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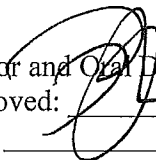
*A Study on Iran:
Indications and Warnings for a future Gray Zone Conflict*

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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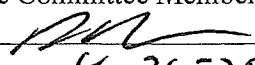
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Abstract

Iran leverages the gray zone environment and conducts political warfare activities to achieve its national objectives. This study asserts that the ‘gray zone’ term is simply a modern reference to ‘political warfare,’ which governments and institutions have actively conducted for decades. For the purposes of this study, political warfare activities are categorized into three parts – unconventional warfare, information operations, and sabotage operations. Since its 1979 revolution, Iran has employed political warfare activities at varying levels. By analyzing Iran’s gray zone operations in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, one can determine the trends Iran employs for expanding its power and influence in the region.

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Introduction

This study reviews the literature on political warfare, gray zone conflicts, their associated key attributes, and then focuses on Iran as a case study for a future gray zone conflict. This study argues that the more recent term ‘gray zone’ is simply a modernized term for what history captures as political warfare actions. Overall, this study is organized in three main sections. First, the study reviews the literature on various definitions for both political warfare and gray zone. It identifies the attributes for each and demonstrates that gray zone attributes are similar enough to political warfare, concluding that ‘gray zone’ is not a new concept, but rather a modern form of political warfare. The first section provides a tangible and refined understanding of gray zone that then leads to the next section. Second, this study identifies and analyzes the categories of political warfare. Essentially, what are the various forms of political warfare that are waged from one sovereign nation against another? The second section helps build the ‘checklist’ of actions that indicate a possible gray zone conflict. By reviewing the ‘tool kit’ of various actions, this section sets up the remainder of the study to focus on Iran as the case study. The third section analyzes Iran’s strategic approach and its political warfare activities in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. These activities are compared to the indications and warnings checklist refined in the previous section. The paper concludes by identifying possible actions taken by Iran that will indicate a need for US involvement in some form of gray zone environment.

Words Matter – ‘Political Warfare’ versus ‘Gray Zone’

There is a long history of how sovereign nations have waged political warfare against other nations. There is also varying degrees of understanding what *is* political warfare, how has it been executed in the past, and what is the current and future state of political warfare. A foundational US document that discusses political warfare is the declassified memorandum

from a state department official, George F. Kennan, addressed to the National Security Council in April 1948 on 'Organizing Political Warfare.' The memorandum broadly defines political warfare as "the employment of all means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives, to further its influence and authority and to weaken those of its adversaries. Such operations are both overt and covert."¹ Shortly after this memorandum, National Security Council (NSC) 10/2 issued in June 1948 broadly defined covert operations and provided examples that include activities related to "...propaganda, economic warfare; preventive direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas and refugee liberation groups, and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world. Such operations shall not include armed conflict by recognized military forces, espionage, counter-espionage, and cover and deception for military operations."² As a result, 1948 marked a period following World War II, where the United States began to consider other forms of activities away from the traditional conventional warfighting that still enabled the government to achieve its national objectives.

Shortly following the 1948 Kennan Memorandum, the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) formed in 1951, "to better coordinate US psychological activities, a term which encompasses overt foreign information and covert action and its successor agency, the Operations Coordination Board (OCB)."³ Gustafson explains that the PSB was "the first attempt at a covert action management system as a routine function in the US government."⁴ The PSB was also a forcing mechanism that drove a higher level discussion within the US Government on how to oversee covert actions and ensure alignment with US national policy interests. Gustafson elaborates on the various literature that is written defining the term covert action. Other similar terms used within the international community include: active measures, special activities, special operations, special political action, and disruptive action.

Overall, the basic definition of ‘covert action’ adopted from Daugherty, “involves the deliberate and planned involvement in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation, seeking to influence (or less often, coerce) a change of state policy.”⁵ This definition is closely aligned with the NSC 10/2 covert action definition, “activities 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 US Government (USG) responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons and that if uncovered the US Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them.”⁶ Gustafson’s research also references a method for categorizing covert actions, since it is broadly defined throughout the literature. This study follows a similar process that identifies three primary categories for political warfare activities that will be discussed in a subsequent section.

The USG continued to evolve the organization and understanding of covert action throughout the 1950s and 1960s. National Security Council 5412/2, issued in 1955, proposed covert coordination procedures and a ‘Special Group’ to coordinate covert programs.⁷ In 1963 the CIA’s internal instruction refined its criterion for submission of such projects to include actions that included “political and propaganda action programs involving direct or indirect action to influence or support political parties, economic action programs designed to influence governments to support US national policy objectives, paramilitary action programs, and CIA clandestine and covert action annexes to US country Internal Defense Plans.”⁸ Furthermore, the National Security Council issued the “Coordination and Policy Approval of Covert Operations” in 1967 that established a formal channel to streamline the policy approval process for covert operations.⁹ The ‘Special Group’ was comprised of representatives of the rank of Assistant Secretary or above and “charged with reviewing in advance all major covert programs initiated by the CIA.”¹⁰ The decades following World War II focused on developing

processes for conducting and coordinating covert activities; however, the USG was not alone in refining and understanding these activities.

The British government, through the work of the British Minister of Economic Warfare, Hugh Dalton, established the Special Operations Executive during WWII in which it heavily focused on aspects of political warfare. Although specific doctrine for the SOE was not produced during that time, there were several successes and failures through the SOE during WWII where clandestine operations took place, ultimately building a network of individuals through informal channels. The SOE sought to primarily focus on establishing a “dedicated sabotage and subversion organization” within the British government in neutral states; however, British government at this time was reluctant to sustain such a capability post-war¹¹ similarly to the various debates ongoing within the US government. Ultimately, the British codified doctrine in 1953 to what they termed as special political action, a concept that mixed politics with the use of special operations to achieve a national objective or interest. As evidenced, various terms throughout the decades have come to share a broad, yet common definition. However, as Western thinking evolved over the decades on political warfare strategy, so did Middle Eastern strategy. The two major contenders in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran, have a contentious and ideologically opposed history. Thus, their strategies for increasing power, influence, and improving their respective economies include the use of both conventional and political warfare tactics.

The term, “gray zone operations” resembles similar aspects of the previous definitions and concepts discussed. Dr. Antulio Echevarria, author and scholar on various US military publications, explains the gray zone boundaries as occurring “below the NATO Article 5 threshold and below the level of violence necessary to prompt a United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR).”¹² Dr. Echevarria cites Russia’s involvement with the Ukraine

and China’s role in the South China Sea as examples of operating within a gray zone, as depicted in Figure 1 below.

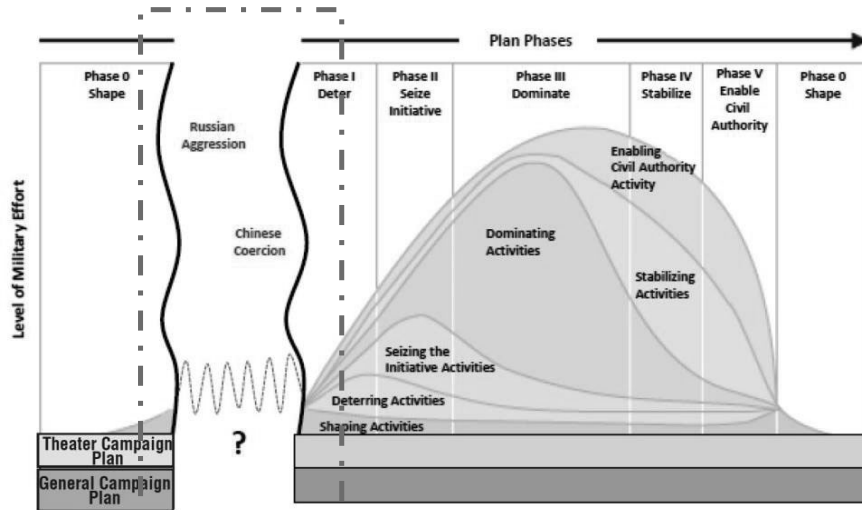


Figure 1.¹³ Notional Operations Phases

Dr. Echevarria argues that gray zone conflicts are not necessarily a new concept; but rather a repetitive concept and an ‘application of classic coercive strategies, enhanced by ever-evolving technologies that exploits weaknesses...’¹⁴ Similarly, in 2015, SOCOM published a whitepaper, *The Gray Zone*, which defines gray zone challenges as “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actions that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.”¹⁵ The whitepaper further asserts that gray zone challenges are not a new concept, but rather a new term, previously acknowledged as “irregular warfare, low-intensity conflict, asymmetric warfare, military operations other than war, and small wars.”¹⁶ Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Dr. Hal Brands, assumes a similar stance on defining the gray zone to that of Dr. Echevarria and states, “Gray Zone conflict is best understood as activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature, but that is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open interstate war.”¹⁷ Brands offers an interesting perspective in that gray zone cannot simply be the catch-all term for every activity, ranging from Chinese expansionism, Russian aggression, and Iranian influence to that of ISIL activities simply because it does not meet the intent of conventional

conflict. Brands references Mazarr's definition and characteristics of a gray zone conflict.

Mazarr views a gray zone conflict as a combination of unconventional tools – hybrid warfare, unconventional warfare, and political warfare that overlap characteristics of a gray zone environment. Mazarr brackets the actors within a gray zone as those states that “desire a shift in international distributions of power and influence” where they are “likely to be in the market for gray zone strategies...but are not tempted to go to war to get them.”¹⁸ Near peer adversaries, such as Russia, China, and Iran fall into Mazarr's category of actors that seek operations in the gray zone.

Overall, the definitions of gray zone and its associated characteristics closely resemble that of how Kennan termed political warfare, or previous US presidential administrations defined covert action - all terms encompass an environment that utilizes various non-traditional means to address a national security policy or objective. As a result, the various literature outlines that gray zone is simply a new term that encompasses decades of conceptual thinking and actions taken from various state actors. Kennan's definition of political warfare combined with Echevarria's definition of gray zone conflict is likely the best combined understanding of the complex ‘gray zone’ environment in which US policy has delicately transcended over the years.

Setting the Stage

Mazarr provides a unique perspective where he identifies a range of behaviors associated with state actors and their capability and interests to change their power and influence. As stated above, Mazarr classifies China, Russia, and Iran as ‘measured revisionists.’ He asserts that measured revisionists “are determined to revise power relationships but aim to do so without causing general mayhem. They are risk-averse, to a degree, except with regard to a tiny handful of core vital interests that would provoke violence.”¹⁹ Based on the aforementioned definitions of political warfare and gray zone, the state actors that Mazarr

references as measured revisionists are those states that operate at the threshold below conventional warfare, and as defined previously, seek to operate within the gray zone environment. Mazarr's research is significant because placed within the larger context of current US and international politics - Russia, China, and Iran tactics are of top US interests.

This study focuses specifically on Iran because its geographic location, ideological foundational beliefs, and political system drive the requirement for a further understanding of its perception toward Western values and how it seeks to undermine US interests within the gray zone. The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) describes Iran as a "rogue regime competing across all dimensions of power. They have increased efforts short of armed conflict by expanding coercion to new fronts, violating principles of sovereignty, exploiting ambiguity, and deliberately blurring the lines between civil and military goals."²⁰ In this statement, the NDS alludes that Iran employs political warfare tactics. Furthermore, the NDS also states "Iran continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability."²¹ After nearly two decades of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to smaller contingency operations spread throughout, stability in the Middle East is paramount to safeguard US access and interests. As such, it is critical to examine Iran's past actions and predict how it may seek to undermine US interests in the future.

The RAND Corporation published a study in April 2018 on current political warfare tactics and uses Russia, Iran, and the Islamic State as the case studies for assessing how each one conducts modern day political warfare – or gray zone activities. Specific to Iran, the study asserts that Iran "employs its [political warfare] strategy in the political, religious, cultural, economic, and military spheres."²² Furthermore, the study states that Iran relies more heavily on 'soft power' tactics to safeguard the Islamic Republic and attain its foreign policy objectives.²³ This assertion is supported by comments that Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei made in September 2015, "economic and security infiltration is not as important as intellectual,

cultural, and political infiltration.”²⁴ The RAND study accounts for Iran’s measurably weaker economy and military and concludes that “Iran views political warfare to be an integral nonmilitary asymmetric capability that can offset military, economic, and political influence.”²⁵ The literature review contends that political warfare encompasses a wide range of activities; however it is imperative to categorize political warfare activities in order to apply Iran’s political warfare tactics as a case study. For the context of this study, gray zone (political warfare) actions are categorized into three primary bins: information operations (IO), unconventional warfare (UW), and sabotage operations. The scope of each category is not mutually exclusive and is intentionally broad to allow for a more robust understanding of how Iran’s state actions can influence political objectives at varying degrees. This framework for categorizing the overarching concept of political warfare actions provides a starting point that can be further developed at a later point in time. Of note, the definitions of each category are derived from military doctrine for the purposes of assessing Iran’s use of gray zone activities notwithstanding that Iran conducts these activities from a different perspective.

Unconventional warfare focuses on support to foreign insurgencies or proxy groups. The Department of Defense (DoD) Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines unconventional warfare as “activities to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power through and with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”²⁶ The DoD Joint Publication 3-05.1, *Joint Special Operations Task Force Operations*, provides a slightly more in depth UW definition, “a broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted through, with or by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes, but is not limited to guerilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, and unconventional assisted recovery.”²⁷ Overall, both UW

definitions focus on enabling a proxy-like group to disrupt or influence a state government on behalf of another state government. UW also implies military training-like actions as its main effort. Whereas the US perspective uses the term ‘unconventional warfare’ to define the support of proxy-like groups, Iran likely views these same actions through the soft power lens of political manipulation.²⁸ In this regard, Iran seeks out pro-Iranian personalities and organizations that can then exert influence onto a host nation.

The second category, sabotage operations, tends to be a subset characteristic of several DoD concepts, such as counterintelligence and UW; however, its unique overt and violent nature is worth its own category because it is not employed often unlike information operations and unconventional warfare. DoD defines sabotage as “an act or acts with intent to injure, interfere with, or obstruct the national defense of a country by willfully injuring or destroying, or attempting to injure or destroy, any national defense or war materiel, premises, or utilities, to include human and natural resources.”²⁹ Sabotage actions are focused on a target (ends), not necessarily the method (means) and can be tangible targets, usually characterized as critical infrastructure (people, places or things) or intangible targets, such as a financial banking system or a breakdown in network security. The limited open source information available indicates that Iran is deliberate and restrains from a vast application of sabotage-like operations based on the provided DOD definition. However, if Iran inserts itself as a prominent role in a host nation’s economy, it can then apply soft or hard power tactics to pressure a specific response. For example, eastern provinces in Iraq have relied on Iran for certain goods and services, to include support to the Iraqi electricity grid.³⁰ This allows Iran to exert influence if deemed necessary on critical infrastructure to interfere (sabotage) a state’s economic power, either directly or indirectly.

The third category, information operations (IO), is likely the broadest and most difficult term to quantify yet has significant impacts across a populace or government institution if

employed correctly. The DoD defines IO as “the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities (IRCs) in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own.”³¹ IO is integrated in every process or operation and primarily focuses on the method (means) as its main effort with a desired military or political end state in mind. IO targets are the perceptions of a group of people to affect a desired change. Iran has a vast IO campaign, and views this from an ideological lens. The RAND study states, “psychological and ideological operations are integral to Iran’s foreign policy.”³² Iran seeks to influence others on the premise of an ideology and does this through various broadcasting stations, fatwas, and providing cultural knowledge throughout the region.

Although the names of the political warfare categories UW, sabotage operations, and IO vary from Iran’s perspectives, the concepts are synonymous with Iran’s soft power actions. Overall, Iran’s political warfare strategy will be analyzed against the actions Iran has taken since the 1979 revolution against four specific states – Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Each case provides examples of Iran operating within the gray zone and below the threshold of conventional war. Prior to completing this analysis, the next section provides an overview of how to approach and understand an adversary’s political intentions.

How to Gauge Adversary Intentions – Theories and Biases

International relations theories provide a variety of frameworks for how to interpret information about an adversary and understand their political and military intentions. This section establishes the model for how to assess and gauge Iran’s use of political warfare by first reviewing the varying schools of thought on understanding an adversary’s intentions. In Robert Jervis’ book *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, he explains four major errors for why the United States did not foresee indications of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Jervis points out that analysts lacked early warning indicators;

developed an incorrect profile of the Shah; did not understand the role of religion; and missed understanding that Iranian nationalism turned against the Shah, not the United States.³³ Keren Yarhi-Milo, author of *Knowing The Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations*, analyzes how political leaders assess adversarial intentions from four primary theses: the selective attention thesis, the capabilities thesis, the strategic doctrine thesis, and the behavior thesis.³⁴ Milo asserts through the selective attention thesis that “individual perceptual biases and organizational interests and practices are likely to shape what types of indicators are regarded as informative signals of the adversary’s intentions as well as how these actors interpret such information about intentions.”³⁵ In other words - individual, political, and organizational biases play a significant role in assessing the value of information about an adversary and how it is interpreted. Thus, it is feasible to develop a framework in which to gauge an adversary’s intentions based on the errors noted by Jervis and the explanation Milo provides for how biases affect an organization’s ability to gauge adversary intention. Milo further explains the various theses that affect a state’s perceived intentions.

The selective attention thesis contains three hypotheses: vividness, subjective credibility, and organizational expertise. The vividness hypothesis explains that decision makers act on information that appeals to the emotional interest and tends to “receive greater weight than its evidentiary value warrants.”³⁶ This hypothesis asserts that decision makers rely on interactions, face to face communications, and responses they witness from the adversary as a means to draw conclusions on an adversary’s intentions.³⁷ The vividness hypothesis is similar to the subjective credibility hypothesis in that it does not assess the credibility of information without bias. Subjective credibility asserts that decision makers will discount information that is contrary to their pre-existing beliefs and biases and may even subconsciously ignore pertinent information.³⁸ The third hypothesis, organizational expertise, focuses on how a state’s intelligence organization processes information about intentions.³⁹ Milo further

explains that intelligence analysts look at different factors than decision makers to analyze an adversary's intentions, to include estimating an adversary's military power in order to assess capability and military power.⁴⁰

Milo compares her specific case study to the other three theses that explain perceived intentions: the capabilities thesis, strategic military doctrine thesis, and the behavior thesis.⁴¹ Milo explains that the three theses share two primary issues as identified in the international relations community. First, each thesis "emphasizes the role of information as a key influence on state behavior" and that states take costly actions "to convey information regarding their interests and intentions to other states."⁴² It therefore relies solely on the overt actions that a state conducts to gauge its intentions. The second issue is that all three theses assume that states assess intentions through one prism, and do not account for the types of actions that decision makers and intelligence organizations focus on to evaluate an adversary's intentions.⁴³ Of the four theses explained, the selective attention thesis will be the approach for primarily explaining Iran's use of political warfare in the subsequent sections.

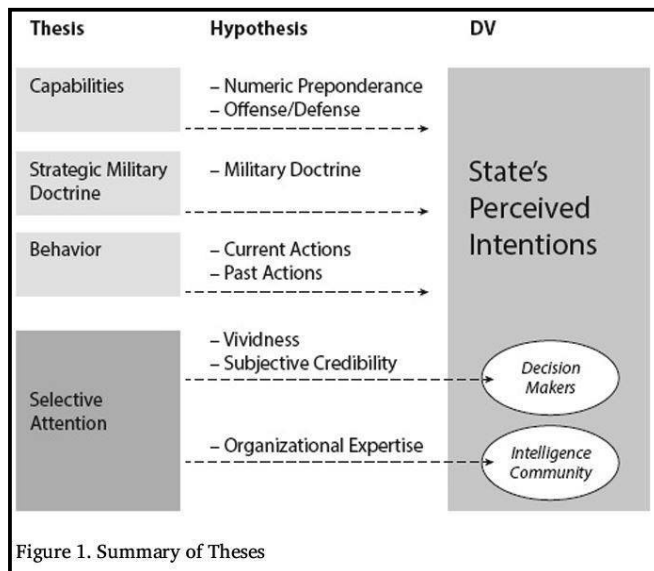


Figure 2.⁴⁴ Summary of Milo's Four Theses

Milo further explains the perceptions that matter when analyzing a state's foreign policy and developed five categories from which states' intentions can be placed: unlimited

expansionist, limited expansionist, unlimited opportunistic, limited opportunistic, and status quo powers.⁴⁵ Expansionist intentions are perceived when the adversary is thought to “expand its power and influence beyond its territorial boundaries.”⁴⁶ In either a limited or unlimited expansionist role, the adversary is perceived as *actively* seeking to adjust the status quo and therefore, thought as unconstrained and pose a significant threat.⁴⁷ A limited or unlimited opportunistic state is perceived as in favor of a change in status quo, but is not actively seeking such a change and therefore, only determined to do so when an opportunity arises without too high of a cost.⁴⁸ Status quo intentions primarily focuses on a state that values “preservation” and a balance of its current position, and therefore does not seek to take opportunities.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the level of diplomacy and various political warfare actions employed by a state against another depends on the level of threat perceived.

The method in which Milo explains the selective attention thesis can be applied to Iran as a case study. When tied to policymaking, Jervis asserts that intelligence is the least popular aspect, because it will analyze information that does not align with policymakers’ predetermined beliefs, lending itself to Milo’s subjective credibility hypothesis. Jervis explains the opposing perspectives that the intelligence community and policy makers often face and further supports Milo’s selective attention thesis. Jervis states, “Decision makers need confidence and political support, and honest intelligence unfortunately diminishes rather than increases these goods by pointing to ambiguities, uncertainties, and the costs and risks of policies.”⁵⁰ The lessons that Jervis captures from an intelligence perspective on the Iranian revolution aligns overall with Milo’s selective attention thesis, delineating between the organizational context of the intelligence community vice the subjective credibility associated with policymakers. The next section briefly explains the significance of indications and warnings to forecast future threats, as a means to analyze Iran’s activities in the gray zone.

A Conceptual Model for Indications and Warnings

Indications and warnings are a classic method for commanders, staff officers, and analysts alike to identify a change in an environment or a possible security threat. The Sherman Kent School for Intelligence Analysis emphasizes the need for *strategic warning*, and defines it as the “timely analytic perception and effective communication to policy officials of important changes in the level or character of threats to national security interests that require re-evaluation of US readiness to deter or limit damage.”⁵¹ Thus, strategic warning looks more closely at the probability of an event to occur, and focusing on those that appear initially as unlikely threats, but adversely affect or undermine US policy. A RAND study asserts that “a major requirement for detecting out-of-the ordinary phenomena is to understand what constitutes ‘ordinary’ and what types of behaviors are significant deviations away from the ordinary that may be relevant.”⁵² A RAND research plan proposed a system that monitors *what is watched over time, how they are watched, and the results of the watching* with the expectation that an analysis in a certain trend would identify when changes occur.⁵³ Additionally, Post and Schneider, from their edited publication *Know Thy Enemy, Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures*, stress the importance of having clear models of the psychology of our adversaries⁵⁴ Additionally, they assert profiling as a means to understand the context of an actor – whether individual or state.” Schneider contends that one “cannot effectively target and influence a group without a clear understanding of its leaders and decision structures.”⁵⁵ As such, in the case study of operating in the gray zone environment against a specific state, there are patterns previously established and likely within a larger historical context that can provide indications to a possible change or elevation of tactics.

Jervis and Milo recognize the requirement for the intelligence community to appropriately assess adversary intentions from a strategic perspective. If one can understand the inherent biases associated with an organization, then it can develop a framework that learns from the

mistakes Jervis identified and build a more robust framework to assess a state's perceived intentions. Profiling, as mentioned above by Post and Schneider, can lead to trend analysis and help frame state's actions based on its historical actions. Trend analysis becomes paramount because if an adversary changes tactics, that anomaly is likely to stand out and cause further review of a problem or action.

Case Study Overview: Iran Across the Decades

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has steadily increased its influence as a regional actor and arguably has evolved to understand that state-on-state conventional warfare is not the most effective means for gaining power and influence. From Milo's five categories of assessing an adversary's intentions, Iran has shifted from an opportunistic state to an expansionist state. This is evident in the method in which Iran has employed political warfare tactics from the inception of the Islamic state in 1979 to current day, where its influence plays a significant role in the Middle East. Iran is viewed from the selective attention thesis and perceived as an adversary whose strategic intention is to gain regional hegemony; become a stakeholder in overall Middle Eastern affairs; and preserve Islamic Shi'ism through its political warfare strategy.⁵⁶ The actions Iran has undertaken to gain these strategic goals are concerning, yet predictable. An analysis over the decades illustrates that Iran seeks its foreign policy goals primarily through gray zone actions so as not to escalate to a conventional war based on its previous losses in fighting conventional wars and that it "believes itself to be under a permanent state of siege, while at the same time fulfilling its role as a defender of the downtrodden in the face of Western imperialism."⁵⁷ The two figures below depict how Iran views its role within the region and demonstrates that by examining Iran's roles specifically in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, one can predict future areas that Iran may seek to expand its influence.

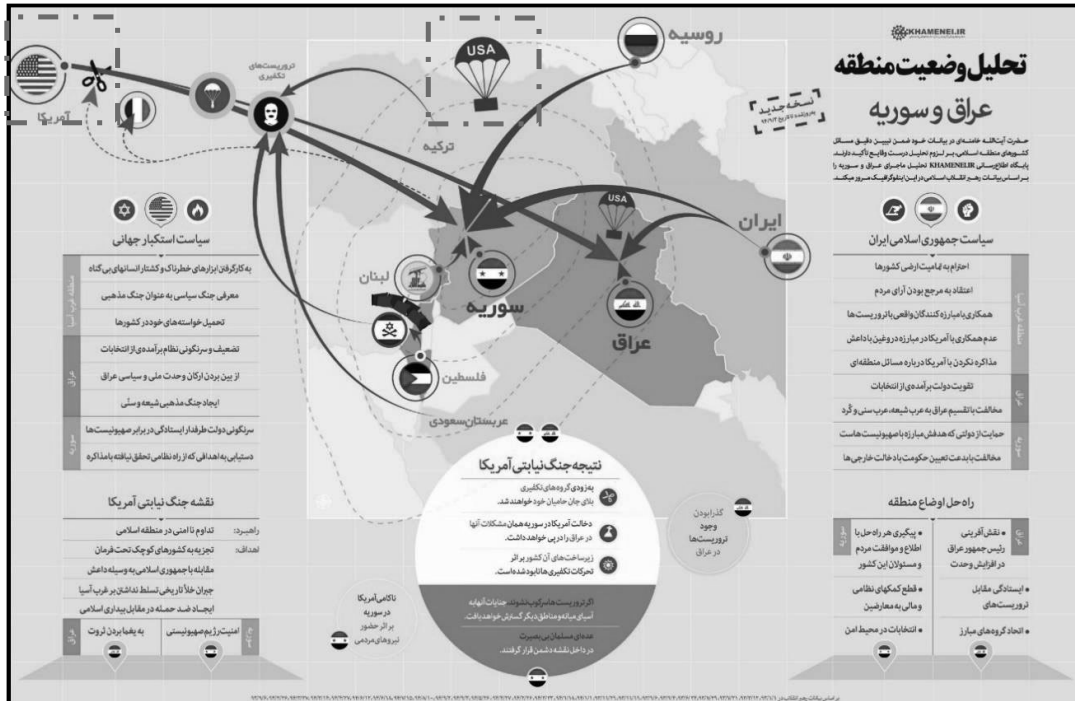


Figure 3.⁵⁸ Depiction on Iranian Website

The depiction demonstrates from the Iranian perspective, the United States involvement and the need to sever ties.

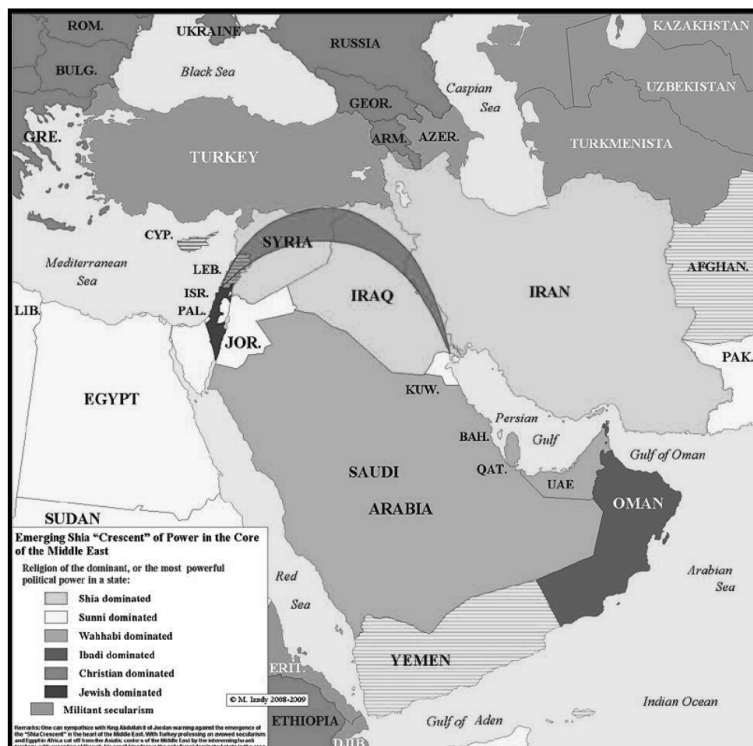


Figure 4.⁵⁹ The Shi'a Crescent

The “Shi’a Crescent” is the term depicted that illustrates Iran’s desire to attain power and influence in the region, pose a threat to Israel, and counter Sunni influence from Saudi Arabia. The four states: Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia provide a starting point for identifying the indications and warnings when Iran seeks to conduct gray zone activities in other parts of the world. Increased resource allocation, presence of Iranian government officials, and expanded propaganda in a specific region are some indications that Iran may be operating within the gray zone.

Iran and Lebanon

Iran’s influence in Lebanon began in the 1980s, shortly after the Islamic Revolution. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and “subsequent occupation of southern Lebanon created the space in which Iranian diplomats and agents could help fashion the unified entity Hezbollah from a motley crew of Shi’a militias and groups.”⁶⁰ This was the initial point where the United States identified an Iranian supported proxy group and attributed dozens of terrorist attacks to Iran in the following years, to include the Beirut 1983 attack on the Marine Barracks. In 1985, Hezbollah issued an “Open Letter on Goals and Principles” where it acknowledged Ayatollah Khomeini as its leader and vehemently declared the United States and Israel as enemies that must be confronted.⁶¹ In less than a decade, Hezbollah shifted from a non-state actor and participated in national elections in 1992. Since then, Hezbollah continues to receive significant amount of training, financial support, and equipment from Iran. An unclassified DoD report estimates Iran provides “roughly \$100-200 million per year in funding to support Hezbollah.”⁶² Overall, the evidence illustrates the fact that Hezbollah is an Iranian-sponsored terrorist organization with a clear goal to influence and act on behalf of Iranian interests.

Hezbollah’s robust use of communications and its successful messaging through all media outlets largely influences its support base. Olfa Lamloum, a French researcher at the Institut

Français du Proche-Orient, wrote an article explaining Hezbollah’s prolific use of media and communications. Lamloum asserts that Hezbollah is “the most organized and wide-ranging media structure of any Islamist grouping, Shiite or Sunni, in the Arab world.”⁶³ Press conferences, messages promulgated at mosques, print news, radio, television, internet, and theatrical events are all forms of IO that Hezbollah leveraged to communicate its message to the general populace. Hezbollah’s terrorist actions coupled with its robust media presence are key factors that force other states to acknowledge Hezbollah as an influential [non-state] actor in the region.

Hezbollah is Iran’s most mature and developed proxy group, primarily due to its substantial ties since the 1980s. Hezbollah employs varying levels of political warfare and demonstrates factors that apply to all three categories previously identified. Iran’s success with developing, supporting, and maintaining Hezbollah as an influential actor provides the foundation for assessing Iran’s gray zone activities in other states, to include Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

Iranian Influence	Political Warfare Attributes		
	Unconventional Warfare	Information Operations	Sabotage Operations
Lebanon	X	X	

Table 1 – Iran’s applied use of PW attributes to Lebanon

Iran and Iraq

The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s held significant setbacks for both sides and strained relations for several years. Once the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Iran identified an opportunity to coalesce Shia groups against the United States and seek a neighboring government that includes Shia influence as a means to strengthen Iran’s regional power. In other words, Iran intends for Iraq to be a state favorable to Shi’i Islamic law and challenge Western presence. Iran maintains a deliberate and methodical strategy to undermine US interests and will continue to expand its regional hegemonic ambitions using varying levels of political warfare.

According to the Unclassified Congressional Directed Action (CDA) report, Iran “seeks

to increase its stature by countering US influence and expanding ties with regional actors while advocating Islamic solidarity...Iran is attempting to secure political, economic, and security influence in Iraq and Afghanistan while undermining US efforts by supporting various political groups.”⁶⁴ The CDA report also explains that the Iranian Revolution Guard Corps-Qods Force oversees the implementation of Iran’s policy in Iraq by assigning IRGC-QF officers in diplomatic positions in Iraq.⁶⁵ As a result, IRGC-QF officers are able to facilitate training, military, and financial aid to the Iraqi government.

Iran’s regional influence increased with the infamous fatwa that Iraqi cleric Ali al-Sistani issued in 2014, calling for Shiites to support the Iraqi government and take up arms against ISIL.⁶⁶ Al-Sistani’s fatwa eventually led to the formation of the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC) under the Iraqi Government. The PMC leads the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF), comprised primarily of Shi’i fighters, many of which were previously associated with Shi’i Militant Groups (SMGs), to include the Badr Organization. In one article, Michael Eisenstadt, a specialist on the Persian Gulf, explains that the Badr Organization is increasing influence within the Iraqi Government, with “22 of 328 seats in the Iraqi parliament.”⁶⁷ The article further states that the Badr Organization “is arguably partway towards carving out an IRGC clone *within the existing [Iraqi] security forces.*”⁶⁸ It is noteworthy to point out that al-Sistani is known for his more moderate views and not necessarily acquiescing to Iranian influence when he issued the fatwa. The actions that evolved since the fatwa simply demonstrate Iran’s ability to exert political warfare tactics and influence political and religious conditions to their benefit. Similarly, Yemen provides for another example where Iran seeks to project its influence.

Iranian Influence	Political Warfare Attributes		
	Unconventional Warfare	Information Operations	Sabotage Operations
Iraq	X	X	

Table 2 – Iran’s applied use of PW attributes to Iraq

Iran and Yemen

Since the Yemeni civil war commenced in 2014, evidence indicates the Ansar Allah Shia-led movement, collectively referred to as the Houthis, also receive Iranian support through gray zone activities. The primary evidence that demonstrates Iran's support for the Houthis is through military equipment and financial aid. For example, a recent article published by the Washington Institute of Near East Policy asserts that explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) employed by Houthis demonstrate very similar ties to the EFPs used by Hezbollah.⁶⁹ This claim stems from a Conflict Armament Research (CAR) report that suggests "the existence of a weapon pipeline extending from Iran to Somalia and Yemen, which involves the transfer, by *dhow*, of significant quantities of Iranian-manufactured weapons and weapons that plausibly derive from Iranian stockpiles."⁷⁰ The findings from the CAR report align with Iran's *modus operandi* for aiding proxy groups through financial and resource support. Additionally, Nikki Haley, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, stated in November 2017 that the "UN found evidence that Iran supplied Houthis with missiles and other arms made by Shahid Bagheri Industrial Group, a firm based in Iran."⁷¹ However, Iran has denied the allegations that it supplies arms, specifically missiles, to the Houthis.

A difference noted between Hezbollah and the Houthis is the different IO campaign led by the Houthis. Whereas Hezbollah embraces all media outlets to promote its message, Houthis seek to limit internet access to the Yemeni populace and have not matured their own messaging campaign. A December 2017 article reported on several blocked social media sites and stated that "internet network and services, specifically Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and Whatsapp are unavailable."⁷² The communications restrictions imposed by the Houthis implies a level of technical expertise and knowledge that is concerning for the Yemeni state.

Overall, evidence demonstrates Iran's initial support to the Houthis through varying levels of gray zone activities. However, a few key differences illustrate the point that the Yemen

conflict is early and young. First, the Houthis are fighting a Yemeni government supported by a Saudi-led coalition, that includes nine African and Middle Eastern countries. The significant amount of support countering the Houthis results in a regional, concerted effort to ensure that Iran does not maintain a presence in a country that threatens Saudi Arabia, as well as control over the sea lines of communication along the Arabian Peninsula. Second, the Houthis have not openly acknowledged Iran’s financial and military aid. The Houthis likely seek a perception of independence and prefer to maintain a low profile with Iran. Similarly, Iran has denied on numerous occasions its military aid, specifically, the ballistic missiles that Houthis have fired against Saudi Arabia. Third, the Houthis do not appear as religiously tied to Iran as deeply as Hezbollah preached for itself. All these factors lend to a conclusion that if Iran truly seeks to maintain an influential foothold in Yemen and along the Arabian Peninsula, Houthi strategies will evolve.

Iranian Influence	Political Warfare Attributes		
	Unconventional Warfare	Information Operations	Sabotage Operations
Yemen	X	X	X

Table 3 – Iran’s applied use of PW attributes to Yemen

Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran’s political warfare tactics against Saudi Arabia pose a different set of circumstances. Iran and Saudi Arabia have a long history of strained relations, up until 2016 when diplomatic relations ceased. Saudi Arabia poses a unique challenge to Iran because it is the other significant power in the region that is religiously, economically, and politically aligned with other Middle Eastern and Western allies. One report explains Saudi Arabia and Iran is “better understood in terms of a power struggle in the Middle East and beyond.”⁷³ As a result of Saudi Arabia’s wealth, influence, religion, and political ties, Iran is unable to wage a proxy-like war within the state. Therefore, Iran seeks other methods to counter Saudi Arabian power – encircle the state with Iranian power and influence – or use other political warfare actions to

target the enemy. The Shia crescent in Figure 2 illustrates how and where Iran is allocating its resources, and it engulfs Saudi Arabia, as well as threatens key access points along the Arabian Peninsula. As a result, Iran levies unconventional warfare tactics to the north and south of Saudi Arabia – in Iraq and Yemen, respectively. Additionally, Iran has employed sabotage operations against Saudi Arabia in recent years. In 2011, Iran planned an assassination attempt against a Saudi ambassador during his visit to the United States. Although evidence supports this allegation, Iran denies its involvement. An assassination attempt on another world leader is an overt and risky action, but clearly one that Iran judged as an acceptable risk.

Another unique form of political warfare Iran routinely engages in is cyber operations. Cyber operations can be classified both as an IRC within the IO umbrella, and as a sabotage operation – if it targets critical infrastructure. Iran initiated a cyber operation, known as the Shamoon malware attacks, against the Saudi oil company, Aramco in August 2012.⁷⁴ In this cyber operation, a malware agent infected “tens of thousands of Saudi Aramco computers... causing tens to hundreds of millions of dollars in damage.”⁷⁵ The group, Cutting Sword of Justice, claimed responsibility for the attack, and “overwrote the hard drives of Aramco computers with the image of a burning American flag...”⁷⁶ In 2017, reports emerged that there was a second version of the Shamoon malware agent, that targeted Saudi Arabia again.

Overall, actions such as a state-sponsored assassination attempt on a foreign leader and cyber attacks on critical infrastructure indicate riskier, and overt, forms of political warfare. One can conclude that since Iran and Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations in 2016, Iran is then forced to find other means to target and undermine Saudi Arabia power and influence in the Middle East. The next section now applies Iran’s actions to the political warfare categories previously identified to help identify future indications and warnings.

Iranian Influence	Political Warfare Attributes		
	Unconventional Warfare	Information Operations	Sabotage Operations
Saudi Arabia		X	X

Table 4 – Iran’s applied use of PW attributes to Saudi Arabia

Iran’s Applied Use of Political Warfare – Analyzing the Trends

There are three underlying assumptions when analyzing this case study on Iran. First, Iran is a limited expansionist state as explained previously through Milo’s perspective. Second, Iran leverages the gray zone environment to further its political agenda. Third, the United States will need to learn how to counteract Iran’s gray zone activities within the same gray zone environment. The table below illustrates the compilation of Iran’s political warfare attributes to each campaign discussed.

Iranian Influence	Political Warfare Attributes		
	Unconventional Warfare	Information Operations	Sabotage Operations
Lebanon	X	X	
Iraq	X	X	
Yemen	X		X
Saudi Arabia		X	X

Table 5 - Political Warfare Attributes Applied

The longstanding relationship Iran developed and currently maintains with Hezbollah demonstrates its classic use of political warfare tactics and illustrates the power and influence Iran can exert once a non-state actor, such as Hezbollah, gains political legitimacy. Therefore, it remains imperative for the United States and allies to pre-emptively identify areas where Iran seeks to influence a government that might undermine US political or economic interests. Iran’s tactics with Hezbollah are the backdrop for its tactics with other states and are predictable. This is exemplified with Iran’s influence in Iraq. As Iran’s Western neighbor, Iraqi stability and influence is paramount for Iran to maintain its freedom of movement and maintain its access into Syria and Lebanon.

Iraq provides a venue for Iran to employ various levels of political warfare. The economic assistance Iraq receives from Iran is significant, implying that Iraq will need to maintain a balanced and amenable relationship with Iran; after all, they are neighbors, and if Iraq wants to seek stability, it will require enduring assistance from neighboring actors. Additionally, influence from IRGC-QF officers present in diplomatic positions provides a much closer eye on ensuring Iranian interests are at the table. Lastly, the PMF and its reported ties with key Iranian leaders already demonstrates how Shia Militant Groups (SMG) shifted to a part of the Iraqi government over a span of 15 years. The circumstances that led to this shift are products of Desert Storm in 1990 and the US creating a vacuum in the regime in 2014 – actions that Iran viewed as expansionist opportunities; yet, predictable consequences, that the US can now forecast in future conflicts.

The Iraqi government recognizes the need to demonstrate credibility and stability for its people and leverages an extensive IO campaign. Iraq was combating ISIL and needed assistance from coalition forces, as well as Iran. The PMF levied a large IO campaign during ISIL combat operations to promote its credibility and undermine the efforts of coalition forces. This, in concert, with Al-Sistani's fatwa, provided the unification of Shiites in the region, lending to increased Iranian influence. Iran likely realized that's its power, influence, and legitimacy improved more so in the region, yet still maintained a significant power struggle with Saudi Arabia and found another contingent of Shiites to support – this time, in Yemen.

Iran's influence in Yemen is still young and immature; however, it is predictable based on the trends identified in Lebanon and Iraq. Iran seeks influence in Yemen to counter Saudi influence in the region and help gain access and control to the Gulf of Aden; and Iran can achieve this through a Houthi (Shia) influenced Yemeni government. Currently, the Houthis do not overtly support Iranian leadership like Hezbollah did so in the "Open Letter." The Houthis are also in active combat operations against a Saudi-led coalition, and do not have an

advanced IO campaign to rally the populace for support. Therefore, if Iran intends to leverage the Houthis for power and influence, it will find ways to impose its religious ideology within Houthi leadership and evolve the IO campaign to seek public, then political, support. In the meantime, the reported allegations of financial and military aid will continue until a change in the conflict status, or another target rises up that warrants Iran's financial and military resources.

Saudi Arabia presents a unique set of circumstances for Iran. Saudi Arabia is not the typical campaign that Iran can levy like it has in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen; however, options still exist for Iran to operate in the gray zone environment and undermine Saudi interests. The assassination attempt demonstrates one form of sabotage; and the Shamoon cyber attacks exemplifies another form of sabotage. This is likely the method Iran will seek with states that are more stable and counter its political objectives. Iran has employed other cyber attacks against the US and Western allies, albeit at an unsophisticated level. However, this demonstrates that Iran is willing and capable of operating in the non-kinetic world to seek destabilizing networks, companies, and financial institutions. As a result, the US and other allies should not underestimate Iran's efforts to undermine US interests, especially in the Middle East.

Strategic Warning Considerations

The campaigns Iran has waged in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia highlight common themes that provide a framework where one can conclude if Iran is seeking to further expand its influence elsewhere or change its tactics. A proposed method combines a variation of the DOD problem framing analysis tool PMESII (political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure) crossed with the three political warfare categories: UW, sabotage operations, and IO. The PMESII model should adjust to PMEIITI (political, military, economic, information, infrastructure, time, and *ideology*) because these are the primary factors

that still apply to assessing an enemy’s operational environment, specifically Iran. Figure 10 below depicts a method for identifying Iran’s actions towards a state actor, non-state actor, or region.

Operational Environment Factors	Political Warfare Attributes		
	Unconventional Warfare	Information Operations	Sabotage Operations
Political	X	X	X
Military			
Economic			
Information			
Infrastructure			
Time			
Ideology			

Table 6 – Model example to frame strategic warnings from Iranian actions

If one builds the baseline of the current Iranian state as it exists today, then the IC and other organizations can track changes as they occur. For example, Iranian elections may affect the type of IO campaign that is disseminated internal to Iranian citizens, or to external Shi’a populations. Similarly, economic sanctions levied against Syrian assets may trigger a sabotage act to a host government susceptible to US influence and support. Using Table 6 as a template, one can identify to what extent Iran is employing each category of political warfare within a given situation. For example, in the ‘political’ environmental factor, one can assess if Iran’s political ambitions and power are changing within a nation state, as discussed with its influence over the PMF within the Government of Iraq. Secondly, one can monitor open source reporting and social media for Shi’a messaging that targets a specific population with that same nation state, or calling for a united Shi’a front to take action. Thirdly, subversive actions against a key leader or political figure, or offensive cyber operation that undermines, or affects critical infrastructure, is an overt and risky behavior that can be monitored. Whichever the case, the above depiction provides an initial framework for shaping how changes in an environment may trigger Iran’s plan to conduct certain political warfare actions.

US Considerations

The United States recognizes Iran's power and influence today at the cost of failing to preemptively foresee Iran's expansionist methods. As a result, Iran maintains an informal seat at the table in world affairs. In other words, Iran likely influences actions and policies the US seeks in other states that create a fragile environment. The next set of indications to keep mindful for is when Iran elevates its actions outside of the gray zone, and in a more overt, direct, and threatening manner. However, if one keeps in mind that Iran is an expansionist state, then it is fair to assume that where an opportunity opens, Iran will seek power. If the US leaves or ends presence in a state or region, it will be filled by an adversary. However, Iraq provides an example where both sides (US and Iran) seek a stable Iraq, capable of defending its borders and emphasizing its rule of law. It is likely that neither side will completely end military or financial support because there is too much to lose. During combat operations against ISIL, coalition forces and Iran had the same goal – eradicate ISIL from Iraq. Following that, it is evident Iran will seek to influence Iraqi government officials to end coalition support. That will be a delicate time where the US will rely on diplomatic solutions to ensure its interests are not lost, again.

The gray zone is where adversaries will operate as the status quo. Iran has mastered how to conduct UW, IO, and sabotage operations in the gray zone to meet political objectives, and will likely seek additional opportunities as social, political, economic, and military environments evolve. Iran will also be weary to lose any of the political and military influence it has gained in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen without a significant challenge or threat to its internal security and stability.

Conclusion

Gray Zone operations are synonymous with political warfare actions. Since its revolution in 1979, Iran consistently demonstrates its trends of political warfare activities, particularly in

states that pose a regional advantage to Iran. The Shi'a Crescent illustrates how Iran seeks to counter Saudi Arabia's power in the Middle East and threaten Israel's existence. As a result, Iran leverages the gray zone environment to meet its national objectives and gain regional hegemony.

The research conducted in this study concludes that Iran will engage in political warfare actions as the primary means to counter US and Western interests. Since Iran will seek opportunities in the gray zone to increase its regional influence, the United States must continue to maintain sustained support and presence throughout the Middle East. By doing so, the US can monitor and take pre-emptive action when Iran assumes presence in locations where there is lack of security and a potential threat to US interests. Iran's political warfare activities can be categorized into three bins, unconventional warfare, information operations, and sabotage operations. Through these categories one can identify the trends Iran uses to prioritize funding, military aid, and support subversive acts when all else fails. The trends help forecast the regions, intentions, and manners in which Iran will expand influence and undermine US interests; therefore, it is imperative the US maintains consistent pressure through the elements of national power to maintain its own credibility in the Middle East and counter malign Iranian influence.

This study helps derive three primary lessons. First, we must acknowledge that political warfare cannot be stopped – it is the nature of how any nation works to achieve national objectives. Iran operates in the gray zone and below a conventional level of warfare, and therefore it is important to identify the best methods for mitigating the threats that Iran seeks to inflict upon the United States. Second, and as noted, Iran leverages influence on other nations, and therefore, the United States must do the same as well. The United States can remain committed to current partnerships and maintain a sustained presence within the region. The US footprint in the Middle East is almost a norm due to nearly two decades of combat

operations; therefore, if the US departs, then the support and influence will be exercised by another state or nonstate actor. The potential result of complete US withdrawal is a follow-on conflict years later based on unintended consequences. However, the military presence should diminish over time with sustained diplomatic relations. This leads to the third point - the United States should improve upon the diplomatic, information, and economic national instruments of power and gradually diminish military levels. If you decrease military presence, then you have the option to increase when necessary as a bargaining tool. Iran seeks methods other than conventional warfare, and therefore the US military can only do so much against Iran within a gray zone environment. Ultimately, the United States and Iran will impose political warfare actions as the status quo in order to maintain power, influence, and economic interests for their respective nations.

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