QF expeditionary capabilities when met by a well-armed and determined resistance, this case demonstrates unprecedented reactions by the Israelis to stop the QF from establishing permanent bases in Syria, as well as the impact on the Iranian homeland when hundreds of soldier body bags begin returning home.

1. Social-Political Situation

The Syrian Civil War can be likened to a wrestling "royal rumble," where there are multiple participants; everyone seems to be fighting everyone; and alliances can shift

rapidly. Approximately 10 resistance or terrorist groups, depending upon one's perspective, are fighting for territory or to overthrow the regime. An equal number of external actors provide support to assist or defeat the regime. The United States has been involved in the civil war since 2015, but its operations have entirely been directed towards defeating the Islamic State. It has not taken steps militarily against the Syria regime, save a 2017 and 2018 cruise missile strike on Syrian military infrastructure in response to the regime's use of chemical weapons. Surveying all parties involved in the conflict would unnecessarily go beyond the scope of this thesis. This case study examines the primary internal and external actors with whom the QF have supported or fought against in pursuit of Iran's NSOs during this war.

a. *The Syrian Government*

From the beginning of the Arab Spring inspired uprisings in Syria, the Syrian regime believed that democratic reforms would lead to the regime's dismemberment, and possibly punishment.²¹⁴ The Syrian population in 2011 was comprised of Shia, Alawite, Christian, and Kurdish minorities with Sunnis accounting for 60 percent.²¹⁵ The current regime traces its lineage to 1963 when the Ba'ath Party executed a coup. The Alawite minority has received the majority of governmental and military benefits since.²¹⁶ When the uprisings began, it was the disenfranchised Sunnis whom the regime subjugated for decades, that filled the streets to call for reforms. Joseph Holliday points out, that the regime saw the calls for reform as an effort to remove and punish the Ba'ath party and Alawite minority for past injustices. The ruling party was fearful of what would happen, so it adopted the strategy President Assad's father had to resistance in the 1980s: brutality.²¹⁷ The regime failed to recognize the effects its strategy would have on the domestic population; its military ranks, which included a Sunni majority in its conscripts;

²¹⁴ Joseph Holliday, *The Struggle for Syria in 2011: An Operational and Regional Analysis*, Middle East Security Report 2 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2011), 9, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Struggle_For_Syria.pdf.

²¹⁵ Holliday, 9.

²¹⁶ Holliday, 9.

²¹⁷ Holliday, 10.

and international opinion. It believed brutality was the only answer to prevent regime change.

The Syrian regime's strategy to quell any uprisings, peaceful or violent, was to surround, cut off, and then clear through the affected city with military forces.²¹⁸ These operations, however, only made the resistance more hardened as social media and news outlets demonstrated the death and devastation. President Assad's father's use of these tactics, along with bombarding cities such as Hama to obliteration in 1982, were no longer useful as the population and world could readily view what was happening. The Sunni dominated conscript ranks began to desert, and opposition groups formed. Author Kim Ghattas surmised that the Syrian resistance movement was in a race against radicalization and militarization in the first year of conflict. In the international world's reluctance to stop the Syrian regime's actions, it allowed the rebellion to splinter and become more violent.²¹⁹ The Syrian regime found itself facing numerous opposition factions alongside terrorists, both of whom were beginning to enjoy external support. But it has survived. It has survived due to the actions of Russia and Iran, two nations who have vested interests in keeping President Assad in power. President Assad continues to rule in 2020 despite enormous political and irregular military forces pitted against him.

b. *Syrian Resistance and Terrorist Groups*

Internal opposition to the Syrian government encompasses hundreds of groups whose activities range from peaceful to terrorist. Ultimately it is a lack of unity between the groups that has aided the regime and its allies in its efforts to quash the resistance throughout Syria. As research analyst, Joseph Holliday, points out in his analysis of the conflict's first year: "the resistance has not been able to hold terrain from which it can operate and organize, unlike Libya's rebels, who enjoyed a liberated Benghazi in which to organize. In addition, Syria's armed resistance has been made up of only small units of deserters and local insurgents."²²⁰ This issue of organization has not been corrected over

²¹⁸ Holliday, 15.

²¹⁹ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 281.

²²⁰ Holliday, *The Struggle for Syria in 2011*, 17.

the past nine years of conflict. Problems for the opposition are further aggravated by competing external actors who support them and terrorist organizations that operate throughout Syria with their own agenda.

March 2011 saw the first clashes between protestors and Syrian government forces in the province of Dara, and this event became the genesis of the armed resistance movement in Syria.²²¹ Joseph Holliday's report on the first year of the conflict demonstrates that the regime's methodology for ending the uprising was to surround, cutoff, and then clear through areas where protests erupted. The violent, militarist-oriented method only intensified protests and led many Syrian soldiers to desert with their equipment.²²² The first armed rebellion against the regime occurred in the province of Idlib in June 2011.²²³ As of 2020, Idlib is the last territory in Syria still held by opposition forces. Idlib has remained outside of the regime's control because it has mountainous terrain bordering Turkey where external actors can smuggle personnel and equipment, and it has a Sunni dominant population.

The primary moderate resistance movement combating the Syrian regime militarily is the Syrian National Army (SNA); known up until 2019 as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In 2013, it was estimated that there were over 1000 opposition groups in Syria.²²⁴ The SNA, is widely seen as the most legitimate and has received the most external support. What is now the SNA, began in August 2011, when former Syrian Army officer, Colonel Riad Al-Assad established a headquarters in Turkey from which to organize and control moderate opposition groups fighting the Syrian regime.²²⁵ However, the organization has demonstrated a lack of control over the various groups fighting in Syria under its banner and has been criticized as being more of a media outlet and conduit for foreign support to

²²¹ Holliday, 13.

²²² Holliday, 15–16.

²²³ Holliday, 21.

²²⁴ "Guide to the Syrian Rebels," BBC, December 13, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

²²⁵ BBC.

groups fighting the regime in Syria.²²⁶ In 2015 and 2016, a U.S. led coalition sought to pull those forces from the organization that would combat ISIS in Syria instead of the Syrian regime under a train and equip program. This program failed to make any gains until U.S. and Turkish special operations entered northern Syria. The United States eventually turned away from direct support to the SNA to support the Kurds fight against ISIS. At this point, the SNA arguably became a proxy of Turkey alongside other groups.

In Engin Yuksel's study of Turkey's use of proxies in Syria, he found that Turkey was able to bring several groups under its control, albeit not total, to meet Turkish intentions in North Western Syria.²²⁷ In 2016, Turkey admitted to its support of Islamist opposition groups Ahrar Al-Sham and Faylaq Al-Sham in Syria.²²⁸ These groups were effective forces, but their ideology did not match with the groups under the SNA. Yuksel's study demonstrates that Turkey developed the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 2018 to bridge gaps between the moderate and Islamist groups it supported. Some SNA groups joined the NLF, and the two collaborated. Turkey eventually influenced the groups to merge and effectively created a significant force in the Idlib province that would combat the regime, Salafi jihadists, and Kurdish groups.²²⁹ The SNA and NLF officially united under the political arm of the resistance, the Syrian Interim Government, on October 4, 2018.²³⁰ This design may have worked for Turkey but, ultimately, it has not helped the Syrian opposition to obtain regime change. The Syrian regime and its allies continue to fight these groups in Idlib Province.

In addition to Turkey, resistance and terrorist groups fighting the Syrian regime and its supporters receive assistance from several Arab nations including Saudi Arabia and

²²⁶ BBC.

²²⁷ Engin Yuksel, *Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria: Back With a Vengeance* (Netherlands: Netherlands Institute of International Relations "Clingendael," 2019), 20, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/strategies-turkish-proxy-warfare-in-northern-syria.pdf>.

²²⁸ Yuksel, 9.

²²⁹ Yuksel, 9–10.

²³⁰ Dilara Hamit and Erogan Cagtay Zontur, "Free Syrian Army Transforms Into Syrian National Army," Anadolu Agency, September 10, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/free-syrian-army-transforms-into-syrian-national-army/1607384>.

Qatar.²³¹ It may seem counterintuitive for these nations to support resistance movements that seek to overthrow an Arab authoritarian in their region, but as Curtis Ryan argued in 2012, the threat of an increased Iranian influence is a threat that regional powers cannot ignore.²³² Ryan points out that this feeling was demonstrated before Iran came to save the regime, in 2006, when Hezbollah and Israel went to war. No Arab nations came to physically or verbally defend Hezbollah, likely for sectarian reasons.²³³ These nations saw some of the groups fighting to topple Assad's regime as a method to remove Iranian influence from Syria without committing regular military forces. However, misaligned goals and improper handling contributed to a non-unified campaign and infighting between groups.

When the Arab Spring occurred, two Middle East alliances formed to ensure their own interests were protected in the aftermath: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Israel on one side, and Turkey and Qatar on the other.²³⁴ Professor As'ad AbuKhalil points out that the two alliances could not work synchronously. The Saudi-UAE-Israel alliance wanted to maintain a status quo in the Middle East, while the Turkey-Qatar alliance supported groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood gaining power in the aftermath of the uprisings.²³⁵ When the Syrian regime did not fall apart in 2011, the Saudis, Turks, and Qataris began to arm groups that they believed could reach that nation's desired end state in Syria. There was an attempt to form an opposition council to negotiate settlements to the fighting, but Professor AbuKhalil notes that there were sharp disconnects existed between the opposition fighting in Syria, and the opposition working to a peaceful solution elsewhere. The council's loyalty was also divided between the Saudis or

²³¹ Haytham Manna, "Syria's Opposition Has Been Led Astray by Violence," *Guardian*, June 22, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/22/syria-opposition-led-astray-by-violence>; Yuksel, *Studies of Turkish Proxy Warfare*, 8–9.

²³² Curtis Ryan, *The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria*, Report No. Middle East Report 262 (Tacoma, WA: Middle East Research and Information Project, 2012), <https://merip.org/2012/03/the-new-arab-cold-war-and-the-struggle-for-syria/>.

²³³ Ryan.

²³⁴ As'ad AbuKhalil, "How the Saudi-Qatari Rivalry Has Fueled the War in Syria," *The Intercept*, June 29, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/06/29/syria-war-saudi-arabia-qatar/>.

²³⁵ AbuKhalil.

Qataris.²³⁶ In 2014, a Saudi and Qatari rivalry spilled over during attempts to negotiate a peaceful resolution between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian regime.²³⁷ This divide resulted in no unity of effort between opposition groups in Syria and has benefited the Syrian regime. Finding themselves unable to form a unified front, often violently infighting and combating terrorist groups like ISIS, the Syrian opposition never stood a chance once Russia and Iran came to the aid of President Assad.

The position of the Syrian opposition is further damaged by the prevalence of terrorist groups, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra, and ISIS seeking to carve out their own parts of Syria. In the summer of 2011, Assad released imprisoned jihadis alongside activists in a move meant to demonstrate mercy in the public eye but also sow chaos into the uprisings.²³⁸ In 2012, a Sunni organization named Jabhat Al-Nusra formed with the intent to overthrow the Assad regime with violence. The group follows strict Islamic governance, and violently quashes dissent and opposition.²³⁹ In the spring of 2013, Al-Nusra seized the Syrian city of Raqqah. After this, it became clear that the group was vehemently at odds with moderate opposition groups like the FSA and openly fought them.²⁴⁰ The hope for a moderate opposition to unite and defeat the regime dwindled as groups with increasingly extremist views and goals formed, intent on fulfilling their own agendas in the chaos of Syria.

Al-Nusra's early actions set the stage for the emergence of ISIS, which further complicated the situation in Syria. In the spring of 2013, the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi purportedly left Iraq to begin establishment of the ISIS caliphate in Syria.²⁴¹ Al-Nusra formally split from ISIS in August 2013, and they have since been competing for

²³⁶ AbuKhalil.

²³⁷ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Saudi-Qatar Rivalry Divides Syrian Opposition," Reuters, January 15, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-qatar-idUSBREA0E1G720140115>.

²³⁸ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 281.

²³⁹ Cameron Glenn, *The Nusra Front: Al Qaeda's Affiliate in Syria* (Washington, DC: The Wilson Center, 2016), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-nusra-front-al-qaedas-affiliate-syria>.

²⁴⁰ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 284.

²⁴¹ Ghattas, 284.

the same territory and recruitment base.²⁴² In January 2014, ISIS, having established a secure foothold in Raqqa, declared it the capital of the Islamic caliphate. What followed were sweeping ISIS offensives to annex as much territory as possible in Syria and Iraq. ISIS fights any who do not completely align with their ideology, including all Syrian opposition groups. ISIS pulled tens of thousands of Sunnis into the caliphate that might have been part of moderate opposition groups. This benefited the regime as ISIS soon attracted the attention of the United States and ultimately ended up fighting every nation and group present in Syria and Iraq. The physical ISIS caliphate was destroyed in the summer of 2019 by a U.S. led coalition that supported the Kurds; although cells are still active throughout the Middle East. The devastation ISIS caused to the future of Iraq and Syria will be felt for generations.

The Syrian opposition to Bashar Al-Assad's government may have been successful had it been able to form a unified military and political front. It was doomed from the start when competing external actors, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, vied for influence and control. The opposition's efforts were further decremented by the emergence of several terrorist groups like ISIS who pulled Syrians into the organization and fought everyone else in Syria and Iraq. The lack of unity ultimately benefited the regime and the efforts of Russia and Iran, who sought to preserve it.

c. *Israel*

Israel has a vested interest in the Syrian Civil War given the border the two nations share and the threats posed by Islamic militants and Iran's military buildup in Syria. Israel and Syria have fought since Israel's founding in 1948, fighting wars in 1967 and 1973.²⁴³ Israel has also struck targets inside Syria that it perceives as threats, including a covert strike on a Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007.²⁴⁴ Israel is no friend of the Assad regime and politicians have openly stated that they support regime change. In 2017, Israeli Defense

²⁴² Glenn, *The Nusra Front*.

²⁴³ Carla E. Humud, Kenneth Katzman, and Jim Zanotti, *Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria*, CRS Report No. IF10858 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10858>.

²⁴⁴ Humud, Katzman, and Zanotti, 1.

Minister Avidor Liberman said: “We cannot allow a man like Assad, who kills his own citizens and who uses chemical weapons against them to remain in power,” and “keeping Assad in power is not in our security interests. As long as he is in power, Iran and Hezbollah will be in Syria.”²⁴⁵ Assad, however, is not the primary threat to Israeli security, it is the Iranian presence.

The presence of such a large Iranian force alongside efforts to establish permanent bases is what most concerns the Israeli government.²⁴⁶ According to journalist David Kenner, Israel has not openly tried to shape the conflict politically or militarily to favor either the regime or the opposition, but it has pursued a strategy to keep Iran and its proxies at a safe distance.²⁴⁷ This strategy included supporting moderate opposition forces fighting the regime and IRGC in southwestern Syria, as well as hundreds of airstrikes against Hezbollah convoys and Iranian bases.²⁴⁸ In 2018, a former national security advisor for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Yaakov Amidror, remarked that “we cannot do everything, but we can do a lot to force the Iranians to decide if they are ready to pay the price [for intervention in Syria].”²⁴⁹ Israel may not like the Assad regime, but it is Assad’s welcoming of Iranian forces that is Israel’s greatest concern.

Iran and Israel have had a bloody and contentious relationship since the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Israel cannot accept being caught in a vice by Iran and its proxies. Iran supports terrorist organizations who attack Israel, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, and Iranian leaders regularly call for its destruction. Quds Force itself, translates to “Jerusalem Force,” which illustrates the unit’s ultimate goal. Israel and Hezbollah regularly engage each other militarily. Iran is Hezbollah’s primary financier and

²⁴⁵ Anna Ahronheim, “Israeli Defense Minister to Syria: ‘Don’t Test Us,’” *Jerusalem Post*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/israeli-defense-minister-to-syria-dont-test-us-498554>.

²⁴⁶ Humud, Katzman, and Zanotti, *Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria*.

²⁴⁷ David Kenner, “No Matter Who Wins the Syrian Civil War, Israel Loses,” *Atlantic*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/israel-gamble-assad-syria/568693/>.

²⁴⁸ Kenner; Ruth Eglash, “For The First Time, Israel Describes The Aid Work It Carries Out in Syria,” *Washington Post*, July 19, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/for-the-first-time-israel-describes-the-aid-work-it-carries-out-in-syria/2017/07/19/22e466a6-6c91-11e7-abbca53480672286_story.html.

²⁴⁹ Kenner, “No Matter Who Wins.”

supplier of its missile arsenal, estimated to be near 100,000.²⁵⁰ With Hezbollah and the IRGC to its north and north east, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israel may feel like it is being surrounded. Research fellow Michael Eisenstadt noted that “the goal [of Iran] is to encircle Israel with these proxies that could enmesh it in a series of open-ended, low-level conflicts that make [Israel’s] life unbearable.”²⁵¹ Unwilling to accept this outcome, Israel has responded significantly to IRGC operations in Syria in the latter years of the conflict, which I examine in the third section of this case study.

d. Russia

Russia entered the Syrian Civil War in September 2015 with a large-scale military force to save the Assad regime. Russia was allies with Syria before the conflict and had called for diplomatic solutions throughout the conflict, as well as protecting Syria from hostile diplomatic actions in the UN. It was no shock that Russia wanted to preserve its only real ally in the Middle East who shares its Mediterranean Sea naval facilities. However, what did surprise the world was the extensiveness of the expeditionary package sent to Syria, which included everything from bombers to mechanized ground forces.

A 2019 RAND report seeking to determine the factors that led to such a large-scale intervention cited three factors: the collapse of the Syrian regime was imminent, implications of a secular regime falling to domestic terrorism, and a perceived failure of diplomacy.²⁵² Pulling its findings from a host of interviews and Russian reports, the study found that Russian officials believed ISIS or another group overrunning the Syrian regime could inspire others to do so. Citing comments from officials including Russian President Vladimir Putin, one can conclude that the Russian authoritarian regime perceives a Western effort to overthrow hostile authoritarians.²⁵³ By preserving Assad’s power, Russia would not allow this model for regime change to be used as a case study for anyone seeking to

²⁵⁰ Humud, Katzman, and Zanotti, *Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria*.

²⁵¹ Kenner, “No Matter Who Wins.”

²⁵² Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria*, RR-3180-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 3–6, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3180.html.

²⁵³ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 5–6.

overthrow the Russian system.²⁵⁴ Russia's level of intervention was also likely based on efforts from the QF commander, Qassem Soleimani.

By 2015, the Syrian Civil War was not going favorably for Assad and it appeared Iranian support would not be enough. The first openly reported meeting between Qassem Soleimani and Russian officials, including President Putin, occurred in July 2015.²⁵⁵ It is not clear which party called for the meeting to plan an escalation in the effort to save Assad, but it is probable that the QF realized its limitations and required extensive artillery and air power outside of its capabilities. The Russian military is far more advanced in material and technology. Russia's resources were certainly required for retaking Syria's largest city, Aleppo. The operation to retake Aleppo from the Syrian opposition included the largest deployment of Iranian forces and proxies to that point in the conflict.²⁵⁶ The battle took over a year to finish, and Russian firepower proved decisive. It is unlikely that Qassem Soleimani's efforts alone were what convinced the Russian military to intervene in Syria, beginning in September 2015. However, what is clear is that both countries saw the prospect of regime change in Syria as unacceptable.

Russia continues to support Assad's grip on power, and in 2020, the likelihood of the Syrian establishment continuing is significantly better than any other year of the conflict. Russia denies that its soldiers are involved in regular combat operations, but Russian "contractor" fatalities began being reported in February 2016.²⁵⁷ In February 2018, a suspected probing attack against U.S. and Kurdish forces resulted in a U.S. military response that left approximately 300 Russians dead.²⁵⁸ It is possible that the Russians were

²⁵⁴ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 6.

²⁵⁵ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iranian Commander Soleimani Meets Putin in Moscow," Reuters, December 16, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iran-russia-idUKKBN0TZ1NY20151216>.

²⁵⁶ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 66.

²⁵⁷ Maria Tsetkova and Anton Zverev, "Ghost Soldiers: The Russians Secretly Dying for the Kremlin in Syria," Reuters, November 3, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12Y0M6>.

²⁵⁸ Maria Tsetkova, "Russian Toll in Syria Battle Was 300 Killed and Wounded: Sources," Reuters, February 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualties-idUSKCN1FZ2DZ>.

seeking to test American will to defend Kurdish territory. The battle did not result in any changes to Russian activity besides remaining out of Kurdish territory, until being invited in when some U.S. forces withdrew in 2019. The defeat of ISIS, withdrawal of most U.S. forces, and a dwindling opposition that holds onto only one Syrian province demonstrate that the Russian intervention is succeeding in its goals. However, the cost to Russian blood and treasure, which is currently unknown, must be weighed against Assad's survival before Russia can say its intervention was at an acceptable cost.

e. Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity and a curse. Uprisings in Yemen resulted in the Houthi movement turning into a rebellion against a Saudi friendly government by 2014. In Bahrain, Shia dominated protests against the monarchy brought the opportunity for regime change, but it was snuffed out by a Sunni coalition coming to the monarchy's aid. In Syria, however, the majority revolted against the minority who happened to be the Islamic Republic's oldest ally. If there was regime change in Syria, Iran might not only lose one of its few international partners, it could lose its link to its clients that maintains pressure on Israel. The Iranian regime went to the aid of President Assad with the tools it had used to stop an uprising two years prior.

In response to perceived election rigging to keep hardline Iranian President Ahmadinejad in power, two million Iranians took to the streets in protest in 2009.²⁵⁹ The protestors contended that the election results were falsified to prevent moderate candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi from winning. In *Vanguard of the Imam*, Afshon Ostovar accounts for how the IRGC and its paramilitary force, the Basij responded with brute force. Security forces responded to all protests with tear gas and batons. Basij units attacked protestors with metal rods, bats, and some used guns to fire indiscriminately into crowds.²⁶⁰ The Basij and IRGC were protected from judicial reprisals, including the deaths of protestors, and physical and sexual abuse committed against detainees.²⁶¹ In the aftermath of the

²⁵⁹ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 297.

²⁶⁰ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 183.

²⁶¹ Ostovar, 184–85.

protests, the IRGC invested heavily in capabilities to stop domestic challenges to the regime. These included cyber spying capabilities, as well as restructuring the Basij to better its standing with the public it had violently subdued.²⁶² The initial Iranian package which included elements of the QF and Basij took the lessons learned from this uprising to Syria in 2011. However, it would not be enough as the violent reprisals against Syrian protestors generated international condemnation, military desertions, and sectarian divide.

As the conflict worsened and it appeared like the Syrian regime's days were numbered in 2015, Iran responded by deploying an expeditionary package that included thousands of soldiers and tons of equipment. The campaign continued to be led by the QF commander, Qassem Soleimani. Iranian casualties could not be hidden despite favoring the use of proxy forces to do the bulk of the fighting, and the casualties did have an eventual impression on the Iranian homeland. I examine the impact these casualties had and the military's narrative to motivate the public in the third section of this case study.

2. QF Operations

Iran's campaign to prevent administration change in Syria began with clandestine operations meant to enable the Syrian government's counter opposition efforts. Evidence suggests that Iran intended, at first, to limit its involvement in the conflict, aiming to provide regime forces with the tools needed to stop the revolution in its infancy. Logistics, intelligence, and training provided by the QF were the mechanisms with which Iran hoped it would solve the problem. From the onset of the uprisings, Iran used the air corridor over Iraq to transport personnel and equipment into Syria. In March 2011, Turkish officials seized dozens of rifles, machine guns, and thousands of rounds of ammunition on a civilian plane that landed in Turkey as it transited from Iran to Aleppo, Syria.²⁶³ This was one of several public reports of arms smuggling via air. The United States was able to pressure the Iraqi government to stop these flights for several months, but by July 2011, the Iraqis

²⁶² Ostovar, 188.

²⁶³ Louis Charbonneau, "Exclusive: Turkey Says Seizes Illegal Iran Arms Shipment," Reuters, March 31, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-un-idUSTRE72U6GJ20110331>.

were no longer willing to deny the airspace.²⁶⁴ In addition to logistics, the IRGC reportedly assisted with intelligence capabilities which ranged from jamming to electronic eavesdropping.²⁶⁵ According to a 2011 Reuters article, the IRGC provided the Syrian regime with surveillance technology that enabled the regime to find and fix dissidents via email, cell phones, and social media.²⁶⁶ In the first year of the conflict, Iran reportedly sent dozens of senior officers, hundreds of QF trainers, and thousands of Hezbollah fighters into Syria to train and equip Assad's forces.²⁶⁷ Iran denied any involvement or use of its forces at first. In August 2012, opposition forces captured 48 IRGC operatives, including QF members, as they attempted to conduct a reconnaissance mission under the cover of being Shia pilgrims.²⁶⁸ This event gave stronger proof to the opposition's assertions of Iranian involvement. Other events implicated the IRGC and QF's participation, including a QF operative's personal video camera being found and turned over to Western media after he and his squad were killed by Syrian rebels in September 2013.²⁶⁹ The QF Commander, Qassem Soleimani, likely hoped logistical, intelligence, and training support would be enough for the Syrian regime to reestablish control. However, it was not, and the situation in 2015 demanded deployment of the IRGC's complete expeditionary capability.

By the summer of 2015, the QF's campaign to save the Syrian regime from being overthrown by opposition forces and terrorist groups appeared to be failing.²⁷⁰ According to a Washington Post article, in September 2015, Syrian forces only controlled 16% of the

²⁶⁴ Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times*, September 4, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html>.

²⁶⁵ Holliday, *The Struggle for Syria in 2011*, 23.

²⁶⁶ Geneive Abdo, "How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, October 31, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2011-08-25/how-iran-keeps-assad-power-syria>.

²⁶⁷ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 64; Abdo, "How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria"; Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace."

²⁶⁸ Liz Sly, "Abducted Iranians Were Helping Syria Crush the Uprising, Rebels Say," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-rebels-say-captured-iranians-are-members-of-pro-government-militias-not-pilgrims/2012/08/05/b93a8730-df14-11e1-a19c-fcfa365396c8_story.html.

²⁶⁹ "Iran's Secret Army," November 2, 2013, BBC, video, 26:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI_88ChjQtU.

²⁷⁰ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 65.

country.²⁷¹ At the time, ISIS was continuing to annex territory throughout Syria and Iraq. Although a U.S. led coalition began an air campaign to stifle ISIS's advance, no ground forces were powerful enough to contest its momentum. Syrian opposition groups continued attacks on the regime and were in complete control of several major cities including Syria's largest, Aleppo. Additionally, faced with low Syrian military morale, Soleimani needed two things to turn the tide: deployment of a large ground force that could fight alongside the regime's forces, and Russian fire support.²⁷² Russian intervention coupled with thousands of additional ground forces was the only viable answer to reversing the course of the civil war.

It is unknown the level of influence Qassem Soleimani had in the scale of Russia's military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. A Reuter's article citing an unnamed regional official claims that Russia's decision to intervene was made several months before Soleimani's arrival in Russia in July 2015.²⁷³ According to the article, a senior envoy from Ayatollah Khamenei secured President Putin's support, and Soleimani was sent to develop the joint plan. Russia's deployment of an expansive arsenal, along with special operations, and aircraft would enable large scale ground assaults to retake Syrian territory. Syria's largest city, Aleppo, would be the first.

The October 2015 Aleppo offensive marked an end to the covert nature of the campaign to save Assad, involving the deployment of hundreds of additional IRGC soldiers along with thousands of Shia militia fighters.²⁷⁴ The QF were joined by other Iranian regular and Shia irregular forces. Citing a report in the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Rai, a Guardian article stated that Iran sent an additional 2,000 soldiers to Syria, alongside 5,000

²⁷¹ Rick Noack and Aaron Steckelberg, "What Trump Just Triggered in Syria, Visualized," *Washington Post*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/17/what-trump-just-triggered-syria-visualized/>.

²⁷² Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 65.

²⁷³ Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow," Reuters, October 6, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>.

²⁷⁴ Ian Black and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iran Ramps up Troop Deployment in Syria in Run-up to Anti-Rebel Offensive," *Guardian*, October 14, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/14/iran-troop-deployment-syria-anti-rebel-offensive-revolutionary-guards-assad>.

Shia fighters.²⁷⁵ Hezbollah continued to contribute the majority of Iranian proxy forces and reportedly sent 8,000 fighters into Syria during the time of the Aleppo offensive.²⁷⁶ Other groups deployed included Katab Hezbollah, and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq from Iraq, in addition to the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun brigades made up of Shia Afghans and Pakistani Shia militants respectively.²⁷⁷

The groups made up of Afghani fighters demonstrate the innovative recruitment methods Iran has used to create proxies and lessen Iranian casualties. According to a report by Phillip Smyth, the majority of the Afghani fighters are recruited from refugees residing in Iran, with the promise of a salary and Iran residency papers.²⁷⁸ Nader Uskowi notes that these sort of foreign legion groups demonstrated a lack of control and discipline in several battles in 2015 and 2016 including Khan Touman and Tal el-Eis. Deploying high numbers with not enough command and control resulted in setbacks during the Aleppo operation.²⁷⁹ However, these militias provide the QF with a front-line force that is ideologically aligned, less expensive than regular forces, and a valid way to keep Iranian soldiers away from the worst of the fighting.²⁸⁰ Another advantage, according to Smyth, is the possibility of reorienting these veteran fighters to Afghanistan to fill the vacuum that may come with the withdrawal of U.S. forces.²⁸¹ The long term effectiveness of groups like the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun brigades remains to be seen, but they have almost certainly lowered the casualty figures for Iranian forces in Syria.

With the deployment of so many fighters and material support, Iran was no longer limited to covert QF units who could maintain plausible deniability for their operations in Syria. Iran's expeditionary force now included artillery and armor units, along with special

²⁷⁵ Black and Dehghan.

²⁷⁶ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 66.

²⁷⁷ Uskowi, 66.

²⁷⁸ Phillip Smyth, *Iran's Afghan Shiite Fighters in Syria*, Report No. POLICYWATCH 2262 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, 2014), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-afghan-shiite-fighters-in-syria>.

²⁷⁹ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 85.

²⁸⁰ Uskowi, 85.

²⁸¹ Smyth, *Iran's Afghan Shiite Fighters in Syria*.

forces from its regular army branch to take part in the fighting.²⁸² In an October 2015 interview, Iran's deputy foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, claimed that there was no Iranian boots on the ground in a combat role, but there were advisers assisting the Syrian army.²⁸³ Amir-Abdollahian went on to say that Iran's support was solely about stopping terrorism, saying: "The fight against terrorism in Syria has intensified and Russia has taken effective steps to fight Daesh [ISIS]...We have decided to increase the number of our military advisers in Syria to help the fight against terrorists. The number of officers and advisers is not important. What is important is an unwavering will to fight against terrorism."²⁸⁴ However, these comments could not hold weight with dozens of news reports showing the extent of Iran and Russia's intervention. Iran's escalation coupled with Russian fire power enabled the regime to retake Aleppo 14 months after the battle began. According to author and former Iranian policy advisor to U.S. CENTCOM, Nader Uskowi, the defeat of the opposition forces at Aleppo was the turning point in the war.²⁸⁵ The regime continued its offensive, retaking rebel-controlled territory piece by piece.

The agreement reached between the Syrian regime and opposition groups in Aleppo in December 2016 involved a trend that appears to be part of a regime strategy to move defeated opposition fighters and their families to the Idlib Province of Syria.²⁸⁶ A May 2017 article by Mays Al-Shobassi includes settlement agreements between opposition and terrorist forces, and the regime, beginning with the Homs settlement in 2014. In 10 of the 13 agreements, opposition fighters and their families were allowed safe passage to Idlib Province if they met the regime's demands.²⁸⁷ This strategy is sound in the short run, and may be in the long run, depending on the will of the opposition. By disarming and allowing

²⁸² Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 66.

²⁸³ Ian Black, "Iran Sending More Advisors to Syria to Defeat 'Terrorism', Says Deputy Minister," *Guardian*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/iran-advisers-syria-terrorism-deputy-minister>.

²⁸⁴ Black.

²⁸⁵ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 67.

²⁸⁶ Mays Al-Shobassi, "Timeline: Syria's 13 'People Evacuation' Deals," *Al Jazeera*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/timeline-syria-people-evacuation-deals-170413084313089.html>.

²⁸⁷ Al-Shobassi.

safe passage, the regime is giving the opposition a way out, which keeps them from being placed on Sun Tzu's concept of death ground. If a fighter considers themselves on death ground, being backed into a corner with no way of escape or surrender, they are likely to fight twice as hard and increase the risk for the attackers. This strategy also allows the regime to move the Sunni dominated opposition into one province of the country, effectively limiting the likelihood of sectarian based resurgences in recaptured provinces. Kurdish areas aside, Idlib is the last province under opposition control in 2020. An assault to clear the province would be comparable to Aleppo in terms of required resources and bloodshed, but it is unlikely to be warranted in the near term. Containment may be the better solution for the time being, given the proximity to Turkey. Turkish proxies, and terrorist groups are also fighting amongst each other in the province, further deteriorating the moderate opposition. No hard evidence proves this strategy was orchestrated by the QF, but the significant degree of control Soleimani took in 2015 makes a strong case for it.

Following the fall of Aleppo, Iranian forces, their proxies, and Russian forces backed the Syrian regime's clearance through southern and eastern Syria. These forces were stonewalled from claiming all of southern Syria and moving east of the Euphrates River given the presence of a U.S. led coalition that supported Kurdish forces fighting ISIS. Several open sources reported incidents of Iranian and Russian proxies intruding on U.S. forces, including near At-Tanf garrison in the summer of 2017, and in Deir ez-Zour Province in the 2018 winter. These incidents resulted in extensive retaliation by U.S. forces and a retreat of the proxies. Efforts by the coalition and the Kurdish forces destroyed the physical ISIS caliphate in the spring of 2019, largely removing the problem the group posed for the Syrian regime. A settlement between the Syrian Kurds and the regime for deciding the future of Eastern Syria remains to be drafted as of 2020. Reclaiming the territories outside of Kurdish and United States control led to the current phase of the Iranian campaign in Syria: soft power projection and establishing a ground logistical chain via permanent bases.

Iran utilizes a soft power strategy across the Middle East to further its strategic goals, and provide civilian cover for QF operatives.²⁸⁸ According to a report by Ahmad Majidiyar, these strategic goals are ideologically or politically based, including everything from charitable foundations to schools.²⁸⁹ The establishments advocate Iranian ideology. In a 2017 speech that announced the building of an Islamic Azad University in Iraq and Lebanon, board of trustees chairman Ali Akbar Velayati, demonstrated the IRGC's influence on the school. Iranian media emphasized that the university is a "refuge of the Basij," who have "a historical fatwa for resistance against oppressors."²⁹⁰ Efforts inside Syria include transforming formerly Sunni mosques and communities into Shia ones to create buffer zones as well as provide properties for utilization by Hezbollah and the IRGC.²⁹¹ Soft power mechanisms also allow the IRGC to turn enemies into subservient allies. According to a Washington Institute report, in Dara Province, Iran was offering jobs to young unemployed Sunnis to serve Shia militias in noncombat roles that kept them safe from conscription while providing economic relief.²⁹² According to the report, Hezbollah also constructed approximately eight Shia religious centers and five schools in Dara. Soft

²⁸⁸ Ahmad Majidiyar, *Iran's Soft Power: Islamic Azad University Opening Branches in Major Syrian and Iraqi Cities* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2018), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-soft-power-islamic-azad-university-opening-branches-major-syrian-and-iraqi>.

²⁸⁹ Majidiyar.

²⁹⁰ "Student Mobilization Activity Is Necessary in Cultural Affairs - Islamic Azad University Branches to Be Set up in Iraq and Lebanon," trans. Christopher Smith using Google Translate, DEFA Press - Iran, July 20, 2017, <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/247232/%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%AC%D9%88%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B6%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%88-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF>.

²⁹¹ Hanin Ghaddar and Dana Stroul, *Pushing Back on Iran in Syria: Beyond the 'Boots,'* Report No. POLICYWATCH 3068 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, 2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/pushing-back-on-iran-in-syria-part-1-beyond-the-boots>.

²⁹² Ghaddar and Stroul.

power establishments and projects are a useful tool for the Iranian regime and the QF and MOIS operatives who use it for cover throughout the Middle East. These projects also provide a thinly veiled cover for Iran's other project in Syria: securing a ground logistics corridor.

Afshon Ostovar posits that Iran's ability to project a realistic threat to Israel is essential to Iran's deterrence strategy.²⁹³ Syria's enabling of this ability through its geographic location, and political relationship were paramount in Iran's intervention according to Ostovar. Hezbollah and other agents of Iran have the location and means to threaten Israeli interests, as long as they can receive financial aid and materials from Iran. With the blessing or eye turning of Iraq, Iran could heighten the deterrent effect with being able to move support via ground. The establishment of a land corridor from Iran into Syria, in which the QF could easily supply and support its proxies fighting Israel is a strategic priority of the QF.²⁹⁴ Permanent bases in Syria enable the IRGC to house forces supporting the Syrian regime's ongoing operations and create a ground logistic chain for moving aid to Hezbollah and other agents targeting Israel.

According to a Jerusalem Post article written in the aftermath of an Israeli strike on an Iranian base in Syria, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) began noticing a shift in Qassem Soleimani's priorities in Syria in 2016.²⁹⁵ Sometime after the fall of Aleppo, Iran began establishing permanent bases in Syria, including one at Tiyas Military Base, Syria's largest, in Homs Province.²⁹⁶ This base is within 130 miles of Israel, and well within the range of Iranian UAV platforms.²⁹⁷ At the Damascus International Airport, the IRGC established a base with a headquarters, logistical, and intelligence element, reportedly for operations

²⁹³ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 206.

²⁹⁴ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 88.

²⁹⁵ Anna Ahronheim, "Before and After Images Show Israeli Strike on Iranian Base," *Jerusalem Post*, May 13, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/israeli-airstrikes-caused-extensive-damage-to-iranian-targets-in-syria-556300>.

²⁹⁶ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 88.

²⁹⁷ Uskowi, 88.

ongoing near the Israeli border.²⁹⁸ These bases have resulted in significant military responses from Israel, which I discuss in the next section.

3. Reaction to QF Operations

Response to the QF's campaign in Syria, along with the additional Iranian forces that joined in 2015 has come primarily from Israel and the Iranian body politic. Iran's efforts to establish a ground logistic line through Syria via permanent bases continues to draw Israeli military action. Israel will not accept its main adversary establishing bases of operation in close proximity to its territory. In the Iranian home front, the loss of Iranian lives and the financial cost of the Syrian endeavor has resulted in some public outcry and contributed to the excitement of the November 2019 Iran protests.

Beginning in 2018, there have been numerous exchanges between the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and Iranian bases, as well as Iranian proxies. Some have resulted in significant IAF action, which one could view as reestablishment of Israeli red lines. In *Temperature Rising*, Nader Uskowi summarizes one such set of events. In April 2018, an Iranian UAV flew over IDF formations. The IDF downed the UAV and then struck the Tiyas Military Base, from where the UAV launched, with air to ground missiles. The QF responded to the attack, in which an IRGC commander was killed by launching 20 rockets at Israeli installations. In an act of escalation to demonstrate the IAF's capability, the IAF struck 16 QF locations in Syria, killing an unconfirmed number of Iranian soldiers and Shia militia. Iran did not retaliate against these strikes, seemingly accepting that they were unprepared and outmatched.²⁹⁹ Israeli strikes continued, and at least one case almost led to an international incident with Russia. In September 2018, an Israeli F-16 striking an Iranian target in Latakia, Syria was targeted by Syrian air defenses. However, the Syrians accidentally targeted a nearby Russian surveillance aircraft, shooting it down and killing 15 Russians. Israel admitted their involvement but blamed it on Iran's antagonism in the

²⁹⁸ Ahronheim, "Before and After Images Show Israeli Strike on Iranian Base."

²⁹⁹ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 89.

region.³⁰⁰ The Russians did not respond beyond diplomatic measures, and Israel's campaign continued.

Israel's policy of not allowing establishment of any Iranian positions inside Syria continues in 2020. In July 2020, Israel targeted an ammunition depot on the outskirts of Damascus, Syria, killing several Iranians. In the months prior to this, Israeli officials stated that the campaign to stop Iran and its proxies would be expanded.³⁰¹ It is likely that unless the QF find a method to deter these actions, Israel will continue its program and reestablish red lines when they are tested. In this state, along with uncertainty concerning Iraqi allowance of the QF's smuggling, the QF cannot hope to attain its objective of establishing a secure ground corridor to move personnel and equipment through Syria.

In Syria, Soleimani sought to primarily utilize proxies for frontline fighting alongside Syrian forces, but the nature of the war would not prevent Iranian casualties. These casualties, alongside economic costs, ultimately contributed to negative responses from the Iranian people towards the war. A December 2018 report by Ali Alfoneh pulling from multiple open sources estimated Iranian casualties to be 561.³⁰² However, an earlier Reuter's article quoted the head of Iran's Foundation of Martyr's as saying the casualty figure had reached 1000 by November 2016.³⁰³ Until 2019, the bodies returning from Syria did not appear to generate public outcry against the war. The Iranian regime had an ideological narrative for the masses which seemed to be accepted, at least publicly, given the lack of free speech in Iranian media.

³⁰⁰ Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne, and Nathan Hodge, "Syria Accidentally Shot Down a Russian Military Plane," CNN, September 18, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/17/politics/syrian-regime-shoots-down-russian-plane/index.html>.

³⁰¹ "Syria Says Israel Strikes Southern Damascus; Iranian Base Hit," Al Jazeera, July 20, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/syria-israel-strikes-southern-damascus-iranian-base-hit-200720204036642.html>.

³⁰² Ali Alfoneh, "The War in Syria Is Transforming the IRGC into an Expeditionary Force," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* (blog), December 5, 2018, <https://agsiw.org/the-war-in-syria-is-transforming-the-irgc-into-an-expeditionary-force/>.

³⁰³ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Death Toll Among Iran's Forces in Syrian War Passes 1,000," Reuters, November 22, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran-idUSKBN13H16J>.

The regime and military leadership portrayed the Iranian bodies returning as martyrs, comparing their sacrifice to that of Imam Husayn's.³⁰⁴ A typical quote for the dead was that their deaths were "defending the holy shrine of Sayyida Zaynab."³⁰⁵ The shrine contains the grave of Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and is one of the holiest sites for Shia Muslims. In August 2017, an IRGC officer named Mohsen Hojaji was captured and beheaded on video by ISIS. This brutal and public act aided the Iranian narrative of being in a holy war against terrorism. Qassem Soleimani remarked: "Martyr Hojaji's death was meant to provide further meaning and glory to the struggle for the defense of the [holy Shia] shrines."³⁰⁶ The Islamic Republic's method of generating a narrative that relates soldier deaths to holy martyrdom has been used since the Iran-Iraq War. The narrative seemed to help placate most contention as the death toll rose. The contention, however, grew greater from 2017 on as questions about the need to be in Syria joined domestic issues.

Questions from the Iranian people concerning the government's intervention in Syria were periodic throughout the conflict, but boiled over in November 2019 when combined with other issues demanding reform from the people. In April 2017, former Tehran mayor Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi criticized Iran's military solution in Syria, advocating for a diplomatic one.³⁰⁷ The same month, a student questioned IRGC theoretician Hassan Abbasi, stating:

Hassan Abbasi, your ideology is the ideology of terrorism and fear, of sending weapons to the bloodthirsty dictator Bashar Al-Assad, and of supporting him. Your ideology is to play with the nationalistic and religious beliefs of the people, defending non-existent shrines in Homs and Idlib. What shrines? ... Your ideology places the budget of Iran in the bank account of Hezbollah in Lebanon. By Hasan Nasrallah's own admission,

³⁰⁴ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 232.

³⁰⁵ Ostovar, 215.

³⁰⁶ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 301.

³⁰⁷ Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Iranians Respond to the Regime: 'Leave Syria Alone!,'" Al Jazeera, May 1, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iranians-respond-regime-leave-syria-180501081025309.html>.

their weapons, their daily livelihood, their food, and even their underwear are provided through the budget of the Iranian people.³⁰⁸

In response to a 50% rise in oil prices, widespread protests erupted across Iran in November 2019. The protests were dealt with violently as they had in 2009, but the government also shut down the internet for six days in an effort to prevent organization and documentation of its retaliation escaping.³⁰⁹ These protests primarily concerned the economic impact being felt by U.S. sanctions for Iran's activities. The question of what Iran was getting for the billions of dollars and hundreds of soldiers it was sending to Syria was also an exacerbating topic. The people saw the investment in Syria as contributing to their misfortune. Ultimately, the brutal, totalitarian response by the Iranian regime quelled the protests as it had in 2009. This issue, however, has only gone dormant.

4. Iran's NSOs Advancement

After nearly 10 years of conflict, the Islamic Republic of Iran has little to show for its campaign to save President Assad's Ba'th Party in Syria. The Syrian regime is still in place and back from the brink of collapse it was upon in 2015. Although Iran, with the help of its proxies and Russia, was able to prevent regime change, it occurred at a high cost with little to show for advancement in three of Iran's four NSOs. Iran has paid a high economic cost, its reconstruction efforts may likely fuel sectarian insurgencies, and the Israelis will not allow establishment of permanent bases anywhere near the Israeli border.

It is unknown how much money Iran is spending each year to support the regime and pay for its military campaign in the country, but estimates put it exceptionally high. In 2015, a spokeswoman for the UN special envoy for Syria put the estimate for Iranian loans to Syria at \$6 billion annually.³¹⁰ Nadim Shedadi at Tufts University put Iranian aid from 2012 to 2013 between \$14–15 billion dollars.³¹¹ A 2018 Foreign Policy article put

³⁰⁸ Fathollah-Nejad.

³⁰⁹ "Iran's Rouhani Claims Victory Over Unrest," Reuters, November 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-gasoline-protests-idUSKBN1XU0YW>.

³¹⁰ Eli Lake, "Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad," Bloomberg, June 9, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>.

³¹¹ Lake.

estimates between \$30-\$105 billion for economic and military aid between 2011 and 2018.³¹² There is also a credit line Iran extends to Syria, which appears to act like a credit card when Syria really needs money. A 2020 report by the Atlantic Council, which sought to determine the value of a credit line Iran has extended to Syria since 2011, contends that the line is a way for Iran to hide its expenditures from the public eye.³¹³ The report estimates the value of the credit line to be \$5–7 billion dollars. Iran’s argument to its body politic has been that it is a tool to achieve long term investment in the reconstruction of Syria.³¹⁴ In 2020, Iran has not reaped any financial rewards from its intervention, and as Thomas Juneau points out, Iran will likely need to prop up the Syrian regime for years, if not decades, to ensure gains are not reversed.³¹⁵ It will be a long time before Iran is able to reap any economic returns from its billions or tens of billions spent in Syria.

Iran hopes its soft power strategy may lead to some returns on its investment for reconstruction efforts, but sectarian issues will likely spoil those efforts. The IRGC’s investments in infrastructure could easily be used as an information warfare tool by adversaries as it alludes to Iranian control. The conversion of Sunni mosques and schools to Shia is unlikely to convert the majority of Sunni Syrians. Dara Province, which has been called the “cradle of the revolution” has witnessed a low-level insurgency permeating over the past two years.³¹⁶ There is evidence suggesting the Sunni population, facing a regime that refuses to reform its ways, is fighting back once again. In 2019, there were 305 assassination attempts reported in the province, and in response to actions like these, the regime is reportedly sidelining reconciliation efforts in favor of cracking down on the

³¹² Borzou Daragahi, “Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever,” *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/01/iran-wants-to-stay-in-syria-forever/>.

³¹³ Karam Shaar and Ali Fatollah-Nejad, “Iran’s Credit Line to Syria: A Well That Never Runs Dry,” Atlantic Council, February 10, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-credit-line-to-syria-a-well-that-never-runs-dry/>.

³¹⁴ Shaar and Fatollah-Nejad.

³¹⁵ Thomas Juneau, “Iran’s Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory,” *Mediterranean Politics* 25, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1479362>.

³¹⁶ Tom Rollins, “Tensions in Syria’s Daraa Are Getting Out of Hand,” Middle East Eye, January 26, 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tensions-syrias-daraa-are-getting-out-hand>.

resistance.³¹⁷ Without extensive reforms that cut through sectarian divides and deal with grievances that caused the civil war, local insurgencies are likely to continue to hamper reconstruction and unification.

Iran's efforts in Syria are also degraded by the Israeli adherence to not accepting a permanent Iranian presence near its borders, and Israel possesses the military capacity to do so. The QF may continue to attempt to build its land corridor via establishment of bases, but the Israelis are likely to continue striking these bases in an effort to show Iran that the venture is too costly. As nationalism rises in Iraq too, the QF may find its efforts to move supplies to Hezbollah and its other agents impeded as the Iraqi population calls for removal of Iranian influence. Iran's investment in Syria will continue to be costly, and although the regime has been saved for now, the future remains uncertain.

D. THE YEMEN CIVIL WAR, 2014–2020

The Yemen Civil War presented Iran with the prospect to establish a foothold on the southern border or its arch-rival, Saudi Arabia. The conflict in Yemen encompasses numerous internal and external actors, but at the heart of the war is a domestic fight between Houthi tribesmen, the Saudi backed government, and other groups desiring their own piece of the country.³¹⁸ The Houthi struggle provided Iran with an opportunity to invest in the future of Yemen. This investment is a unique case in Iran's use of the QF for three reasons. First, Iran did not and does not have a majority stakeholder say in the actions of the Houthis as it did with militias in Bosnia, Iraq, and Syria. Second, overt support that could garner greater control over the Houthi's actions could result in escalation to total war with Saudi Arabia and its allies including the United States.³¹⁹ Third, the QF's support to the Houthis is covert, and does not follow the model it used in Iraq and Syria. The QF's approach in Yemen is about a low cost, long-term gamble to spread its zone of influence to the underbelly of its archrival.

³¹⁷ Rollins.

³¹⁸ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 647, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12599>.

³¹⁹ Juneau, 658–60.

The QF's campaign in Yemen has yielded no gains in its NSOs as its authority over the Houthis is modest, and the fear of Iranian influence in Yemen united a coalition of nations to counter the QF's campaign. Yemen also provides little, if any, economic opportunities. However, this campaign is about long-term investment. Events in 2019 and 2020 suggest the coalition is on the ropes and the Saudis are looking for a way out. If the Houthis prevail, Iran may see significant returns in its NSOs.

1. Social-Political Situation

a. Yemen

Yemen's civil war began in late 2014 with a Houthi led rebellion, but the genesis of the conflict began a decade prior. The Houthis, began rebelling against the government in 2004, citing a lack of political representation and distribution of resources. Fighting occurred sporadically until a 2010 ceasefire.³²⁰ In 2010, Canadian National Defence analyst Thomas Juneau cited several issues that would lead to the collapse of Yemen if uncorrected. These included a booming population with high unemployment in the Arab world's poorest country, marginalization of the Houthis and southern districts by the government, widespread corruption, and the prevalence of jihadi groups inside Yemen including Al-Qaeda Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).³²¹ The government was corrupt and did not appear to be concerned with reform.

Yemen's authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was forced to face the turmoil only after the Arab Spring came to Yemen in 2011. A Tunisian citizen, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire on December 17, 2010 in protest of authoritarian abuses, and in doing so set a fire that would become the Arab Spring. The movement, seeking democratic reforms via protests, spread over the next several months to Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, and Yemen.³²² The Yemeni government reacted violently to protests. On May 29, 2011, security forces countered a several thousand strong protest in Yemen's second largest city,

³²⁰ Thomas Juneau, "Yemen: Prospects for State Failure— Implications and Remedies," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 3 (2010): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00456.x>.

³²¹ Juneau, 135–41.

³²² Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 63.

Taiz, with gunfire, tear gas, and arson. Incidents like this soon led to tribal militias expanding and increasing arming for protection against the government. The Army became overwhelmed in the fighting and tribal militias took control of areas in the north and southern parts of Yemen.³²³ President Saleh was forced to abdicate power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, as a first step towards reformation.³²⁴ However, Yemen's issues had already turned into a lit powder keg.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) orchestrated agreement for a transitional government avoided a civil war at first but ultimately failed to correct any of the grievances of the Houthis and other disenchanted Yemeni tribes.³²⁵ Disillusioned with a lack of change, the Houthis began to seize control of areas in northern Yemen. Security forces once loyal to President Saleh, along with other Yemenis, joined the Houthis and seized the capital of Sanaa in early 2015.³²⁶ The rebellion forced President Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia, and the Houthi advance continued.³²⁷ It appeared that the rebellion had the materials and support to take over the country. The Yemeni people gained no reforms that the transitional government had promised, and instead a costly civil war rife with famine and disease set in.

b. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates–Led Coalition

Intervention in the Yemen Civil War against the Houthis encompasses numerous nations, but it is Saudi Arabia and the UAE who have played the largest international role.³²⁸ In response to the escalating civil war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia launched a campaign to stop the Houthi advance and restore President Hadi to power in early 2015.

³²³ Robert F. Worth, "Yemen on the Brink of Hell," *New York Times*, July 20, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/magazine/yemen-on-the-brink-of-hell.html>.

³²⁴ "Yemen Crisis: Why Is There a War?," BBC, June 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

³²⁵ April Longley Alley, *Yemen's Houthi Takeover* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2014), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/yemens-houthi-takeover>.

³²⁶ BBC, "Yemen Crisis: Why Is There a War?"; Longley Alley, *Yemen's Houthi Takeover*.

³²⁷ "Yemen Crisis: President Hadi Flees as Houthi Rebels Advance," BBC, March 25, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32048604>.

³²⁸ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 121–23.

This campaign was supported by nine regional states including the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Senegal and Sudan.³²⁹ The United States provided only intelligence support at first, and then naval support, as it was, and is primarily focused on combating AQAP in Yemen.³³⁰ The civil war on the Arabian Peninsula concerned all of the nations surrounding it for commerce issues given the importance of the Mandeb Strait. The strait is strategic for global trade, particularly oil, and disruption of it could severely impact oil rich nations in the region.³³¹ The Saudis and Emirates, however, saw the possibility of an Iranian controlled Yemen as a prominent security issue that required military action on a level both countries had not engaged in before.

c. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's efforts in Yemen stemmed first from concern of the Arab Spring ideology spilling into the kingdom in 2011, then from a security concern for an Iranian proxy on its southern border, as well as Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's ascent to power.³³² These factors contributed to its initial bombing campaign, and later more direct involvement in the fighting. However, the years of conflict, economic and political toll, and lack of significant retaliation suggest it is weary of the conflict.

The 2011 Arab Spring presented the Saudi monarchy with the possibility of a revolution that would seek democratization.³³³ Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian-monarchy with absolute control of its domestic population and favors heavy handed tactics. The Muslim Brotherhood seized power in Egypt and the Bahrain monarchy faced extensive protests that jeopardized its rule during the Arab Spring. The Saudis responded with an

³²⁹ Helen Lackner, "The GCC, Iran and Yemen:: An Overview of Relations," in *Yemen and the Gulf States: The Making of a Crisis*, ed. Helen Lackner and Daniel Martin Varisco (Berlin, Germany: Gerlach Press, 2018), 24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1wrpww6.4>.

³³⁰ Jeremy M. Sharp, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, CRS Report No. R43960 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 10, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43960.pdf>.

³³¹ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 118.

³³² Lackner, "The GCC, Iran and Yemen," 10, 11.

³³³ Michael Duffy, "Saudi Arabia's Yemen War Isn't About Sectarianism," *The National Interest*, September 6, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/saudi-arabias-yemen-war-isnt-about-sectarianism-17581>.

operation to assist the Bahrain government to suppress the protests and ensure the status quo remained.³³⁴ The movement in Yemen forced President Saleh to step aside, and the Saudis had an ally in his successor, President Hadi. However, as reforms failed to come to fruition, the Houthi rebellion gained steam. The Saudis were faced with a movement on their southern border that threatened the stability of the region and could serve as a launching point for further rebellion. This movement was also supported by its chief adversary, Iran.

The Iran-Saudi rivalry has existed since 1979 and led to numerous conflicts across the Middle East as the two vie for influence and control.³³⁵ Saudi Arabia is greatly concerned with Iranian influence on two of its bordering nations in addition to Yemen, Syria and Lebanon. The Sunni dominated kingdom, was effectively surrounded by Shia factions and disruption of the Yemeni coast could threaten the oil trade for which it bases its economy on.³³⁶ This was unacceptable for King Salman in 2015 as Yemen was collapsing, so he put his son in charge of preventing the Iranians from getting a foothold.

The Yemen crisis was an opportunity for the new crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman to gain popularity with the Sunni domestic population and his military.³³⁷ Prince Salman assumed responsibility for responding to the Yemen crisis in January 2015 when his father, King Salman, took power following his brother's death.³³⁸ Prince Salman was initially seen as a reformer on the world stage, speaking to the internet connected population of his country, of which 70% were under 30.³³⁹ He tackled corruption, supported reforms to women's rights, and presented a casual attitude in an ultra-

³³⁴ Duffy.

³³⁵ Lackner, "The GCC, Iran and Yemen," 12–14.

³³⁶ Lackner, 14–15.

³³⁷ Lackner, 10–11.

³³⁸ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 73.

³³⁹ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 311.

conservative government.³⁴⁰ However, the prince would eventually show this to be a disguise, and worse yet, he had zero military experience to plan a response in Yemen.³⁴¹ The campaign was ill designed and the five years of stalemate are proving disastrous for the now Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi led campaign relied on air superiority and Yemeni groups to do the majority of the fighting and has yielded only a continued stalemate at rising costs.³⁴² As of spring 2020, the Crown Prince is faced with the COVID-19 crisis, fracturing of GCC goals, and a fracturing of the Yemeni alliances. Indiscriminate aerial bombings against Houthis and civilians alike resulted in global condemnation and alienation.³⁴³ The Crown Prince, facing multiple issues, is likely examining an exit strategy that could accept a permanent Houthi area in Yemen. A lack of significant Saudi responses to Houthi missile and drone attacks escalating since 2017 also suggests the Saudis are weary of the war and seeking a way out. The exit of the Emirates from the fight in 2019 was also a significant blow to the Saudis.

d. United Arab Emirates

The UAE had a vested interest in joining the coalition as it valued its relationship with the Saudis, wanted to ensure regional stability by denying Iranian influence, and wanted to stifle the spread of violent extremism.³⁴⁴ Up to this point, the UAE's foreign policy had been one of maintaining good relations with its neighbors and not getting involved in conflicts, although it did join the U.S. counterterrorism fight in places like

³⁴⁰ Ghattas, 311–12; Iain Millership, "We Should Welcome Mohammed Bin Salman to the UK - His Reforms in Saudi Arabia Could Benefit Us All," *Independent*, March 5, 2018, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-domestic-reforms-benefit-wider-world-radical-a8237261.html>.

³⁴¹ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 311.

³⁴² Declan Walsh, "War Within War: As Saudi Prince Edges Away from Yemen, His Allies Feud," *New York Times*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/world/middleeast/yemen-separatists-saudi-arabia.html>; Lackner, "The GCC, Iran and Yemen," 7.

³⁴³ Walsh, "War Within War."

³⁴⁴ Neil Patrick, "The UAE's War Aims in Yemen," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 24, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73524>.

Afghanistan.³⁴⁵ The UAE's involvement in the Yemen Civil War involved combating two enemies: the Houthis and terrorist groups such as AQAP.³⁴⁶ The Emirates primarily provided special operations forces to train Yemeni forces and engage in counterterrorism. These demonstrated worth by removing AQAP from several key areas near Aden and the southern coast between 2015 and 2017.³⁴⁷ The Emirate Navy took part in disrupting smuggling efforts and securing the Red Sea.³⁴⁸ However, in 2018 the UAE military and the Yemeni forces it supported were unable to retake the port of Hodeidah.³⁴⁹ With no end in sight to the conflict, a worsening humanitarian crisis, and negative publicity for the air campaign, the UAE sought an exit.

The Emirates withdrew from direct military action on February 9, 2020, not only removing its forces from combat operations but also complicating the reunification of Yemen. In 2017, the Emirates created the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a group of forces in the south of Yemen who still fought the Houthis and extremists but weakened the Yemeni government the Saudis were propping up. In doing so, the Emirates ensured they had a loyal proxy that could have a say in the future of Yemen, whether it be reunification or dismemberment.³⁵⁰ While the Emirates' efforts in Yemen did contribute significantly to counterterrorism efforts, their exit strategy only further splintered the coalitions efforts to unite Yemenis it supported against the Houthi movement. This has only caused more problems for the Saudis and increased the prospects for the Houthis and Iran of achieving autonomy.

³⁴⁵ Lackner, "The GCC, Iran and Yemen," 19.

³⁴⁶ Ibrahim Jalal, *The UAE May Have Withdrawn from Yemen, but Its Influence Remains Strong* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-may-have-withdrawn-yemen-its-influence-remains-strong>.

³⁴⁷ Jalal; Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 123.

³⁴⁸ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 121–23.

³⁴⁹ Jalal, *The UAE May Have Withdrawn From Yemen*.

³⁵⁰ Jalal.

e. Iran

In the Houthi rebellion, Iran found an ostracized resistance movement that it could support to increase pressure on its Saudi rival, but there were issues. First, there were logistical problems to sending adequate arms and supplies to the Houthis.³⁵¹ Second, the Saudis might retaliate to an Iranian footprint on its southern border.³⁵² Third, Iran's campaign in Syria was resulting in more IRGC losses that Iran had to admit to publicly.³⁵³ Fourth and finally, Iran was in negotiations to secure the survival of its nuclear program. Author Nader Uskowi contends that it was the inability of Qassem Soleimani to replicate the QF expeditionary model in Yemen that led to a more covert approach.³⁵⁴ Whether or not this was the thought process behind the QF's construct for the Yemen campaign, it has succeeded, albeit that may not be apparent yet.

Iran viewed the Houthis as a marginalized Shia group that would accept QF support and guidance as other Iranian proxies had done in the past. The Houthis follow Zaydi Shiism, and this form of Shiism is not identical to Iran's practice of Twelver Shiism.³⁵⁵ However, as demonstrated previously in this thesis, ideological alignment is not necessary for Iranian support.

Iranian leadership sought to advocate for the group publicly and missteps by the anti-Houthi coalition proved detrimental to the world audience. In 2012, Iran added a daily Yemen program to its official Arabic language channel that is accessible in Yemen and was vehemently anti-President Saleh and anti-United States.³⁵⁶ After Sanaa fell to the Houthis, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani publicly described the takeover as brilliant.³⁵⁷

³⁵¹ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 73.

³⁵² Uskowi, 73.

³⁵³ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 232.

³⁵⁴ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 73.

³⁵⁵ Duffy, "Saudi Arabia's Yemen War Isn't About Sectarianism."

³⁵⁶ Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role," *New York Times*, March 15, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html>.

³⁵⁷ Juneau, "Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," 657–58.

In February 2015, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister vowed Iran's political and economic support to the Houthi movement.³⁵⁸ The Saudi led campaign that launched soon after only aided Iran's narrative, as the Saudi bombing was described as indiscriminate. By March 2020, the UN estimated most civilian deaths that occurred during the fighting were from Saudi air strikes.³⁵⁹ Iranian leaders supported the Houthis in their statements, while always denying any involvement outside of advisement. They could point to the devastation being caused by a Sunni coalition, which denied humanitarian relief and bombed innocents alongside Shia freedom fighters. Coupled with no Iranian deaths or retaliation, the domestic base remained content with the QF's campaign.

2. QF Operations

The QF campaign in Yemen is built around investing in the Houthi rebellion to maintain pressure on Saudi Arabia and gain influence in the event of a Houthi victory, while managing risk to avoid an escalation to war with the GCC nations. Iran's level of support is modest compared to what it gives other non-state actors, but this is because it recognizes the consequences of escalation, and the QF's activities are about access to spoils during and post-conflict.³⁶⁰ Iran was also limited in the support it could provide at first due to the inability to move personnel and equipment freely into Yemen as it had in Iraq and Syria.

Iran does not share a border with Yemen, and the GCC coalition quickly closed air and sea access in early 2015 as the coalition sought to stop QF efforts.³⁶¹ The QF's expeditionary model that it had utilized in Iraq and Syria was not an option due to this and the possibility of escalating too quickly with not knowing the reaction Saudi Arabia would have.³⁶² The QF's approach shifted to more covert material and training support to the

³⁵⁸ Juneau, 657–58.

³⁵⁹ BBC, "Yemen Crisis: Why Is There a War?"

³⁶⁰ Juneau, "Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," 659.

³⁶¹ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 73.

³⁶² Uskowi, 73–74.

Houthis. This support increased over the years both in quantity and sophistication based on the actions and inactions of the Saudi led coalition.

The QF's primary support to the Houthis is via smuggling of financial and material support that includes weapons, ammunition, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and ballistic missiles. In order to smuggle these items, Iran takes advantage of the extensive Yemen coastline with disguised naval vessels. A 2015 U.N. report concluded that Iran began sending arms to the Houthis in 2009 in defiance of a 2007 U.N. resolution forbidding Iran from arms shipments. The report cited six other incidents including an Iranian fishing vessel seized in February 2011 that was loaded with 900 Iranian anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets.³⁶³ By March 2012, U.S. intelligence recognized a widening QF outreach to the Houthis. QF operatives were delivering rifles, rocket propelled grenades, and IEDs among other weapons primarily via small boat and freighter smuggling.³⁶⁴ A December 2014 Reuter's report citing several Yemeni, Western, and Iranian sources concluded that Iran was sending weapons and money to the Houthis before the 2014 seizure of the capital of Sanaa.³⁶⁵ As external entities sought to stop the flow of support to the Houthis, the delivery methods and types of ordinance changed.

Iran continued to take advantage of the 2700-kilometer-long coastline of Yemen, using ships disguised as commercial vessels to deliver increasingly destructive weapons.³⁶⁶ Beginning sometime in 2016, coalition navies began finding long range ballistic missiles, and by 2017 the Houthis had Iranian Qasef-1 UAVs. The Houthis also began utilizing a type of unmanned boat laid with explosives to attack coalition ships, including a Saudi frigate in January 2017. The UAVs were primarily used to target

³⁶³ Carole Landry, "Iran Arming Yemen's Houthi Rebels Since 2009: UN Report," Middle East Eye, May 1, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-arming-yemens-houthi-rebels-2009-un-report>.

³⁶⁴ Schmitt and Worth, "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role."

³⁶⁵ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Confirmed: Iran's Foreign Military Arm Is Backing Yemeni Rebels Who Took Control of the Country," Business Insider, December 15, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/r-iranian-support-seen-crucial-for-yemens-houthis-2014-12>.

³⁶⁶ Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, and Michael Gregory, "Exclusive: Iran Steps up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War - Sources," Reuters, March 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis-idUSKBN16S22R>.

coalition air defense infrastructure.³⁶⁷ By January 2018, the Saudis were able to demonstrate with recovered ballistic missile pieces that Iran was supplying the Houthis with missiles that could be launched into Saudi Arabia. The recovered pieces demonstrated great lengths being taken to hide the origin. Missile segments welded together suggested that the missiles were being shipped in segments to avoid detection.³⁶⁸ In a January 2018 interview with CNN, Saudi Air Force General Turki Maliki, refused to state Saudi Arabia's red line for retaliation after the reported 88th ballistic missile was intercepted near the capital of Riyadh.³⁶⁹ Facing no retaliatory targeting by the Saudis, the QF appeared to feel safe in enabling the Houthis to continue targeting Saudi soil and pushing the line.

Since the 2015 intervention of the Saudi led coalition to reinstate President Hadi, the Houthis have retaliated with attacks along the Saudi-Yemen border and firing missiles into Saudi Arabia.³⁷⁰ In 2019 the Houthis, with an unknown level of guidance from Iran, claimed responsibility for more prominent attacks. This included a strike on the Abha airport in June 2019 that injured 26 people and a swarm drone attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.³⁷¹ The attacks resulted in no escalation from the Saudis or other coalition members despite threats from the Saudis and the Trump administration. Remnants from the drone attack showed that the weapons were too sophisticated to have been manufactured in Yemen but were also a type never seen in Iran.³⁷² The covert delivery of material support has allowed the QF and Iran to maintain plausible deniability, even as Houthi attacks increased in destructiveness and sophistication between 2015 and 2020.

Complimenting the delivery of materials and finances to the Houthis, Iran provided QF operatives for training and advisement. It is unclear when the QF began training Houthi

³⁶⁷ Saul, Hafezi, and Gregory.

³⁶⁸ "Saudis: Missile Evidence Iran Backing Yemeni Rebels," January 17, 2018, CNN, video, 2:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XInCIZz_yUI.

³⁶⁹ CNN.

³⁷⁰ Adam Taylor, "Why Iran Is Getting the Blame for an Attack on Saudi Arabia Claimed by Yemen's Houthis," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/09/16/why-iran-is-getting-blame-an-attack-saudi-arabia-claimed-by-yemens-houthis/>.

³⁷¹ Taylor.

³⁷² Taylor.

rebels, but by 2014, open source reporting suggested it was ongoing inside and outside of Yemen. According to an Iranian source for Reuters, the QF had a few hundred training personnel in Yemen and “about 100 Houthis had traveled to Iran [in 2014] for training at a Revolutionary Guards base near the city of Qom.”³⁷³ By 2015 U.S. intelligence concluded that although Iran’s direct involvement in the civil war was limited, IRGC personnel were training and equipping Houthi fighters.³⁷⁴ Houthis took control of the Yemeni Army’s missile force after capturing the capital of Sanaa. The QF provided technical help to extend the range of these systems up to 400 miles.³⁷⁵ QF operatives providing training and technical assistance appears to have remained unimpeded, with the anti-Houthi coalition members focusing primarily on interdicting material and financial delivery.

3. Reaction to QF Operations

The QF’s campaign in Yemen has not resulted in significant reaction from Saudi Arabia or its allies due to its covert nature and grind on the coalition’s will to continue. The former QF commander, Qassem Soleimani, may have wished to deploy an expeditionary package like he had in Iraq and Syria, but early actions by the coalition prevented this. During the initial phases of the coalition’s intervention, Yemeni airspace was declared restricted and the coast was blockaded. In April 2015, Iran sent naval vessels to challenge the blockade but ultimately reversed course when challenged by the U.S. Navy. Iran next tested the air restrictions by sending civilian Mahan airlines to the Sanaa airport under the guise of humanitarian aid. The Saudis responded by bombing the airport runways.³⁷⁶ These responses made the QF adjust its campaign to be more covert.

In 2015, Former Canadian National Defense analyst, Thomas Juneau, argued that Iran’s support to the Houthis is less impactful because it expects limited returns, coupled

³⁷³ Ghobari, “Iran’s Foreign Military Arm Is Backing Yemeni Rebels.”

³⁷⁴ Warren Strobel and Mark Hosenball, “Elite Iranian Guards Training Yemen’s Houthis: U.S. Officials,” Reuters, March 27, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-houthis-iran-idUSKBN0MN2MI20150327>.

³⁷⁵ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 119.

³⁷⁶ Uskowi, 121.

with the possibility of total war if it angered Saudi Arabia too much.³⁷⁷ Yemen's position was a vital security threat and, therefore, required the use of all elements of national power. Thomas Juneau also points out as Nader Uskowi in *Temperature Rising* and Helen Lackner in "Yemen and the Gulf States: The Making of a Crisis" that Saudi King Salman and his son, the current Crown Prince, intended to send a message about Iranian influence by subduing the rebellion in several months.³⁷⁸ The response, however, only resulted in stalemate, and the air campaign hurt the coalition publicly as it appears indiscriminate. Iran's calculus at first likely included risk mitigation against a Saudi response, and it may have also wanted to deploy greater forces and support. We may not know for certain the original intent, but what time has shown is that the covert nature of the campaign has kept the QF and Iran from significant blowback, despite increasing the sophistication of weaponry and training delivered to the Houthis.

A 2020 congressional report on Yemen cited several pieces of evidence linking weapons utilized by the Houthis to Iranian origin from ship seizures and debris analysis over the past several years.³⁷⁹ In January 2018, UN experts concluded from debris of missiles launched into Saudi Arabia that it showed similarities to missiles produced in Iran. In January 2019, the UN panel of experts on Yemen reported that Iran was funding Houthi purchases of UAVs and rocket fuel. In February 2020, U.S. CENTCOM announced the recovery of Iranian "Noor" anti-ship cruise missiles destined for the Houthis. Dissection of Houthi operated UAVs and waterborne explosive boats also suggest Iranian origin given the components.³⁸⁰ However, nothing is clearly marked "Iran," nor have Iranian operatives been captured alongside these materials to provide definitive proof.

The QFs covert smuggling of weapons and training bares similarities to the CIA's Operation CYCLONE during the Soviet-Afghan War. In the 1980s, the CIA provided equipment to the mujahedeen resistance combating Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Training

³⁷⁷ Juneau, "Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," 662–63.

³⁷⁸ Juneau, 662; Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 73; Lackner, "The GCC, Iran and Yemen," 11–12.

³⁷⁹ Sharp, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, 9.

³⁸⁰ Sharp, 9.

occurred in Pakistan and arms flowed via backpack and donkey through the rugged mountain passes. The CIA took advantage of the extensive Pakistani border for smuggling in everything from rifles to anti-air missiles. This covert operation effectively enabled the resistance to defeat the Soviets while the United States and its supporting allies could maintain plausible deniability. The Soviets were unable to justify retaliation against the United States and its allies for the operation.³⁸¹ Throughout the Yemen Civil War, Iran has been able to avoid retaliation because its soldiers are not on the front lines with the Houthis, and there exists no definitive evidence that could justify expanding the war.

The U.S. military has provided support to the Saudi coalition, but the political issues surrounding the civil war and presence of other threats to the United States have limited U.S. involvement. The Saudis handling of the war is politically distasteful given the humanitarian crisis and documenting of indiscriminate air operations by the coalition. In 2018, the U.S. Air Force stopped refueling coalition combat planes amid criticism of air strikes on civilians.³⁸² From the start of the conflict, the U.S. Military did provide intelligence and naval support to the coalition to locate and interdict shipments to the Houthis. The Houthis, however, do not present a realistic threat to U.S. security. Terrorist groups like ISIS and AQAP present a greater threat, and have therefore, bore the brunt of American attention.

Terrorist groups in Yemen have been targeted by the U.S. military since the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism. According to one report, the U.S. military conducted 372 air or ground operations against terrorists in Yemen between 2002 and 2020.³⁸³ U.S. special operations forces do work with coalition forces, including Yemeni government forces inside Yemen for certain operations. These include an operation in 2019 to capture the leader of the Yemeni ISIS branch, and a 2017 raid against an AQAP camp,

³⁸¹ For an in depth account of Operation CYCLONE, see: George Crille III, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2007).

³⁸² John Hudson, Missy Ryan, and Josh Dawsey, "On the Day U.S. Forces Killed Soleimani, They Targeted a Senior Iranian Official in Yemen," *Washington Post*, January 10, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/on-the-day-us-forces-killed-soleimani-they-launched-another-secret-operation-targeting-a-senior-iranian-official-in-yemen/2020/01/10/60f86dbc-3245-11ea-898f-eb846b7e9feb_story.html.

³⁸³ Sharp, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, 11.

during which a U.S. Navy SEAL was killed.³⁸⁴ Counterterrorism appears to be the United States' primary interest in Yemen. It did begin deploying special operations to assist counter-Houthi operations by late 2017, but open source reporting demonstrates that it is limited and reserved.

By late 2017, the United States began sending teams of Army Special Forces to Saudi Arabia to train Saudi soldiers and assist with locating and targeting Houthi ballistic missiles. The mission was focused on training, border defense, and intelligence, appearing to have taken steps to remain apart from any offensive operations.³⁸⁵ There is no open source evidence that the Special Forces teams accompanied Saudis on counter-Houthi operations. The United States did attempt to target then QF deputy commander, Abdul Reza Shahlai, in Yemen the same day Qassem Soleimani was killed in Iraq. However, the operation appeared to be more about disrupting and signaling to the IRGC following increasing tensions in Iraq.³⁸⁶ The QF's support to the Houthis does garner some attention, but the reservation of U.S. operations against the Houthis in Yemen demonstrates that it is a secondary or tertiary concern.

4. Iran's NSOs Advancement

The QF's campaign in Yemen has not resulted in any significant gains to Iran's four NSOs, but the campaign is one of a long-term investment strategy. Operations yielded minimal gains to its NSO of increasing regional influence via the ability to apply pressure against Saudi Arabia. The United States expanded its support to the GCC alliance beyond naval support and intelligence sharing, deploying advisors to Saudi Arabia in 2017. This increase in the U.S. special operations footprint does not help Iran's NSO of removing U.S. influence. There are no economic advances from supporting the Houthis, nor has the conflict had any tangible effect on Iran's domestic population control. However, this is a campaign in gambling on the Houthis gaining power and being able to reap the benefits

³⁸⁴ Sharp, 11.

³⁸⁵ Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, and Eric Schmitt, "Army Special Forces Secretly Help Saudis Combat Threat from Yemen Rebels," *New York Times*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/us/politics/green-berets-saudi-yemen-border-houthi.html>.

³⁸⁶ Hudson, Ryan, and Dawsey, "On the Day U.S. Forces Killed Soleimani."

should that occur. Conducting risk management to avoid escalation with the GCC coalition, and not spending more in blood and treasure than necessary makes it a less risky gamble.

Since 2019, there have been an increase in issues for the Saudi led coalition that suggest it may be looking for a way out. Before withdrawing from military action in 2019, the UAE created the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in May 2017, from several non-state actors it supported. This council ensured the Emirates maintained influence and a say in the future of Yemen at the expense of weakening the position of the Saudi backed Yemeni government.³⁸⁷ In 2020, the Saudis are facing the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside evidence that their operations in Yemen are unsustainable. 80% of Yemen is reliant on humanitarian aid, there is widespread famine, and the Saudis military operations continue to draw criticism on the world stage for exacerbating the human toll.³⁸⁸ The COVID-19 crisis may provide the Saudis with an opportunity to withdraw under the guise of humanitarianism.³⁸⁹ The Saudis seem unable to retain an agreed cease fire, and the Houthis continue to launch attacks into Saudi territory with the Saudis only responses being politically damaging air strikes. A Saudi withdrawal from major combat operations could be inevitable if the coalition continues to deteriorate. This is almost a certainty given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region and with allies including the United States. When this occurs, Iran will be in a better position to assert influence over the Houthis, and begin reaping more benefits from its gamble in Yemen.

E. THE WAR IN IRAQ AGAINST ISIS AND THE UNITED STATES, 2014–2020

The QF led campaign to defeat ISIS in Iraq, and subsequent campaign to remove reintroduced U.S. forces are lessons in the consequences of using proxies and exceeding an opponent's threshold for violence in IW. The QF's campaign to remove U.S. forces from Iraq between 2003–2011 resulted in advances of all four of Iran's NSOs, but its subsequent actions resulted in the reversal of those gains. These actions were centered on

³⁸⁷ Jalal, *The UAE May Have Withdrawn From Yemen*.

³⁸⁸ Raiman Al-Hamdani, "Riyadh's Retreat," *Zenith*, April 21, 2020, <https://magazine.zenith.me/en/politics/saudi-arabia-and-war-yemen>.

³⁸⁹ Al-Hamdani.

fostering a Shia dominated government and military at the expense of the majority Sunni population. The sectarianism fed the growth of ISIS and its offensive to unite the Middle East under a singular Islamic caliphate that was completely at odds with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The QF, its proxies, and U.S. backed Iraqi forces defeated ISIS in Iraq by the end of 2017, but the renewed presence of U.S. forces was unacceptable for Iran. QF operations to push the United States back out of Iraq escalated to the brink of war in 2020 with the targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani because the QF had again overstepped victory and misjudged the responses of its adversaries.

1. Social-Political Situation

The campaign to defeat ISIS in Iraq united American and Iranian forces in pursuit of a common goal. Both nations could not afford to allow an extremist organization to overtake a sovereign country. The United States saw the possibility of a nation being established whose intention was to launch terrorist attacks throughout the world. For Iran, ISIS rhetoric called Shia Muslims apostates who needed to be put to death; defeating ISIS was an act of survival. Both nations needed a secure and stable Iraq, and this depended on preserving the autonomy of the Iraqi government and its territory.³⁹⁰ This unification, however, was fleeting. As ISIS was pushed further back, the two old adversaries once again turned to ensuring that the other did not have a majority say in rebuilding Iraq.

a. Iraq

In 2011, Iran could undeniably say that its efforts in Iraq had worked; the U.S. military was removed and what was left was a friendly government with a heavily influenced, if not controlled prime minister, Nouri Al-Maliki. When the Americans left, the Iraqi people purportedly had a democratic system of government with a viable military capable of defending the country, but this was by all accounts a gross exaggeration. Sectarian actions by Maliki and others would splinter the Iraqi population in favor of Shia

³⁹⁰ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane M. Tabatabai, "A Comparative Study of U.S. and Iranian Counter-ISIS Strategies," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 6 (June 3, 2017): 456, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1221265>.

dominance. These actions helped set conditions for the rise of ISIS and weakening of the Iraqi military.

The level of Iranian say in the policies of Prime Minister Maliki and other politicians post U.S. withdrawal is unknown, but what is clear, is that sectarianism played a substantial role.³⁹¹ According to one RAND report, at the discretion of Maliki, the Iraqi Security Forces went from 55% to 95% Shia between 2010 and 2014. According to the same report, Maliki also allowed Shia militia groups such as Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq to attack his rivals.³⁹² According to accounts of several politicians who served under Maliki, those who did not agree with his policies faced intimidation, discrimination and arrest.³⁹³ Anti-government protests in primarily Sunni areas were dealt with harshly, including one case in April 2013, where 44 civilians were reportedly killed by security forces.³⁹⁴ Maliki's selfish actions served to only further the Shia-Sunni divide and protect the interests of his power base. Sunnis found that the government that the Americans had left in place was not serving their interests. As ISIS began to grow and spread its ideology through numerous media platforms, its message became more appealing.

In "Why was ISIS Successful" Kenneth Pollack finds five factors that contributed to the initial success of ISIS's expansion: poor adversaries, zeal, fighting commanders, unorthodox hierarchy, and foreign fighters.³⁹⁵ The sectarian actions of the Iraqi government contributed to poor adversaries and zeal. When U.S. troops withdrew in 2011, Maliki replaced experienced officers with those who aligned with his goals. Some of these officers sold excess ammunition, auctioned commissions, and created "ghost soldiers" on

³⁹¹ Alireza Nader, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for Cooperation?*, PE-151-OSD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 3, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE151.html>.

³⁹² Nader, 2–3.

³⁹³ Priyanka Boghani, "In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Maliki's Iraq," PBS, October 28, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq/>.

³⁹⁴ Boghani.

³⁹⁵ Kenneth Pollack, "Why Was ISIS Successful?," American Enterprise Institute, March 27, 2019, <https://www.aei.org/articles/why-was-isis-successful/>.

paper to fraudulently collect payroll.³⁹⁶ ISIS faced the Iraqi Third Armored Division when it marched on Mosul. In six days, ISIS overwhelmingly defeated what was a better armed but incoherent force.³⁹⁷ One contributing factor for defeats like this was the marginalization of Sunni soldiers, who may have been more skilled or experienced in positions they were denied.³⁹⁸ ISIS's message, amplified by a sophisticated propaganda campaign, targeted the disillusioned Sunni population, including former soldiers. ISIS fostered a sort of zeal through its propaganda machine that encouraged adherence to only the Caliph and sacrifice for Sunni Islam. The Iraqi government, after years of pushing aside Sunnis, could not compete with this message, and nationalism gave way to extremism.

b. ISIS

ISIS is an extremist Sunni Islamic group whose goal is to establish an Islamic state guided by the interpretations of religious scholars, and ruled by a singular caliph (supreme leader).³⁹⁹ ISIS began as a splinter group from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, taking part in the Sunni insurgency against the U.S. led coalition.⁴⁰⁰ ISIS is unique from other Islamic terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, and Al-Nusra because it succeeded in drawing in enough individuals and support to establish its own form of government over an exceptionally large area. At the height of its expansion in June 2014, ISIS ruled over an estimated 10 million people.⁴⁰¹ The group attracted foreign fighters from almost every nation across the globe, developed an unprecedented propaganda campaign, and inspired attacks in countries like the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and France.

³⁹⁶ David A. Patten, "Defeating ISIS, Rolling Back Iran," *Middle East Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (2015), <https://www.meforum.org/5479/defeating-isis-rolling-back-iran>.

³⁹⁷ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 98.

³⁹⁸ Boghani, "In Their Own Words."

³⁹⁹ "'Deviant and Pathological': What Do ISIS Extremists Really Want?," NBC News, September 3, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/deviant-pathological-what-do-isis-extremists-really-want-n194136>.

⁴⁰⁰ "The War Against 'Islamic State' in Maps and Charts," BBC, March 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>.

⁴⁰¹ BBC.

The group's leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi routinely called for the overthrow of governments and acts of terrorism. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi reportedly decided that the situation in Syria in the summer of 2011 possessed the conditions for sowing the seeds of his interpretation an Islamic caliphate.⁴⁰² By the summer of 2013, ISIS had seized the Syrian city of Raqqah and accelerated its propaganda machine to feed recruitment from disenfranchised Sunnis locally and globally. It openly warred with any who did not submit, including moderate Syrian opposition groups. In the spring of 2014, ISIS fighters launched into Iraq, seizing major cities such as Mosul and eventually threatening Baghdad. In June 2014, ISIS published a document that attempted to paint Baghdadi as the rightful descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, and additionally removed all references to geographic boundaries in its messaging.⁴⁰³ ISIS made it clear it was on the march and would not stop short of engulfing the Muslim world under the umbrella of its caliphate.

Ultimately, it was the actions of violent subjugation and advocacy of world-wide terrorism that brought about its demise. ISIS overplayed its hand and united allies and enemies alike in a mission to destroy it. The non-Sunni populations who did not align with its ideology in seized territories were either executed, enslaved, forced to convert, or pay religious taxes. ISIS sought no allies, and favored making enemies. The physical ISIS caliphate was gone in Iraq by late 2017 and finished in Syria in April 2019. Remnants of the group including cells which attack Iraqi forces do exist, but it is a shell of its former self because it united too many enemies.

c. *The United States*

President Barack Obama fulfilled a campaign promise and removed all U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. The global war on terrorism continued but the United States was done with Iraq. The situation that brought the United States into Iraq in 2003 appeared to haunt the administration as it took multiple efforts to avoid getting drawn into the situation developing in 2013. Despite voicing chemical weapons as a "red line" that would result in U.S. military action against the Syrian regime, President Obama did not follow through

⁴⁰² Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 281.

⁴⁰³ NBC News, "'Deviant and Pathological.'"

after evidence of over 1000 Syrians being killed in a chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta, Syria.⁴⁰⁴ The president's administration showed similar reluctance to get involved in another Middle East conflict when ISIS continued to expand and call for terrorist attacks abroad. It was only after ISIS marched across northern and western Iraq that the United States became more involved. In July 2014, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced that there were 750 U.S. servicemembers in Iraq, conducting assessments for a U.S. response to ISIS.⁴⁰⁵ The administration was no longer able to defend not getting involved in the conflict. The situation demonstrated that substantial military support and advanced air support was required to save Iraq. A month later, the U.S. military began an air campaign to counter the advance of ISIS and U.S. soldiers were being prepared to return to Iraq.

On September 10, 2014, President Obama announced that the U.S. military had conducted over 150 airstrikes against ISIS targets in the month prior, and began doing so only after Prime Minister Maliki was removed by the Iraqi president.⁴⁰⁶ The prime minister attempted to hold to power for several days before he reportedly lost favor with Iranian supporters and was told to stand down by Iraq's most influential Shia Cleric, Ali Sistani.⁴⁰⁷ President Obama stated that the U.S. mission was to "degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group," through an air campaign and support to partner forces on the ground.⁴⁰⁸ Air support, material, and training support to the Iraqis did help the Iraqi Army stop ISIS's advance. The strategy did not originally include authorities for U.S. forces to accompany any partner forces but was later modified after the train and equip program proved a complete failure in Syria. The U.S. military strategy next evolved to include U.S.

⁴⁰⁴ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 285.

⁴⁰⁵ Kristina Wong, "Hagel: U.S. Knows Iran, Russia Aiding Iraq in Fight Against ISIS," *The Hill*, July 11, 2014, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/212024-hagel-us-knows-iran-russia-aiding-iraq-in-fight-against-isis>.

⁴⁰⁶ Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," *The White House: President Barack Obama*, September 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

⁴⁰⁷ Michael Georgy and Ahmed Rasheed, "Power Struggle on Baghdad Streets as Maliki Replaced but Refuses to Go," *Reuters*, August 11, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-idUSKBN0G808J20140811>.

⁴⁰⁸ Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL."

SOF being allowed to enter northern Iraq and Syria to support Kurdish fighters battling ISIS. Authorities would continue to relax as President Trump assumed office in 2016.

From 2016 to 2017, the U.S. military expanded its footprint in Iraq and Syria to defeat ISIS on one hand and prevent control of the Iraqi military by Iran on the other. U.S. SOF primarily supported the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), while conventional forces trained regular army units and security forces. According to Nader Uskowi, the CTS was the only Iraqi unit that was believed to remain apolitical at the time.⁴⁰⁹ The CTS bore the brunt of the Iraqi Army's fighting to retake cities such as Mosul. After Mosul was liberated in July 2017, the ISIS capacity to fight in Iraq beyond sporadic hit and run attacks greatly diminished. However, the U.S. military would not be leaving this time. The military did not want a repeat of 2011, and the administration saw Iranian influence as being detrimental to Iraq's stability.⁴¹⁰ This policy would lead to increasing tensions for the next two years as Iran sought to remove U.S. influence from Iraq. These tensions would escalate to the possibility of war in 2020 due to the American political will to respond to QF operations that threatened U.S. forces and interests. I explore these events in the third section of this case study.

d. Iran

ISIS presented the Islamic Republic of Iran with a cataclysmic threat to its campaign in Syria, Iranian influence in Iraqi politics, religious sites in Iraq, economic interests, and sovereign Iranian territory.⁴¹¹ The ideology of ISIS was and is vehemently at odds with that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. ISIS's narrative portrayed the Islamic Republic of Iran as Shia apostates who sought to subjugate the "true" Sunni Muslim community.⁴¹² ISIS propaganda included Persian-Farsi language that sought to inspire Iran's Sunni minority to terrorist acts. The literature sought to delegitimize the religious

⁴⁰⁹ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 104.

⁴¹⁰ Kathy Gilsinan, "Iraq Is the One War Zone Trump Doesn't Want to Leave," *Atlantic*, February 3, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/02/trump-troops-iraq-iran-soleimani_isis/605908/.

⁴¹¹ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, "A Comparative Study of U.S. and Iranian Counter-ISIS Strategies," 456.

⁴¹² Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 456.

authority of the government, denouncing its authority to rule and Ayatollah Khamenei.⁴¹³ Iranian leadership quickly realized that the ideology of ISIS spreading across Syria and Iraq was a significant danger.

ISIS shocked Iran and Western nations in 2014 when it seemingly exploded across Syria and Iraq, easily defeating Iraqi forces and capturing cities such as Mosul, Iraq. By the summer of 2014, it was possible that the Iraqi capital of Baghdad could be overrun and the Iranian border could be crossed by ISIS fighters. Iran was at risk for losing everything it had gained from its campaign to remove U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. The Iranian military deployed QF and conventional forces to Iraq in a manner similar to what it did in Syria. Arms and training aid gave way to deployment of expeditionary conventional units to push ISIS back away from the Iranian border. The difference between this campaign and the one in Syria was that the Iranian public did not protest the Iraq intervention as ISIS was a threat to Iran and its people. This threat was demonstrated in several instances of ISIS inspired terrorism inside Iran.

When ISIS was pushed back from the Iranian border region, it turned to terrorism for inflicting a toll on the Islamic Republic. However, these actions failed to ignite a Sunni uprising in Iran or deter Iranian popular support as it united the people against a real threat to the Shia majority. According to one Reuters report citing Iranian media, Iranian security forces arrested 12 militants inside Iran and over 50 sympathizers promoting ISIS ideology in May, 2016. The same report stated that Iranian intelligence claimed to have prevented a terrorist attack in Tehran in June 2016, arresting 10 individuals and seizing 100 kilograms of explosives.⁴¹⁴ In June 2017, five Kurdish militants acting on behalf of ISIS carried out two attacks in Tehran at the Iranian parliament and Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum. Iran placed blame on Saudi Arabia and the United States for the attacks but ISIS quickly claimed responsibility with a video from inside the parliament building during the

⁴¹³ "Iran Attacks: 'IS' Hits Parliament and Khomeini Mausoleum," BBC, June 7, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40184641>.

⁴¹⁴ Babak Dehghanpiseh, "Islamic State Militants Paid to Stage Bomb Attacks in Iran: State TV," Reuters, July 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-security-islamic-state-idUSKCN0ZK1TW>.

attack.⁴¹⁵ The attacks did not have the effects ISIS desired, as it only invigorated popular support for the war on ISIS the same way the recording of an IRGC soldier being beheaded in Syria had that same summer.⁴¹⁶ The Iranian government succeeded in preventing an ISIS inspired uprising, or allowing the threat of terrorism to impede its efforts to destroy ISIS.

As the threat of ISIS posed to Iran diminished, and U.S. forces appeared to not be leaving Iraq, Iran's efforts turned to pushing the Americans out of Iraq once again. However, this time would be different from 2011. The American political will to meet the QF's operations forcefully, coupled with the Iranian body politic who would not accept more conflict at the continued expense of the Iranian economy are a barrier that has kept the U.S. forces in the region. QF IW activities aimed at pushing the Americans out of Iraq culminated with the targeted killing of the QF commander, Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Despite weeks of Iranian rhetoric warning of exceptional retaliation, what followed was minimal. Iran responded by launching several volleys of ballistic missiles at two U.S. bases in Iraq. There were no U.S. deaths from the attack, although, 110 U.S. service members were diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries.⁴¹⁷ However, after a U.S. military review, only 29 met the criteria for being significant enough to award the Purple Heart medal for an injury sustained in combat.⁴¹⁸ The U.S. government felt no need to respond to the missile barrage. Iran ratcheted down its rhetoric after this, seemingly realizing that further escalation with the United States could prove too costly. The missile barrage also coincided with an Iranian air defense system accidentally downing a civilian airliner over Iranian airspace. The Iranian government suffered embarrassment, and demonstrators took to the streets in protest of the situation which had caused the accident. Iranian leadership also likely realized that the Iranian people, who had taken to the streets in protest of the government's policies two months prior, did not see value in a new conflict with the United

⁴¹⁵ BBC, "Iran Attacks: 'IS' Hits Parliament and Khomeini Mausoleum."

⁴¹⁶ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 292, 301.

⁴¹⁷ Elizabeth McLaughlin and Luis Martinez, "29 Soldiers Receive Purple Hearts Following Iran Missile Attack," ABC News, May 5, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/29-soldiers-receive-purple-hearts-iran-missile-attack/story?id=70510632>.

⁴¹⁸ McLaughlin and Martinez.

States. In an Op-Ed, British Parliament member Bob Blackman pointed out the “#IraniansDetestSoleimani” Twitter tag being tweeted by hundreds of thousands concurrent with Soleimani’s funeral as an example of the true feelings many Iranians had for Soleimani and the QFs activities.⁴¹⁹ According to Mr. Blackman, the Iranian narrative surrounding the sense of grief in Iran for Soleimani’s death was grossly exaggerated given the part Soleimani played in the brutal crackdown of protests in Iran two months prior. Outside of state-controlled media inside Iran, there is little to suggest that the body politic cares about a continuing U.S. presence inside Iraq. The Iranian people do not care enough about a modest U.S. presence, especially when there are greater concerns, such as a struggling economy. This lack of popular will, alongside an American political will to respond to hostile QF activities in Iraq, are the reason why the QF have been unable to push U.S. forces out like they did in 2011.

2. QF Operations

The ISIS offensive that spread across Iraq in 2014 demanded a response from the Iranian military as the Iraqi Army demonstrated itself incapable of stopping a force that threatened to engulf Iraq and position itself to take on Iran next. The Iranian strategy was once again orchestrated by the QF commander, Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani’s campaign strategy followed a construct similar to that of the one used in Syria, although at an accelerated pace. The campaign’s design can be broken down into three key tasks required to reach Iran’s desired end state: prevent sectarian division of Iraq, minimize support diverted from the Syrian campaign, and ensure proxies setup for political and military power in Iraq after the defeat of ISIS.

Maintenance of plausible deniability and avoiding overt deployment of forces to Iraq in 2014 was intended to prevent further Iraqi secularization that risked splitting the

⁴¹⁹ Bob Blackman, “Mourning at Soleimani’s Funeral Was Staged. Iranians Are Not Rallying Behind the Regime.,” Euronews, January 15, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/15/mourning-at-soleimani-funeral-was-staged-iranians-are-not-rallying-behind-the-regime-view>.

country across sectarian lines.⁴²⁰ ISIS sought to use the sectarian policies of Prime Minister Maliki's government to feed its recruitment and divide the country. Iran recognized that an unstable and partitioned Iraq would weaken its regional interests.⁴²¹ In "Iran's ISIS Policy," Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai explore the beginning and transition of the Iranian strategy between 2014 and 2015. According to the authors, Iran's strategy of primarily using the QF to arm, train, and support militia groups inside Iraq allowed Iran to maintain some deniability. The concern of the Iranian leadership, according to the authors, was sparking an Iraqi nationalist reaction to direct Iranian involvement. This reaction could lead to further secularization, and a possible dividing of Iraq between the three main populations: Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish.⁴²² Citing statements from officials and an interview with Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the authors contend that a divided Iraq would weaken Iran's sphere of influence and possibly create new enemies as the Sunni province would possibly align with Saudi Arabia.⁴²³ To prevent further destabilization of Iraq, Soleimani utilized the QF to arm, train, and support various groups inside Iraq that could stop the ISIS advance moving towards Iran.

The QF's initial actions in Iraq were aimed at enabling friendly Kurdish and Shia militia groups to stop ISIS from reaching Iran. In an August 2014 press conference, Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani stated that Iran had been delivering military aid to Iraqi Kurdish fighters, and that Iran was the first nation to come to the Iraqi Kurds aid.⁴²⁴ A separate Washington Post article quoting an Iranian Cleric stated that Iran had sent over 1000 advisors and \$1 billion dollars in aid to Iraq between June and December 2014.⁴²⁵ QF operatives provided logistics, guidance, and assistance to the Kurdish Peshmerga, and

⁴²⁰ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 1 (2015): 7, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_docs/INTA91_1_01_Esfandiary_Tabatabai.pdf.

⁴²¹ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 7.

⁴²² Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 8.

⁴²³ Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 7.

⁴²⁴ Isabel Coles, "Iran Supplied Weapons to Iraqi Kurds; Baghdad Bomb Kills 12," Reuters, August 26, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-kurds-idUSKBN0GQ11P20140826>.

⁴²⁵ Missy Ryan and Loveday Morris, "The U.S. and Iran Are Aligned in Iraq Against the Islamic State — For Now," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

Shia militia groups including the Badr Brigade, Katab Hezbollah (KH), and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq (AAH).⁴²⁶ The three latter groups would make up the heart of the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF). This list is not all encompassing, but reporting demonstrates that these three made up the bulk of Iran's proxy force to counter ISIS. QF influence after the fall of Mosul in 2014, capitalized on the call to arms from Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali Astani, who called for all Iraqis to unite and take up arms against the ISIS invasion. The QF mobilized over 100,000 fighters into the PMF, and through Prime Minister Maliki, made them a legitimate arm of the Iraqi military.⁴²⁷ By supporting these groups, the QF could lead the ISIS counterattack from the rear to maintain deniability, and prevent the need for a full-scale intervention of Iranian forces.

The QF led militia groups proved successful at counterattacking and pushing back ISIS forces, but the situation in Syria demonstrated the issues inherent in fighting a two-front war. By August 11, 2014, ISIS forces had reached the town of Jalula, Iraq, some 22 miles from the Iranian border.⁴²⁸ According to an Al-Monitor article citing Iranian Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Pourdestan's testimony before Iran's parliament, he said that Iran responded by deploying five combat brigades, to the Iranian border to defend it.⁴²⁹ The general's testimony also included that some infantry and helicopters passed over the border. Realizing that further incursion towards Iran would be met with a high level of resistance, ISIS forces turned to fortifying the towns around Jalula.⁴³⁰ The QF led militias, Iraqi forces, and anti-ISIS Sunni groups were successful in retaking several towns and key infrastructure by the end of 2014, including Jalula, Kirkuk oil fields, and the Mosul Dam.⁴³¹ However, as the QF was orchestrating its campaign in Iraq, it was facing a worsening situation in Syria that threatened fulfillment of its key task for mission success:

⁴²⁶ Ryan and Morris; Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 100, 102.

⁴²⁷ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 303.

⁴²⁸ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 99.

⁴²⁹ Abbas Qaidaari, "Is Iran Worried About IS on Its Border?," Al-Monitor, June 5, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2015/06/islamic-state-iran-border.html>.

⁴³⁰ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 99.

⁴³¹ Uskowi, 104.

minimize support diverted from the Syrian campaign. In March 2015, QF and IRGC officers led 25,000 Shia militia fighters and 3000 Iraqi Security Forces in an operation to retake the city of Tikrit.⁴³² Due to the deteriorating situation in Syria, Soleimani was unable to reinforce these forces as the battle went on, leading the new Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi to seek U.S. air support to speed the pace of the operation.⁴³³ As discussed in the Syrian Civil War case study of this thesis, the situation in Syria in early to mid 2015 demanded the deployment of an exceptional Iranian expeditionary force as well as all available proxy forces. However, the QF continued to advise and support the PMF as it continued to retake ISIS held territory, albeit with smaller numbers.

The Iraq campaign continued with the unintended aid of the U.S. military and Iraqi forces not under QF influence. U.S. intelligence and airpower, alongside increased training and support to Iraqi forces accelerated gains made against ISIS, culminating in the liberation of Mosul in July 2017.⁴³⁴ The PMF continued its offensive west to Al-Qaim and into Syria, thereby linking a ground corridor between Iran and Syria for movement to the Syrian front.⁴³⁵ The QF's campaign significantly contributed to the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and the American led coalition would finish it off in Syria. Two of the QF's key tasks to reach mission success were complete. Now it needed to ensure its allies were in power as the future of Iraq was developed.

The third key task for the campaign to be a success and help Iran reclaim the NSO advancement it lost in 2014 was ensuring that allies or proxies were in positions of power from which Iran could exercise influence. A report by Vice News highlighted the efforts of PMF groups like Harakat Hezbollah Al-Nujaba, to gain political office in 2018. Statements from PMF officers and the Al-Nujaba spokesman, Hashim Al-Moussawi, clearly articulated Iranian influence. The Iraqi vice president, Ayad Allawi, emphasized the concern for this influence, stating: "They want to control Iraq. As they are doing now,

⁴³² Uskowi, 105.

⁴³³ Uskowi, 105.

⁴³⁴ Uskowi, 107–8.

⁴³⁵ Uskowi, 111.

they control Iraq.”⁴³⁶ However, the 2018 parliamentary elections did not go Iran’s way. According to Nader Uskowi, Qassem Soleimani failed to account for the split among Iraqi Shia leadership once ISIS was no longer a threat.⁴³⁷ The PMF led coalition was forced to contend with three other Shia parties in the 2018 parliamentary elections including an anti-Iran Muqtada al Sadr group, and a group led by the former and current Iraqi prime ministers. Uskowi posits that the QF was forced after this point to adjust its strategy to counter an emerging “Iraq first” mentality.⁴³⁸ The QF, however, had another problem to reclaiming the influence it had between 2011–2014; the U.S. maximum pressure policy.

Following its decision to withdraw from the JCPOA agreement on May 8, 2018, the U.S. government adopted a maximum pressure policy to deter and coerce Iranian activities.⁴³⁹ Part of this strategy is preventing Iranian control of the Iraqi government, and the Trump administration has demonstrated exceptional resolve to respond to hostile Iranian actions in Iraq. Keeping U.S. forces in Iraq enables the U.S. military to prevent an ISIS resurgence in Iraq, as well as Syria, while also curtailing Iranian influence. President Trump repeatedly stated on the campaign trail that leaving Iraq was a mistake and likely sees staying there as a way to avoid the blame President Obama received for ISIS.⁴⁴⁰ When the U.S. appeared to not be leaving Iraq like it had from its main bases in Syria during 2019, the QF orchestrated several small-scale attacks using rocket attacks, believing casualties might force a U.S. withdrawal. After a U.S. contractor was killed, the U.S. military responded by striking an Iranian supported militia position, killing 25.⁴⁴¹ The QF responded by mobilizing fighters and civilian supporters to march on and threaten the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. This action, along with a reported imminent threat to U.S. forces in Iraq, resulted in an airstrike that killed the QF commander, Qassem Soleimani, alongside

⁴³⁶ “Iran’s Power Over Iraq,” January 3, 2020, Vice News, video, 15:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTPKJtPWNrQ>.

⁴³⁷ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 112.

⁴³⁸ Uskowi, 112–13.

⁴³⁹ Katzman, *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options*, 24–25.

⁴⁴⁰ Gilsinan, “Iraq Is the One War Zone Trump Doesn’t Want to Leave.”

⁴⁴¹ David Rising, “Iran Uses Violence, Politics to Try to Push U.S. Out of Iraq,” AP News, January 23, 2020, <https://apnews.com/6a6cf1d35f314242e616d95ea6c012ba>.

others including the PMF operation chief, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis. I explore the reasons behind this reaction, which was so different from previous U.S. responses, in the next section.

3. Reaction to QF Operations

The QF's campaign to defeat ISIS in Syria and restore a level of control over the Iraqi government was initially successful but failed to realize the second order effects continued sectarianism was having on the Iraqi population, as well as the change in U.S. policy towards Iran. According to former ambassador to Iraq, James Jeffrey, the Obama administration may have not reacted quickly enough to ISIS in Iraq, instead wanting to see political reforms from the Maliki administration before intervening. The former ambassador remarked: "The Iraqis were in desperate straits, and the only ones who came to their rescue was Iran...These guys will remember that."⁴⁴² Despite being the first to come to the aid of the Iraqi people when ISIS stormed across their border, the mood of the population changed during the conflict as they saw the implications of an externally controlled government and military continuing the cycle of conflict. The U.S. government also took up a drastically different stance towards Iran in 2018, reacting quite differently to QF operations that sought to remove U.S. forces from the region.

It is unknown exactly what level of control the QF had over the PMF when it came to sectarian reprisals against ISIS fighters and liberated Sunni civilians, but the problems it caused are worth exploring as preventing these actions are essential in IW. The rise of Iraqi nationalism that impacted Iran's efforts to reestablish a level of control over the Iraqi government is related to the activities of the PMF. A November 2014 article in the *Seattle Times* cited several videos, purportedly showing Shia militiamen from groups like KH beheading ISIS captives and retaliating against Sunnis they saw as ISIS supporters.⁴⁴³ Iraqi Sunni lawmaker, Raad Al-Dahlki, accused the militias of "carrying out sectarian

⁴⁴² Ryan and Morris, "The U.S. and Iran Are Aligned in Iraq."

⁴⁴³ Sameer N. Yacoub and Sinan Salaheddin, "Iraqi Shiite Militias Grow Brutal in Anti-IS Fight," *Seattle Times*, November 11, 2014, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/iraqi-shiite-militias-grow-brutal-in-anti-is-fight/>.

cleansing.”⁴⁴⁴ Accusations led to militia leadership having to publicly denounce the retribution and react. In one case AAH expelled 49 members in October 2014 for using ISIS as an excuse for unknown actions.⁴⁴⁵ Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr was forced to publicly decry the sectarianism when his fighters were filmed carrying the heads of ISIS fighters during a battle in August 2014.⁴⁴⁶ However, sectarian issues that exacerbated the divide among Iraq’s population continued. In January 2016, seven Sunni mosques in Eastern Iraq were burned in retaliation for ISIS fighters destroying several Shia mosques.⁴⁴⁷ The PMF were blamed for these actions. Speaking as part of a panel discussing the issues with the PMF, former spokesman for the Iraqi Government, Ali Al-Dabbagh, remarked that the problems were PMF members like Badr and KH, who were loyal to Iran.⁴⁴⁸ Fellow at the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies, Renad Mansour, shared similar thoughts, pointing to these groups being primarily concerned with their interests and not so much with what the Iraqi prime minister may want for the betterment of the country.⁴⁴⁹ Whether by lack of concern, allowance, or inability to control the sectarian reprisals of the groups the QF supported, this activity did not support Iran’s goal of maintaining a unified Iraq under Iranian influence.

According to U.S. IW doctrine, “The strategic point of irregular warfare is to gain or maintain control [of] influence over, and the support of, a relevant population.”⁴⁵⁰ By allowing the Iraqi population to be further divided, the QF failed to present the PMF as a viable protectorate of the Iraqi people, regardless of their ideology or heritage. Iran needs the majority of Iraqis, or at least the government body, to be on its side if it wants to expand its influence and push U.S. forces out of Iraq. It cannot do so without appealing to Sunnis and Kurds the same way it does to the Shia. PMF retaliations over the conflict only

⁴⁴⁴ Yacoub and Salaheddin.

⁴⁴⁵ Yacoub and Salaheddin.

⁴⁴⁶ Yacoub and Salaheddin.

⁴⁴⁷ “Can Iraq’s Government Stem Rising Sectarianism?” January 3, 2020, Al Jazeera English, video, 25:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJUZbCpGvKY>.

⁴⁴⁸ Al Jazeera English.

⁴⁴⁹ Al Jazeera English.

⁴⁵⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I–6.

increased concern and fear in a population who has witnessed what happens when the power of one sect becomes too great. A PMF that could demonstrate itself as an accomplished part of the Iraqi military that protected the interests of all Iraq would likely have secured significant QF influence in the future of the Iraqi military, but the lack of QF control instead contributed to the rise of Iraqi nationalism.

Several reasons were given by the Trump administration and media outlets for the January 3, 2020 targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani. One Business Insider article cited a half dozen statements by U.S. officials ranging from an imminent threat to targeting Soleimani for previous crimes against U.S. forces.⁴⁵¹ What was clear is that the action was a significant change from previous U.S. reactions to hostile Iranian actions. I contend that the administration saw the QF orchestrated attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in December 2019 as the QF passing a red line. This consensus was shared in several articles in the wake of Soleimani's death including an OP-ED in the Washington Post by Marc Thiessen.⁴⁵² In this OP-ED, Thiessen cites a Washington Post report that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo personally delivered a message during a visit to Iraq in May 2019. This message reportedly stated that any attack on Americans would result in military action, and Iran would be held responsible for any actions of its proxies. Retired U.S. General Jack Keane shared this sentiment in an interview with Fox News, saying that Iranian activities were increasing through 2019 in hostility and that they would continue if President Trump's administration followed the policy of President Obama.⁴⁵³ The Trump administration would not accept an attack on U.S. diplomats or servicemembers, so it took the opportunity to reestablish the red line with Iran. The subsequent counterreaction by Iran to save face, and then the cooling of hostilities demonstrates that Iranian leadership

⁴⁵¹ Ryan Pickrell, "The Trump Administration Is Struggling to Explain Why The U.S. Killed Top Iranian General Soleimani — Here's All The Shifting Explanations," Business Insider, January 13, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-administrations-shifting-explanations-for-soleimani-killing-2020-1>.

⁴⁵² Marc A. Thiessen, "In Killing Soleimani, Trump Enforces the Red Line He Drew on Iran," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/01/03/killing-soleimani-trump-enforces-red-line-he-drew-iran/>.

⁴⁵³ Jack Keane, Gen. Keane on Soleimani Strike: Trump Had a "Red Line" For Iran and He Enforced It, interview by Julia Musto, Television (Fox News, January 3, 2020), <https://www.foxnews.com/media/jack-keane-iran-qassem-soleimani-strike-trump>.

received the message. The United States would tolerate some QF activities as it had in the past, but substantial threats to U.S. personnel were off limits.

4. Iran's NSOs Advancement

The QF's campaign against ISIS and the United States in Iraq did prevent the potential invasion of Iran by ISIS, save Iran's economic interests in Iraq, and enable its proxy army to receive legitimacy as part of the Iraqi Security Forces. However, the sectarian nature of the campaign helped give rise to Iraqi nationalism, which advocates for the removal of external influence. Additionally, the Trump administration's policy towards Iran has made it clear the U.S. military will be staying in Iraq this time, and antagonization by the QF will not be tolerated on the level it was before.

Iran's NSO advancements from the conflict are the renewal of economic partnerships with Iraq and the continued legitimacy of the PMF, which expands its regional influence. In 2019, Iran-Iraq trade stood at \$12 billion per year and stands to increase to \$20 billion per year.⁴⁵⁴ A March 2019 trade treaty between the two countries heavily favored Iran with expansion of Iranian imports and shared oil wells.⁴⁵⁵ Iraq depends on Iranian provided gas and electricity, and this dependence has stifled the United States' efforts to enact economic sanctions.⁴⁵⁶ The PMF remains a legitimate wing of the Iraqi Security Forces, and several of the factions that comprise the PMF display loyalty to Iran. Factions inside the PMF continue to demonstrate that their actions are not beholden entirely to the Iraqi government.⁴⁵⁷ The QF's plan to push U.S. forces out of Iraq, leading up to the killing of Qassem Soleimani, was executed by some of these groups. However, maintaining legitimacy requires majority support to the Iraqi government. Aymenn Jawad

⁴⁵⁴ Natasha Turak, "Iran Just Struck a Hoard of Deals With Iraq, and Washington Isn't Happy," CNBC, March 20, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/20/iran-just-struck-several-deals-with-iraq-and-washington-isnt-happy.html>.

⁴⁵⁵ Turak.

⁴⁵⁶ Sajad Jiyad and Ellie Geranmayeh, "Iraq, Iran, and The Spectre of U.S. Sanctions," European Council on Foreign Relations, March 18, 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_iraq_iran_and_the_spectre_of_us_sanctions.

⁴⁵⁷ Michael Knights, Hamid Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces" (online presentation, The Washington Institute, May 28, 2020), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>.

Al-Tamimi contends that some factions like AAH and KH now have dual roles. One role is of an anti-American resistance force, the other is supporting the Iraqi government security interests.⁴⁵⁸ The PMF also entails forces like the Atabat units, who have no link to the IRGC and are affiliated primarily with prominent Iraqi Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani.⁴⁵⁹ The continued existence of the PMF does provide several of the QF's proxies with legitimacy, and a force with which to counter the U.S. military. However, it is wrong to look at the organization as a singular Iraqi military branch under Iran's control.

The QF's lack of control over sectarian vengeance and an increased perception that it sought to control the future political landscape of Iraq contributed to a rise in Iraqi nationalism. In November 2019, hundreds of Iranian intelligence reports and cables were leaked to the press. These documents verified the U.S. narrative that the QF and MOIS sought to make Iraq into an Iranian satellite state.⁴⁶⁰ Anti-government protests escalated in the fall of 2019, as thousands of Iraqis marched in opposition to corruption and external influence. What was unique from previous protests is that they advocated for removal of Iranian influence in predominantly Shia areas like Karbala and Najaf. In November, the Iranian Consulate in Karbala was burned down.⁴⁶¹ The Iranian Consulate in Najaf was attacked and burned by Iraqi protestors in November, and then again on December 1, 2019.⁴⁶² In July 2020, three gunmen assassinated an Iraqi researcher named Hisham Al-Hashemi. Protestors marched through Najaf chanting anti-Hezbollah slogans and some blamed Iran's supreme leader for the assassination with posters labeling Ayatollah

⁴⁵⁸ Knights, Malik, and Jawad Al-Tamimi.

⁴⁵⁹ Knights, Malik, and Jawad Al-Tamimi.

⁴⁶⁰ Tim Arango et al., "The Iran Cables: Secret Documents Show How Tehran Wields Power in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/18/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-spy-cables.html>.

⁴⁶¹ Adam Taylor, "As Iran and the U.S. Face Off, Iraq Is Stuck in the Middle," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/12/31/why-iraq-is-center-dispute-between-iran-united-states/>.

⁴⁶² "Iraqi Protesters Torch Iranian Consulate For Second Time," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, December 2, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iraqi-protesters-torch-iranian-consulate-for-second-time/30301872.html>.

Khamenei a murderer.⁴⁶³ Protests in Iraq between 2019 and 2020 have also called for the removal of U.S. forces and influence as well, but no U.S. structures have been attacked besides a QF orchestrated violent demonstration resulting in minimal damage to the U.S. Embassy in December 2019. The protests have shown that the Iraqi people are demanding that the future of their country will not be a repeat of what happened in 2011.

Iran's level of political influence over Iraq has been degraded over the course of the conflict with ISIS and the return of U.S. forces. Iraqis wishing to remove the level of external influence that aided the rise of ISIS resulted in the Shia bloc being split between pro and anti-Iran groups during the parliamentary elections of 2018.⁴⁶⁴ In May 2020, Iraq elected its current prime minister, Mustafa Al-Kazimi. According to a report by Raz Zimmt, the secretary of the Iranian National Security Council and the current QF commander actively sought to oppose his election.⁴⁶⁵ Thus far, Prime Minister Kazimi's policy appears to desire continuing relations with the United States and Iraq's Sunni neighbors, while preventing the Iraqi government from becoming an Iranian satellite state.⁴⁶⁶ Iran has lost the control it had with Nouri Al-Maliki and it appears that the current Iraqi administration is comfortable with a continued U.S. presence.

In 2011, the QF's campaign in Iraq successfully removed U.S. forces, but the threat of ISIS which Iran could not contain brought them back. The Trump administration has shown that it is planning to maintain a military presence of thousands of soldiers in Iraq for years.⁴⁶⁷ Its acceptance of escalation risk to stop QF activities that past a certain threshold of violence, also presents Iranian decision makers with a problem. The political

⁴⁶³ Yaghoub Fazeli, "Iraqis Mourning Assassinated Researcher Hisham Al-Hashemi Call Khamenei 'Murderer,'" Al Arabiya English, July 8, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/07/09/Iraqis-mourning-assassinated-researcher-Hisham-al-Hashemi-call-Khamenei-murderer-.html>.

⁴⁶⁴ Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 112.

⁴⁶⁵ Raz Zimmt, *Iran Faces Growing Challenges in Iraq but Is Determined to Further Its Vital Interests* (Glilot, Israel: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2020), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iran-faces-growing-challenges-iraq-determined-vital-interests/>.

⁴⁶⁶ Zimmt.

⁴⁶⁷ Gilsinan, "Iraq Is the One War Zone Trump Doesn't Want to Leave."

will to face and respond to the QF is preventing the advancement of Iran's NSO to remove the United States from the Middle East.

F. QUDS FORCE USE OF TERRORISM AND SUPPORT TO TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

In the following case study, I examine the reasoning behind the QF's use of methods associated with terrorism and support to terrorist groups. This case study takes a different approach than the others in this thesis. The reasoning for this is that the conflict is not confined to one period of time, and the availability of open source data that can definitively prove guilt is lacking. In examination of how a weak state actor like Iran can use special operations forces in IW, it is essential to understanding the purpose and limitations behind such universally condemned activities. U.S. doctrine concerning IW states that adversaries will use irregular methods like terrorism to "wage protracted conflicts in an attempt to exhaust the will of their opponent and its population."⁴⁶⁸ Use of activities associated with terrorism do not serve advancement of Iran's four NSOs the same way its other activities do, but it is a valuable tool for signaling to adversaries with asymmetric advantages.

In 1984, the U.S. government designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism and has continuously maintained that it is the world's leading sponsor of international terrorism.⁴⁶⁹ The QF are a designated terrorist organization and so is its parent division of the military, the IRGC. Iran uses terrorism alongside other instruments of power to achieve its national security objectives.⁴⁷⁰ Labeling Iran's support to terrorist activities may provide the legal basis for sanctions. However, viewing the IRGC's methodology through the prism of terrorism is incorrect. Many of its activities, including assassinations, are not internationally acceptable, but these activities are executed by a state that is acutely aware

⁴⁶⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-6.

⁴⁶⁹ U.S. State Department, "State Sponsors of Terrorism," in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016* (Washington, DC: U.S. State Department, 2017), <https://web.archive.org/web/20170721054054/https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272235.htm>.

⁴⁷⁰ Negar Fayazi, *Iran: Is It Really the Leading State-Sponsor of Terrorism?* (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Global Dialogue, 2017), 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17466>.

of its exceptional asymmetric disadvantage with its primary adversaries, the United States and Israel.

I submit that IRGC's use and sanctioning of activities labeled as terrorism are an extension of their strategy of using extraterritorial networks to compete with Iran's adversaries. Labeling the IRGC a terrorist organization does enable the U.S. government to target its resources to combat hostile actions. However, looking at the IRGC from a terrorist group model is incorrect. To the contrary, many of its extraterritorial operations associated with terrorism are about strategic retaliation and signaling. In the following sections I first examine several definitions of terrorism, and then compare it to the U.S. State Department's justification for labeling the IRGC a terrorist organization. Next, I assess reasons why a state may choose to use such activities. Finally, I examine several cases during the leadup to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Agreement (JCPOA) in which several Iranian linked attacks against United States and Israeli targets occurred or were foiled. The analysis demonstrates that labeling terrorism is subjective to an establishment's perception, and activities often associated with terrorism can be effective in the conduct of IW for a state in signaling and retaliation.

1. Defining Terrorism

What constitutes terrorism and a terrorist act is subject to interpretation and varies between assemblies. UN General Assembly Resolution 49/60 defines terrorism as "criminal acts, intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstances unjustifiable whatever the considerations...invoked to justify them."⁴⁷¹ This definition is vague and many UN nations have definitions that vary significantly such as Russia, whose definition is closer to acts of sabotage.⁴⁷² According to the FBI, terrorism is "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social

⁴⁷¹ Fayazi, 1.

⁴⁷² Fayazi, 1.

objectives.”⁴⁷³ Groups of nations, nations, or the entities that exist internal to those nations will base their definition upon the perception of external and internal threats which might undermine it through irregular means.

Terrorist designation not only varies between organizations, but time and culture as well, illustrating subjectivity of the term. In *Inside Terrorism*, political analyst and terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman points out that the definition evolved over time. The term was primarily associated with revolution between the French Revolution and World War I.⁴⁷⁴ During World War II it took on a meaning in line with political violence being conducted against domestic populations by authoritarians such as Hitler and Stalin. The definition then reverted back to being associated with violent revolutions as the post-World War II era saw numerous indigenous populations rise up to overthrow occupying powers through irregular means.⁴⁷⁵ Hoffman and others including Brian Jenkins point out that the term is itself subjective, and labeling a group terrorists depends on a point of view.⁴⁷⁶ Hoffman concludes that terrorism should be defined by five points that distinguish them from criminals and irregular fighters. These points are

- Ineluctably political in aims and motives.
- Violent - or, equally important, threatens violence.
- Designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target.
- Conducted either by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure (whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia) or by individuals or a small collection of individuals directly influenced, motivated, or inspired by the ideological aims or example of some existent terrorist movement and/or its leaders.
- perpetrated by a subnational group or nonstate entity.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷³ Fayazi, 2.

⁴⁷⁴ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Revised and Expanded (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 4–11.

⁴⁷⁵ Hoffman, 15–16.

⁴⁷⁶ Hoffman, 23.

⁴⁷⁷ Hoffman, 40.

Numerous attacks linked to Iranian agents share Hoffman's characteristics, and characteristics of what terrorism entails according to the UN. The U.S. State Department regularly provides press releases to why the IRGC is considered a terrorist entity.

According to the U.S. State Department, Iranian agents and proxies have been implicated in terrorist attacks, both failed and completed, as well as assassinations in more than 40 countries. Iran primarily uses the extraterritorial arm of the IRGC, the QF, to engage in these acts. These acts are committed by QF operatives, or by using proxies such as Hezbollah and drug cartels, to silence dissidents and attack foes.⁴⁷⁸ These assertions are backed up across the U.S. government. At a 2011 U.S. House of Representatives joint hearing regarding Iranian threats to U.S. soil, subcommittee on oversight, investigation, and management chairman Michael McCaul remarked "Iranian backed political violence has killed more than a thousand people in over 200 terror attacks, including the 1983 suicide bombing [of the U.S. Marine barracks]...in Beirut."⁴⁷⁹ Various expert witnesses laid out QF support to South American drug cartels in the form of tunnel construction, as well as financing to groups who seek to destroy Israel including Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.⁴⁸⁰ Actions of these groups who receive support from the QF are well documented and give credence to the U.S. government's assertions.

The groups receiving QF support meet Hoffman's criteria for identifying terrorism, and some link the doctrine for their attacks to Iranian origin. In March 1992, Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for bombing an Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, leaving 21 dead and over 250 wounded. The group sought retaliation for Israeli airstrikes, and made a political statement regarding Israeli antagonization.⁴⁸¹ Hezbollah assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, reportedly at the direction of Iranian agents for trying

⁴⁷⁸ U.S. State Department, *Iran's Assassinations and Terrorist Activity Abroad* (Washington, DC: U.S. State Department, 2020), <https://www.state.gov/irans-assassinations-and-terrorist-activity-abroad/>.

⁴⁷⁹ *Iranian Terror Operations on American Soil: Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management, the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and the Committee on Homeland Security House of Representatives, 112th Cong.* (2011), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg73741/html/CHRG-112hhrg73741.htm>.

⁴⁸⁰ H.R., *Iranian Terror Operations*

⁴⁸¹ William R. Long, "Islamic Jihad Says It Bombed Embassy; Toll 21," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-03-19-mn-5905-story.html>.

to take Lebanon out of the Iran-Syria orbit.⁴⁸² Hezbollah effectively created the concept of suicide bombing in the name of martyrdom throughout the 1980s against leftist and Western targets inside Lebanon.⁴⁸³ This concept, according to author Kim Ghattas, was inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran. Facing defeat by better armed Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini found an effective countermeasure in religious fervor that inspired suicidal human wave charges. These charges in the name of religious justification became the basis for suicide attacks.⁴⁸⁴ These examples demonstrate groups receiving Iranian support can be labeled terrorists according to UN definitions, and academia. One must ask then, why would a rational state actor choose to support terrorists beyond ideological alignment?

2. Why a State May Use Terrorism in the Conduct of IW

A nation state such as Iran may wish to use activities associated with terrorism to overcome asymmetric deficiencies that it feels other foreign policy tools cannot attain. Iran cannot compete with the United States and many other Western powers diplomatically or economically due to several factors including availability of resources. Iran's only true resource is oil and Western sanctions are aligned with restricting Iran's ability to export it. Iran views U.S. influence in the Middle East as a persistent threat to the regime's survival. Iran's military strategy is primarily built around conventional deterrence for defense, which includes its ballistic missile program.⁴⁸⁵ For offensive operations, use of militant clients allows Iran to extend its influence outside its border to achieve its national security objectives.⁴⁸⁶ Use of these clients is part of Iran's grand strategy as it has demonstrated effectiveness in countering adversaries.⁴⁸⁷ These clients include Shia militias that effectively pushed the United States out of Iraq in 2011, as well as groups who readily

⁴⁸² Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

⁴⁸³ Ghattas, *Black Wave*, 141.

⁴⁸⁴ Ghattas, 141.

⁴⁸⁵ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 23.

⁴⁸⁶ Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 11–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862>.

⁴⁸⁷ Ostovar, 11–12.

commit acts of terrorism including Hezbollah and Hamas. These groups, under direction of the QF, can further Iran's objectives abroad through actions associated with terrorism, without invoking military retaliation against Iran itself.

Terrorist activities linked to Iran demonstrate that it will utilize QF agents, or QF advised proxies to silence dissidents, and signal capabilities. As Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter point out in their study of terrorist strategies: "Terrorism works not simply because it instills fear in target populations, but because it causes governments and individuals to respond in ways that aid the terrorists' cause."⁴⁸⁸ The authors surmise that terrorism is a type of costly signaling, conducted by an entity too weak to achieve their goals directly. Iranian agents have assassinated dissidents abroad since the 1979 revolution, believing their message might pose a threat to the regime's internal security.⁴⁸⁹ Support to terrorism can also act as a form of deterrence.⁴⁹⁰ The IRGC will never admit the QF influenced or supported any attacks; doing so could result in military retaliation. However, when plots are executed, the IRGC is essentially signaling its capacity to inflict damage abroad. Even when the attacks are foiled, the signal is still sent in media coverage that the capability and willingness exist.

The Iranian regime may also view support to terrorist groups and activities such as assassinations as necessary given that its adversaries also use it. The regime may view these activities as a form of covert warfare, rather than terrorism. In most cases where the finger was pointed at the IRGC for supporting terrorist activity, Iran and the perpetrator were ideologically aligned. The United States and Israel have also admitted to or been accused of conducting covert action against Iranian interests. Iran views these as terrorist acts. In 1953, the CIA and MI6 deposed Iran's democratically elected prime minister over fears that an oil dispute with the British could push Iran into the USSR's orbit.⁴⁹¹ In 2010, the

⁴⁸⁸ Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 50.

⁴⁸⁹ Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

⁴⁹⁰ Daniel L. Byman, "How Terrorism Helps — and Hurts — Iran," *Brookings* (blog), January 6, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/06/how-terrorism-helps-and-hurts-iran/>.

⁴⁹¹ Ostovar, "Religion and Politics of Iran."

STUXNET malware program was discovered to be undermining Iran's nuclear program progress. In 2012 there were a string of assassinations conducted inside Iran with Iranian nuclear scientists being the target. The CIA has admitted since that it did conduct the 1953 covert action. STUXNET and the assassinations' perpetrators have not been definitively proven, but Iran blames the United States and Israel. Iran's arch-rival in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, has itself been accused of assassinating dissidents abroad. Saudi Arabia was universally blamed for the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi for his criticism of the Saudi Crown Prince. In August 2020, the Saudis were accused of dispatching a hit squad to Canada to silence former intelligence official, Saad Aljabri.⁴⁹² If Iran's adversaries are conducting these acts that it perceives as terrorist, it likely feels justified in reciprocating.

These activities, whether perceived as terrorist or covert can also serve the purpose of signaling in the interest of preventing escalation overtly. Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo posit that covert action can be conducted completely in secret, or intelligibly to communicate resolve.⁴⁹³ The authors demonstrate that covert action that does not remain entirely hidden can be effective if it demonstrates credibility to two audiences: Strategic adversaries and local allies. An example used is the 2007 bombing of Syria's nuclear reactor. Israel could not act overtly in the interest of regional stability, but intelligence strongly suggested Israel was to blame. This sent a message to Syria and Iran that Israel had the willingness and capacity to directly attack their nuclear ambitions.⁴⁹⁴ Several cases in the early 2010s suggest Iran executed covert action intended for retaliation, and signaling of its ability to fight back against threats to its nuclear program.

⁴⁹² Alex Marquardt, "Saudi Crown Prince Accused of Assassination Plot Against Senior Exiled Official," CNN, August 6, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/06/politics/saudi-assassination-plot-allegations/index.html>.

⁴⁹³ Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret," *Security Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1243921>.

⁴⁹⁴ Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 132–33.

3. Attacks Signaling Resolve for Iran's Nuclear Program

There were several unsuccessful and well publicized attacks linked to Iran and the QF between 2011 and 2013 that demonstrate retaliation and signaling from the Iranian government. Between 2011–2013, former QF commander, Qassem Soleimani, reportedly orchestrated as many as 30 attacks across the globe.⁴⁹⁵ Several of these attacks appeared to be in retaliation for a string of assassinations of Iranian scientists in January 2012, for which Iran blamed Israel.

In February 2012, an Iranian cell operating in Bangkok was discovered after an explosion at their safe house. One member of the cell blew his own legs off after using his own explosives to evade the police, and the other two were later apprehended trying to get out of Thailand.⁴⁹⁶ At the same time, attacks were carried out against Israeli targets in New Delhi, India and Tbilisi, Georgia. A magnetic bomb was emplaced on a diplomatic vehicle in New Delhi by a motorcyclist, injuring the Israeli diplomat's wife. In Tbilisi, an Israeli embassy driver found a car bomb under his car. Israel immediately accused Iran of the attacks. Many pointed in the aftermath to the likelihood of the attacks being based on retaliation.⁴⁹⁷

Several months prior to these attacks, an assassination attempt on U.S. soil was foiled. In October 2012, Iranian expatriate, Mansour Arbabsiar, plead guilty to U.S. Department of Justice charges related to a 2011 plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States. The plot allegedly involved the QF tasking Mansour to work with a Mexican drug cartel to kill the ambassador with a bomb that would be planted inside a Washington,

⁴⁹⁵ Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

⁴⁹⁶ Thomas Fuller and Rick Gladstone, "Blasts in Bangkok Add to Suspensions About Iran," *New York Times*, February 14, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/15/world/asia/explosions-in-bangkok-injures-suspected-iranian-national.html>.

⁴⁹⁷ Harriet Sherwood and Jason Burke, "Israel Accuses Iran of Attacks in Delhi and Tbilisi," *Guardian*, February 14, 2012, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/14/israel-accuses-iran-of-attacks>.

DC café the ambassador frequented.⁴⁹⁸ The news of this attack, alongside acknowledgement that over a dozen Americans would likely have been killed in the blast led some lawmakers to claim that it was a declaration of war by Iran. However, others were skeptical that it was really a QF orchestrated operation.

IRGC expert, Afshon Ostovar, notes that the brazenness of the attack and Mansour's background are not in line with other QF operations.⁴⁹⁹ Some including Secretary of State Hilary Clinton appeared to look at the case almost as if it was a joke. If the QF or Iranian leadership were involved its tenacity would implicate a gross misstep and demonstrate that Iran was once again favoring aggressive, unconstrained terrorism as part of their strategy.⁵⁰⁰ If the plot was known to or conceived by Iranian leadership, could it have been designed to fail as a method of signaling capability or willingness?

Developing the plot with the intention of having it fail could still demonstrate some capacity by Iran to conduct terrorism on U.S. soil if Iran's nuclear program was attacked. The failure of the plot also ensured the signal yielded zero loss of life, and the QF only losing a patsy while exposing a mole in the drug cartel. The final withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq was occurring as the plot was unmasked, and President Barack Obama was headed into an election year. Iran could likely say with a degree of certainty that the U.S. president would not seek to escalate the situation if no Americans were killed. This is not the only case where an Iranian attack on U.S. soil failed. As part of a series of cyber-attacks against U.S. institutions between 2011–2013, Iranian hackers were able to access the system controlling the Bowman Dam in New York. The part of the system that would have allowed the hackers to open the dam was reportedly manually disabled at the time due to

⁴⁹⁸ Department of Justice - Southern District of New York, "Man Pleads Guilty in Manhattan Federal Court to Conspiring with Iranian Military Officials to Assassinate Saudi Arabian Ambassador to The United States," Press Release, October 17, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140408225049/http://www.justice.gov/usao/nys/pressreleases/October12/arbabsiar.php>.

⁴⁹⁹ Afshon Ostovar, "Worst. Plot. Ever.," *Foreign Policy* (blog), October 13, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/13/worst-plot-ever/>.

⁵⁰⁰ Ostovar.

maintenance, preventing remote access.⁵⁰¹ Iran signaled that its cyber soldiers could get into U.S. infrastructure, and in the case of the dam, a capability to cause death and damage. If it was able to remotely open the dam, causing U.S. deaths at the time would not have supported Iran's ongoing efforts with the JCPOA negotiations.

There is a common saying: "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Terrorism is subject to interpretation across nations, cultures, and time. There are many countries who would call the U.S. military and CIA terrorists for having taken part in several coups, and forceful regime changes throughout its history. Labeling the IRGC and its extraterritorial arm, the QF, terrorist organizations does provide a legal basis for sanctions. Sanctions are perhaps the best way of imposing costs on the IRGC at this time. I also do not posit that all of its operations are calculated, and civilians are often killed. However, as the United States continues to study and target the IRGC, it must not look at all of its operations under the lens of violent, ideological terrorism. Acts we view as terrorism are an effective mechanism for covert retaliation and signaling that Iran could not possibly do through other policy tools.

⁵⁰¹ "Seven Iranian Hackers Indicted over Alleged Cyber Attacks Targeting U.S. Banks and NY Dam," Trend Micro, March 29, 2016, <https://www.trendmicro.com/vinfo/de/security/news/cyber-attacks/seven-iranian-hackers-indicted-over-attacks-on-banks-ny-dam>; Danny Yadron, "Iranian Hackers Infiltrated New York Dam in 2013," *Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iranian-hackers-infiltrated-new-york-dam-in-2013-1450662559>.

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to determine which factors have enabled the Iranian regime's use of its special operations force to remain a resilient competitor with the United States and its allies despite significant asymmetry. Through its irregular warfare (IW) strategy by the Quds Force (QF), Iran has been able to spread its revolutionary ideals and regionally compete with the United States and other adversaries below the level of armed conflict. The five conflicts and QF's use of activities associated with terrorism that are examined in the previous chapter demonstrate that the QF can be an effective mechanism for competition below the level of conventional armed conflict. However, the case studies also demonstrate limitations and disadvantages. In the following sections I highlight the scope of QF activities conducted during the conflicts examined in this thesis to illuminate the capacity of the QF. I then examine the conditions that enabled the QF's operations to be effective. As in the previous chapters, effectiveness is determined by advancement of Iran's four national security objectives (NSOs) at an acceptable cost, which is preventing revolution or total war with an adversary. Finally, I provide recommendations for military leadership and policy makers to impede these conditions from occurring and how to approach confronting the QF.

Each of the six case studies presents insight into how the QF operates during conflicts ranging from covert smuggling and advise/assist actions, to large scale expeditionary operations coordinated with state and non-state actors. This expansive range of mission sets also includes activities associated with terrorism and employment of soft power to expand Iranian ideology. Each case is unique in the manner in which it was executed and the diversity provides a look at the depth and capacity of the QF. The expansive breadth of operations demonstrates that the QF is not limited to traditional military roles. The organization has wholly adopted every tool available to wage IW against adversaries with superior capabilities and resources like the United States, Israel, and U.S. backed Saudi Arabia. Table 1 highlights the expanse of known activities surveyed in the case studies of conflicts and key points that affected achievements in the campaigns.

Table 1. Scope of QF Operations

Conflict	Activity						
	Weapons & Financial Smuggling	Training of Indigenous Forces	Deployment of Iranian Proxies	Direct Action by QF Operatives	Soft Power Investment	Political Manipulation	Deployment of Conventional Forces
Balkans	X	X	X		X	X	
Key Points: Covert smuggling and training of Bosniaks by the QF and Hezbollah operatives did not garner extensive attention from NATO. Political influence over the Bosnian president and his cabinet enabled the QF and MOIS to remain in Bosnia under cover through soft power projects.							
Iraq 2003-2011	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Key Points: A porous border enabled relative free flow of arms, fighters, and operatives into Iraq. The QF escalated operations against the coalition once it became clear that Iraq was becoming politically unsustainable for the United States and its leaders could not risk expanding the war. Unity of effort between military operations and political subversion protected QF operatives while degrading U.S. efforts to establish a government not beholden to Iran.							
Syria	X	X	X	X	X		X
Key Points: Initially covert with training and electronic surveillance support provided to the Syrian regime. By 2015, the situation required the full extent of Iran's expeditionary capabilities, including deployment of several proxy groups from throughout the Middle East. The campaign showed the extent of Iran's ability to muster and employ proxies as well as special operations with conventional forces in supporting roles. Soft power mechanisms to ensure a Shia majority stake in the future of Syria may provide Iran with an eventual economic benefit.							
Yemen	X	X			X		
Key Points: The QF developed innovative methods for delivery of finance and supplies to the Houthis as the Saudi coalition sought to cut the country off. Deployment of a small package of advisors to support the Houthis along with calculated escalation over the years has kept the campaign covert, with little significant repercussions from adversaries or the Iranian people.							
Iraq 2014-2020		X	X		X	X	X
Key Points: Like in Syria, the war against ISIS demonstrated the QF's capacity to form, train, and employ proxies to fight an enemy. Due to the situation, most support did not require smuggling. The QF lost a great deal of the political power it had waived when Prime Minister Maliki was removed, but was able to influence several of its proxies becoming legitimized forces under the Iraqi government. Operations in 2019 to push the U.S. military out of Iraq demonstrated the risk associated with miscalculated escalation and the loss of plausible deniability.							

Central to answering the research question of this thesis is identifying the conditions that make the QF's IW campaigns effective. The above table illuminates the activities the QF execute in pursuit of furthering Iran's NSOs. The next step is to identify the conditions that make these activities effective or ineffective based on the empirical evidence collected in the six case studies of the previous chapter. A 2019 report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies identified four characteristics essential for Iran's success during the U.S. occupation of Iraq. These characteristics are

- A failed state of geostrategic significance with a disorganized opposition and local partners willing to employ lethal force to achieve Iran's goals.
- A Shia community that believed itself to be under existential threat. (However, the fractious Shia community in Iraq was such that no single umbrella organization like Lebanese Hezbollah could ever be created and some Shia elements – such as that led by Muqtada al-Sadr – would challenge Tehran as much as Washington.)
- A logistics pipeline, which allowed Iran to transfer personnel, materiel and weapons in support of its allies, as well as enabling it to bring surrogates to Iran for training.
- The absence of an external actor with the will and capacity to threaten Iran's core interests sufficiently to end its intervention.⁵⁰²

I maintain that these characteristics still represent the ideal situation for an IW campaign conducted by the QF. However, all six case studies represent varying territorial, political, social, and economic conditions. Since no two campaigns were the same, it is essential to find the commonality of conditions which had the greatest impact on the outcome or current state of the campaign.

Analysis presented in this thesis demonstrate three conditions that make the QF's activities effective and its IW campaigns more likely to succeed in advancing Iran's NSOs. These conditions are (1) Maintenance of plausible deniability, (2) an opponent's lack of political will to confront covert action, and (3) an opponent's lack of unity of effort and unified action. The presence of these conditions during each conflict represented in this

⁵⁰² International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*.

thesis demonstrate that they are recurring variables with the greatest impact on the efficacy of QF operations.

A. MAINTENANCE OF PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

To avoid escalating too far with an adversary or encouraging popular demonstrations amongst the Iranian people, the Islamic Republic of Iran strives to maintain a level of plausible deniability in its covert activities. Gregory Treverton's work on covert warfare cited the 1948 U.S. National Security Council Directive 10/2 as the link between plausible deniability and covert action.⁵⁰³ The directive was in response to perceived covert actions by the Soviet Union and in part stated: "[covert actions] are conducted or sponsored by this government against hostile foreign states or groups or in support of friendly foreign states or groups but which are so planned and executed that any U.S. government responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons and that if uncovered the U.S. government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them."⁵⁰⁴ This directive effectively ordered the CIA to maintain a level of deniability to the U.S. people and the world to mitigate consequences for covert action. Iran follows this ideal as well with how the QF is employed.

Iran regularly rejects responsibility for the actions of the QF, regardless of the intelligence presented to the contrary. In Syria it denied QF operatives taking part in the fighting despite a deceased soldier's personal video camera being published showing the opposite.⁵⁰⁵ During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Iran vehemently denied providing Shia militias with EFP and IRAM weapons despite substantial U.S. and British intelligence.⁵⁰⁶ The September 2019 drone swarm attack on Saudi oil fields drew extensive finger pointing at Iran, but no retaliation occurred because irrefutable evidence could not be placed at the

⁵⁰³ Gregory F. Treverton, *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1987), 36.

⁵⁰⁴ Text from the directive can be found at: "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945–1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment," Office of the Historian, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d292>.

⁵⁰⁵ BBC, "Iran's Secret Army."

⁵⁰⁶ Michael R. Gordon and Scott Shane, "U.S. Long Worried That Iran Supplied Arms in Iraq," *New York Times*, March 27, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/27/world/middleeast/27weapons.html>.

feet of Iran. Ali Vaez, the director of the Iran Programme at the International Crisis Group remarked that: “plausible deniability is a trademark of Iran’s pushback strategy...Iran wants to show that, instead of a win-lose contest, Iran can turn this into a lose-lose dynamic for everyone.”⁵⁰⁷ This tactic has proven effective for Iran in most cases as its adversaries routinely fail to come to an international consensus regarding Iranian guilt.⁵⁰⁸ Responding to these activities brings with it the potential escalation to total war. In most cases, this risk was too great and social-political factors did not allow a response. For instance, this was the case in Iraq in 2007 when the Bush administration found expanding the war inconceivable based on the information it could present to the American people for justification.

Like all aspects of covert action, loss of plausible deniability can result in unforeseen consequences from adversaries and the body politic alike. The January 2020 targeted killing of the QF Commander, Qassem Soleimani, and the attempted targeting of his deputy, Esmail Qaani, was an individual act by the United States. The Trump administration justified this operation after concluding that the QF were behind the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Iraq and were planning other attacks. Plausible deniability could no longer be maintained in the eyes of the U.S. president. The QF had pushed too hard, in too little time, against an adversary who found the evidence sufficient to justify retaliation.

The risks associated with a loss of deniability are not only reserved for external audiences. The Iranian population must also be complacent in the QF’s campaigns. In the Balkans, Yemen, and the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Iranian government was able to sufficiently hide the QF campaigns. Leadership denied sending anyone but advisors, casualties were low, and there appeared to be no negative economic impact. In the war against ISIS, the Iranian people were faced with an existential threat that warranted deployment of the Iranian military. However, in Syria, the escalation required to save the Assad regime in 2015 removed the curtain for a great deal of the Iranian people. Survival

⁵⁰⁷ Thomas Seibert, “Deniability Risky Tack in Iran’s Foreign Policy as U.S. Mulls Strike,” *The Arab Weekly*, September 21, 2019, <https://the arabweekly.com/deniability-risky-tack-irans-foreign-policy-us-mulls-strike>.

⁵⁰⁸ Seibert.

of the Syrian regime provided nothing to the majority of Iranians less the possibility of holy Shia sites being destroyed by groups like ISIS. Fallen soldiers began returning home, and as the numbers increased alongside economic downturn, the Iranian regime's reasoning faltered in the eyes of the people. The QF's campaign in Syria exacerbated the late 2019 protests across Iran. The Syrian case demonstrates that deployment of an extensive expeditionary force for a prolonged time, comes with the loss of plausible deniability in participation, and brings with it the risk of repercussions from the body politic.

The level of deniability that must be maintained varies over time and according to the action being taken. It must be maintained with all actions associated with terrorism. Definitive proof of assassinations that can be shared with the public carries the risk of an international response. However, plausible deniability can also be managed according to the level of risk identified by the perpetrator. In Yemen, the QF have been able to increase the sophistication of weaponry delivered to the Houthis, and the amount of attacks on Saudi targets due to the international world not seeing Iranian culpability. The lack of reaction may also be based on some actors having a lack of concern for the conflict as long as it remains isolated.

As long as Iran is able to refute international and internal evidence presented against it, QF operations prove to be very effective as escalation and retaliation are avoidable. It is when the operations spill into overt conflict, without justification that the Iranian people will no longer remain complacent and willing to accept the consequences. Additionally, the acceptance of plausible deniability is beholden to one's perspective and willingness to act against that perspective. The United States, under the Trump administration, has shown that it is willing to accept risk by retaliating against activities it perceives as QF orchestrated in the face of discontent from lawmakers and the American people. Israel is even more likely to act against QF operations near its borders, ignoring the guise of intentions purported by Iranian officials. Maintenance of plausible deniability may be delicate, but it is essential for effectiveness in covert action.

B. AN OPPONENT'S LACK OF POLITICAL WILL TO CONFRONT COVERT ACTION

The legacy of the Iran-Iraq War weighs heavily on the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iran has only deployed conventional forces since to Syria and its border with Iraq when faced with the threat of an ISIS invasion. Iran's military posture is more designed around deterrence against the threat of invasion.⁵⁰⁹ To fight foreign wars and compete with its adversaries below the level of traditional armed conflict, Iran favors irregular tactics designed to attrite the will of an opponent over time. The QF is Iran's orchestrator for this strategy. Tactics found in IW intensify the toll on an adversary over time and are harder to target discriminately. The conflicts analyzed in this thesis demonstrate that the lack of political will to confront the QF's covert activities lead to continued escalation in Thomas Schelling's concept of "salami tactics" and will eventually lead to capitulation of the opponent.

The effectiveness of the QF's ability to attrite political will for conflict continuation increases over time. In Yemen, the conflict became politically unsustainable for the coalition and U.S. support as the Saudi air campaign has been widely viewed as indiscriminate and worsening a humanitarian crisis. The Saudis also appear to lack the will to expand the conflict to a ground war or react to an increase in ballistic missile and drone attacks beginning in 2017. The increase in quantity and sophistication of Houthi attacks on Saudi targets from 2017 on, demonstrate that they were escalating to see how the Saudis would react. By 2019, the coalition has mostly dissolved, and the Saudis are likely looking for a way out. Although it became clearer in 2006–2007 that the QF were supporting several insurgent groups and targeting coalition soldiers in Iraq, the loss of the Senate by the Republican Party, which one can view as an addendum by the American people on their dissatisfaction with the war, resulted in the U.S. military being restrained from expanding the conflict to Iranian targets. This inaction, in a way, gave the QF the green light to escalate support to Shia groups and delivery of weapons. The QF continued their operations until remaining in Iraq became politically infeasible for the United States. The U.S. government

⁵⁰⁹ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 23.

was more concerned with leaving as soon as possible rather than accepting risk for targeting the core issues destabilizing the country. In the Balkans, U.S. intelligence articulated a continued threat to the stability of the region and NATO forces after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, assessing that not all QF operatives would be expelled.⁵¹⁰ However, the Clinton administration elected to not further the subject. The agreement was signed in November 1995, it was a win, and the administration was going into an election year. Any additional skirmish arising from action against the QF could be politically detrimental.

The case of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the Clinton administration's lack of concern to deal with QF operations in Bosnia after the Dayton Peace Agreement also reveals the extra toll wars place on democracies. A 1998 study by political scientists, D. Scott Bennet and Alan Stam, used quantitative data to demonstrate the correlation between war outcomes and duration, in relation to democracies fighting autocracies. The data included all interstate wars between 1816 and 1990 in the Correlates of War list, with the dependent variable being the outcome of the war (win, lose, draw, or continue).⁵¹¹ The authors found that wartime advantages are fleeting for democracies as public support is an essential variable in political decision making. The data shows that after 18 months, the advantage passes to the autocracy and after this point, the democratic state is more willing to accept a draw or loss.⁵¹² The key advantage an autocracy has over a democracy as a war drags on is that "political leaders in democratic states are painfully aware of and sensitive to the electoral punishment mechanism at work in their states."⁵¹³

This condition that enables the QF to prevail over an adversary by degrading political will can be combated and immobilized if met with the proper will and force. The

⁵¹⁰ Risen, "Iran Gave Bosnia Leader \$500,000"; Associated Press Archives, Bosnia - Iranian Reaction To Raid Of Base; U.S. National Security Council, *Assessment: The Bosnian Government Divisions Show Confusion In Peace Negotiations*; U.S. National Security Council, *Dealing With The Terrorist Threat To U.S. Forces*.

⁵¹¹ D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy: A Combined Model of War Outcomes and Duration," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (1998): 353.

⁵¹² Bennett and Stam, 345.

⁵¹³ Bennett and Stam, 345.

Israeli military has continuously reacted to perceived and real threats near its border. When the QF worked to establish a ground corridor and bases near Israeli territory after 2016, the Israeli military has stood by its red lines, retaliating in a destructive fashion to any QF threats. In this case, Israel sees the QF near its borders as an existential threat that must be dealt with. Popular support remains behind the military's actions because the threat posed outweighs the cost to the Israeli people. The January 2020 targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani was a high-risk maneuver by the United States that did not have the full support of the U.S. government. However, it reestablished the U.S. red line in the aftermath of Shia militias attacking the U.S. embassy in Iraq. The reaction by Iran that was non-casualty producing, and a lack of QF orchestrated attacks on U.S. personnel in 2020 shows that it was an effective measure for halting the QF's campaign to push U.S. forces out of Iraq.

U.S. doctrine concerning IW states that: "the strategic point of IW is to gain or maintain control or influence over, and the support of, a relevant population."⁵¹⁴ It is incorrect to think of this in terms of only the population inside the territory of the conflict. The will of the population of all actors and the constraints it imposes upon the government directly correlates to the will of the actor to continue participating. An IW strategy met by an opponent favoring a traditional approach and lacking the political support to adapt to changing dynamics creates a condition that erodes will. This is compounded when the tactics test resolve in a calculated manner over time. Democracies feel the greatest impact as an inability to produce results play into popular support that votes leaders in or out every two to four years. Meeting the irregular threat requires an adaptable strategy that utilizes all elements of national power and is supported by political will to see victory achieved.

C. AN OPPONENT'S LACK OF UNITY OF EFFORT AND UNIFIED ACTION

U.S. doctrine places a large emphasis on the concepts of unity of effort and unified action. As summarized in Joint Publication 3.05, "Unity of effort is the coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, as a result of unified action, even if the participants are not necessarily part of the same command or organization. Unified action is the

⁵¹⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-6.

synchronized, coordinated, and integrated activities of government and nongovernment entities with those of the military to achieve common objectives.”⁵¹⁵ Both concepts are essential for achieving objectives as the doctrine recognizes that conflicts are rarely resolved by military action alone.⁵¹⁶ Synchronization between all involved agencies is required to achieve a common goal. In the Balkans and Yemen, fissures in unity of effort between military and political action supported QF success, while in the U.S. occupation of Iraq it led to victory for Iran. The evidence also demonstrates that QF leadership place emphasis on these concepts as well, becoming directly involved in political matters in the area of operations to compliment military action.

QF leadership understood in the conflicts examined in this thesis that military engagement alone is not sufficient to gain control of a territory in modern warfare. If Iran’s ideology and influence is to be cemented, political weight over the territorial government is necessary. When the QF and Iran’s MOIS are able to insert adequate power over politicians during war time, this creates a condition that allows the QF’s targeting of opponents to occur with a level of impunity. Additionally, when unity of effort between military and diplomacy breaks down in the adversary’s strategy, the ability to arrest QF activities is impeded. The opponent finds their intelligence activities compromised, military operations restrained, and increased vulnerability that coincides with protracted conflict. If this condition is not corrected, the QF is able to continue or escalate its operations.

While there was no danger of an Iranian satellite state being established in Bosnia or elsewhere in the Balkans in the 1990s, Iran’s influence over President Izetbegovic degraded U.S. intelligence efforts and posed a threat to NATO forces. The Bosnian campaign may have not yielded any gains in Iran’s four NSOs, but the political influence that prevented complete expulsion of operatives from the region allowed Iran to gain a small foothold in Europe’s underbelly. The ethnic and religious dynamics of the region prevent Iranian ideology from solidifying, but the level of reported infiltration provides

⁵¹⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, III-1.

⁵¹⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-6.

Iran with a point from which to launch disruptive operations into Europe if Iran's interests are threatened elsewhere.⁵¹⁷ The condition created by Iran's influence over Bosnian politicians and NATO's unwillingness to sever that link enabled the QF and MOIS to continue debilitating NATO's goals and establish an infiltration mechanism into Europe.

The Saudi led coalition hoped that military power alone could defeat the Houthi movement when it began its campaign in 2015. Military force blockaded the coast, destroyed airports, and bombed Houthi targets. However, the Houthis did not surrender and the QF developed innovative methods for smuggling personnel and equipment by land and sea. The coalition's mission faltered due to the lack of an accompanying political strategy. The situation turned into a humanitarian crisis and the Saudi air campaign has been widely viewed as indiscriminate and cruel. There was little, if any, unity of effort between the coalition nations. Smuggling occurred across Oman's borders and the UAE paved its own way in Southern Yemen with investment in the Southern Transitional Council. Interstate political competition in the coalition ruined several cease fire attempts. As of 2020, the Saudis have found themselves relatively alone in the conflict, scrutinized by the international community, and the situation aggravated by the actions of other Gulf States like the UAE.

In the aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government, the QF obstructed the U.S. led coalition efforts to stabilize the country by supporting numerous Shia insurgencies. These operations were coupled with extensive work by the QF to control as much of Iraqi politics as possible. Qassem Soleimani once bragged to the U.S. commander, General David Petraeus that he was in control of the country.⁵¹⁸ General Petraeus remarked that: "they [QF] serve as the executive arm of Iran's foreign policy in Iraq."⁵¹⁹ QF operatives moved throughout Iraq, protected by the Iraqi judicial system if apprehended. QF operatives were detained by coalition forces on numerous occasions after 2006, however, any efforts to prosecute or interrogate these individuals were thwarted by

⁵¹⁷ Khatab, *Iran's Influence in Bosnia, a Dagger in the Flank of Europe*.

⁵¹⁸ Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."

⁵¹⁹ Guzansky, "Made in Iran," 87.

the QF's direct line to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki. Iran also worked to influence elections inside the new government since 2005 by providing funding and advisement to preferred candidates.⁵²⁰ Political sway complimented military action by the QF. Both approaches were effective against an increasingly frustrated coalition, however, it is unified action that made the QF's campaign particularly effective. The QF had a unity of effort inside Iraq while the coalition military was increasingly restrained by dwindling political support to confront Iran militarily or politically. The strategy led to the complete expulsion of U.S. forces in 2011, and advanced all four of Iran's NSOs. The U.S. corrected this mistake when it returned to Iraq in 2014 as it demanded political change as a precursor for military support. As U.S. forces returned to aid in the war against ISIS, U.S. agencies better utilized all four elements of national power to stimmy Iranian efforts, develop the capacity of the Iraqi military, and prevent a sectarian model of government from reemerging. These efforts, coupled with the rise of Iraqi nationalism, continued presence, and adherence to red lines have demonstrated that the QF's strategy is likely not to work a second time.

A lack of unity of effort and unity of action significantly debilitates efforts to defeat an IW strategy. U.S. doctrine emphasizes that: "Military operations alone rarely resolve IW conflicts... whole-of-nation approaches where the military instrument of power sets conditions for victory are essential."⁵²¹ Military action must be supported by diplomatic tools and other mechanisms to build a cohesive and stable government that is capable of dealing with internal and external threats. Additionally, any military action must be supported by the other elements of national power as modern warfare's expansive portrayal in mass media brings internal and international scrutiny. A lack of unity of effort between allies also exacerbate interstate relationship dynamics concerning competition and self-serving interests that could devastate the entire campaign as witnessed in Yemen.

When the QF are able to execute unity of effort and action between military and political action, their campaigns become much more effective and difficult to combat. One must remember that the weaker actor in IW will "seek to create instability and disrupt and

⁵²⁰ Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," 4.

⁵²¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, I-6.

negate state legitimacy and governance to gain and maintain control or influence over and the support of a relevant population.”⁵²² Iranian political influence via the heads of state and infiltration of agents in Bosnia and Iraq complimented the QF’s military activities while also subverting the political system to the detriment of the United States.

D. CONCLUSION

Military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously wrote “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”⁵²³ Iranian leadership understands its asymmetric disadvantage with the United States and with its near peer adversaries who are supported by strong states like the United States. It will not engage in conventional battle unless its survival is at risk. Instead it has, and will continue to favor IW strategies that use the QF to compete in the gray zone of conflict, somewhere between open hostility and covert action. If the United States and its allies are to defeat these tactics, they must not enter into these conflicts believing the competition to be quick, easy, or solved with one instrument. The empirical evidence demonstrates that the QF’s maintenance of plausible deniability, an opponent’s lack of political will to confront its covert action, and an opponent’s lack of unity of effort and unified action will foster effectiveness for Iran in most of its IW campaigns.

The QF are not beholden to one particular model of IW to be studied, nor can all of its actions be understood by traditional convention surrounding the conduct of warfare. Perhaps its least costly but potentially most successful campaign is still ongoing in Yemen. The design for which may have been due to a lack of resources at the time rather than a well-developed covert operation. Additionally, it is wrong to look at the QF’s support to terrorist groups and use of activities associated with terrorism from the lens of terrorism. Iran’s adversaries conduct assassinations and other hostile acts. Iran views these activities

⁵²² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, II–1.

⁵²³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret, reprint (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 88.

as an extension of its IW arsenal that it is forced to use due to its asymmetric handicaps. These activities should instead be viewed as a method for deterrence and signaling capability as part of a broader strategy. One should not expect previous cases to precisely predict future models, as the nature of a good IW strategy is unpredictable.

The QF's activities are not without disadvantages and limitations. Nor are the three conditions for effectiveness canon for all situations. The Balkans case demonstrates that although all three conditions were present, the lack of a substantial support base for Iranian ideology in Bosnia, and the depth of NATO resources led to the campaign not attaining advancement of Iran's NSOs. The Syrian Civil War illuminated the capacity of Iran's expeditionary capabilities, and the requirement for involvement of a stronger actor (Russia) intervening when faced with multiple obstacles. The war also enlightened the impact the body politic could still present to an authoritarian government when covertness is lost alongside blood and treasure. The QF's relative grip on Iraqi politics that helped push the U.S. military out of Iraq was also a primary factor in the rise of ISIS and the return of the U.S. military.

The evidence reveals beyond the three conditions that prove most effective for a weak state actor's use of its special operations forces, like the QF, in IW, is the fallacy of approaching the problem conventionally. Doctrine provides a basis for understanding, it is not all encompassing and will change over time. The QF are an incredibly dynamic special operations unit who do not play by the rules of Western military tradition. They also are not limited to purely military action, with leadership being directly involved in political matters, as well as being in positions for an ostensibly longer time than Western leaders. Qassem Soleimani had over 20 years of command, experience, and relationship building as the head of the QF. As the world emerges from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict between Iran, the United States, and other actors is likely to expand beyond its current, relatively cold state. Iran will likely continue to prefer its IW strategy with a model that varies according to the territorial and political situation. The QF will remain Iran's instrument for this strategy. It is imperative that military and political leadership recognize the conditions that foster effectiveness for this organization. Only by denying these conditions to propagate can another actor expect to immobilize and defeat it.

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