

**Revolutionizing Revisionism: The Proliferation of Iran's Militant Clients in
Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen**

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran through the prism of its notorious militant clients: foreign armed groups under the management of Iran which use battlefield gains to advance the regime's regional interests. Iranian foreign policy underwent a shift since the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989) when over 500,000 Iranians died. The trauma of this experience encouraged regime decision makers to instead prefer to cultivate sympathetic foreign allies to advance Iranian interests. These groups activated during wartime across the Middle East in the past three decades and have effectively advanced Iranian state interests in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Iran's militant clients now serve as the tactical nuts and bolts of the regime's long-term regional strategy.

To explore how this unique foreign policy strategy came to be, the following chapters explore the sources of Iranian power, Iran's regional aspirations, and the regime's chosen strategy to advance them. Militant clients are demonstrated to be a key pillar of Iran's grand strategy. In the end, this thesis uncovers the strategic strengths and weaknesses of Iran's militant clients and concludes with revised assumptions about them to better inform U.S. policy.

Introduction: How Revolutionary Can Foreign Policy Be?

Before undertaking human-wave attacks in its war with Iraq in the 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran equipped soldiers as young as 12 with keys to heaven for their service to revolutionary Shi'a Islam.¹ Beginning with examples such as this, the regime's Arab neighbors and Western adversaries have long feared that the theocratic state uses Shi'a internationalism to espouse an aggressive foreign policy.² During the Iran-Iraq War Iran relied on its own armed forces (The Artesh). Over the ensuing decades, however, the Islamic Republic's favored military tool shifted.³ It now primarily cultivates and deploys like-minded militant clients: foreign armed groups which advance Iran's interests on the battlefield.⁴ The impact of this client network has been far-reaching: Lebanese Hezbollah is enshrined in the domestic security and political apparatuses, Shi'ite militias are coalescing as a leading power broker in Iraq, foreign fighters successfully defended strategic territory on behalf of Bashar al-Asad regime in Syria, and Ansar Allah (the Houthis) remain an effective spoiler to Saudi Arabia in Yemen. In each of the conflicts listed above, battle lines have fallen along religious and ideological lines: Iran's Shi'a identity and disdain for the international system on one side pitted against Sunni Arab states and western coalitions. And yet, the traditionally held perspective of Iran as a religiously motivated state-sponsor of terrorism misrepresents and exaggerates much about the regime's status and capabilities.

¹Afshon Ostovar author, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016). 12.

² "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia," FRONTLINE, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>. Chapter 3: *The Forgotten War*.

³ For an overview on The Artesh, I recommend: "The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized and Under-Armed Conventional Military," Middle East Institute, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/artesh-irans-marginalized-and-under-armed-conventional-military>.

⁴ An in-depth operational definition of "militant clients" is forthcoming, but in short the term is used to incorporate the numerous armed groups fighting in alliance or on behalf of Iran in conflict zones throughout the region.

On February 15, 2021, for the first time as president, Joe Biden approved the use of military force. In Syria he targeted facilities used by Iran-backed militias.⁵ This continued on June 27, 2021 when airstrikes and raids hit Iraqi sites also tied to Iran's militias.⁶ Despite the administration's stated foreign policy shift away from the Middle East⁷, President Biden's use of force demonstrates how Iran's clients remain a key flashpoint for American foreign policy against its key, and arguably most-feared, regional adversary.⁸ The militant clients in question, and their pivotal role in Iranian foreign policy decision-making, go back to the earliest years of the post-revolutionary regime and provide key insights into Iran's regional goals, capabilities, and limitations.

There are two major schools of thought regarding Iran's network of militant clients. First are those that highlight Iran's state ideology as the primary driving force of its strategy to credibly threaten adversaries (particularly Israel) and challenge Sunni leaders (largely Saudi Arabia).⁹ Others focus on Iran's regional isolation and subsequent security demands in a uniquely unstable region.¹⁰ Iran's ideology—particularly its religious, conservative, and

⁵ "EXPLAINER: How US Airstrike in Syria Sends Message to Iran," AP NEWS, February 26, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/us-airstrike-syria-explained-0276818ed191a48fafcd1c2c57d1a1d9>.

⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-27/u-s-hits-iran-backed-militias-with-airstrikes-pentag-on-says>

⁷ "Biden Deprioritizes the Middle East," POLITICO, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/22/biden-middle-east-foreign-policy-470589>: reports of President Biden's deprioritization of the Middle East. A serious example of this shift can be seen by the Navy SEALs changing their training away from antiterrorism work to "global threats", as can be found in: "Navy SEALs to Shift from Counterterrorism to Global Threats," AP NEWS, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-osama-bin-laden-china-russia-government-and-politics-8f277ce1a284b227afedcfabfb51ffc>.

⁸ Iran listed as most feared adversary in the Muslim World: Gallup Inc, "Four Nations Top U.S.'s Greatest Enemy List," Gallup.com, February 22, 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/189503/four-nations-top-greatest-enemy-list.aspx>.

⁹ Iran's Shi'a ideology is particularly prone to consideration in foreign policy analyses. This has historical backing. In 1979, the Iranian Revolution disposed of the western-aligned Pahlavi Dynasty and installed a regime that brought animosity toward the West and Sunni Arab states to the fore. In current scholarship and public discourse, Iranian ideology is often centered and used to define the country by its most radical elements.

¹⁰ This school of thought, as presented in this paper, includes scholars of structural and neoclassical realism. Structural realism posits that power is the most important factor in international relations and that the international structure is defined by its ordering principle, anarchy, and by the distribution of capabilities (measured by the number of great powers within the international system). These principles seek to explain the *why* explanation of

inflammatory rhetoric—must not be ignored. However, solely focusing on such rhetoric sours discourse and does not highlight the fact that Iran’s foreign policy choices are limited. To elucidate this issue, this thesis asks two primary questions. First, what are the primary determinants of Iran’s foreign policy and the regime’s military engagements? After exploring this question (in Chapter 1), I will then explore through which processes Iran develops its militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen (in Chapter 2). Through answering these two questions, better assumptions about Iran’s militant clients can be utilized in U.S. policy options to address them (in Chapter 3).¹¹

The questions and arguments in this thesis will be pursued in the following three sections. Chapter 1 places Iran’s foreign policy in relative terms regionally and defends the key claim that Iran’s militant clients hold significant grand strategic value. Chapter 2 follows the development of Iran’s militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen to demonstrate their evolution into effective and successful mechanisms through which Iran advances its highest interests and priorities in the region. Chapter 3 calls upon these case studies to propose revised assumptions about Iran’s militant clients to fill a need in U.S. foreign policy toward Iran.

state behavior. Neoclassical realist builds off of this and includes the *how* element to foreign policy formation. Scholars of neoclassical realism include unit-level factors that shape leaders’ responses to crises. This adds space to analyze the level of success leaders’ decisions had in reaching their goals. This is important for Iran’s use of militant clients and in how I delineate this strategy as self-defeating.

¹¹ This is particularly relevant for the future landscape of the civil wars in Syria and Yemen.

Introduction

Though there exists an expansive and diverse literature on Iran’s foreign policy—both in scholarly and policy making circles—but there is much disagreement as to what drives it. As I will elucidate in the following sections, there are six major schools of thought relevant to my two main primary questions.¹² I break these schools of thought into two categories: those primarily pertaining to academic discourse or policymaking circles. There is a robust debate over how policy should understand and respond to Iran’s network of co-religionist clients. This section includes three prominent viewpoints within the scholarly and policy making communities, respectively, to prime the forthcoming analysis in Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

Review and Evaluation of Scholarly Literature

Contending Hypotheses: The Scholarly Viewpoints

In academic communities, scholarly focus centers on the primary determinants of Iranian foreign policy. I break down the dominant opinions on this subject into three schools of thought. First, I refer to the “power parity” school of thought as those scholars which interpret Iranian foreign policy as foundationally determined to reach power parity with its regional adversaries. Second, the “grand strategy” school of thought attaches Iran’s militant clients to the foundation of Iranian foreign policy. Third, scholars of neoclassical realism interpret Iran’s foreign policy as being reliant on a suboptimal, unconventional toolkit. While overlapping in some areas, each of the three scholarly schools of thought offer distinct prisms through which to analyze Iran’s foreign policy.

¹² My primary research questions are: To what extent is Iran’s involvement in regional conflicts due to its particular brand of Shi’ism? And toward what political ends have Iran’s militant clients been deployed in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen?

1. Power Parity

Within the scholarly community, many scholars look to power politics as the primary driver of Iranian foreign policy. Specifically, these scholars consider the concerns of Iran's ruling elite about the international distribution of power, and Iran's place within it, as the factor which above all determines the regime's foreign policy decision making. The "power parity" school of thought contrasts with the politicians and analysts who see Iran as primarily a sectarian actor. Writers such as Shahram Chubin clearly posit that ideology is not the leading contributing factor to the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.¹³ Instead, thinking within the "power" school of thought centers on an Iranian goal to gain power parity with its neighbors and rivals. The event most often discussed by these authors, and particularly succinctly by Chubin, is the post-2003 regional environment. When referring to the Islamic Republic's financial and military support for client groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and others, Chubin claims that Tehran's transnational client network was utilized to fill a power vacuum.

In the last two decades, the proponents of the "power parity" school often publish reports and papers which respond to claims of a "new aggressiveness" in Iranian foreign policy in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Pieces authored by Mark Gasiorowski and Fariborz Mokhtari have sought to temper expectations about Iran's willingness to be an aggressive actor on the international stage through their use of classic metrics of state power consistent with realism, and to temper state rhetoric with calculations about Iran's political, economic, and military capabilities.¹⁴ Politically, Iran is neither a marginal state nor a great power.

Economically, the country is beset by a crippling sanctions regime and dependent upon the

¹³ Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Power in Context," *Survival* 51, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 165–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330902749772>.

¹⁴ Mark Gasiorowski, "The New Aggressiveness In Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2 (2007): 125–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2007.00303.x>, Fariborz Mokhtari, "No One Will Scratch My Back: Iranian Security Perceptions in Historical Context," *Middle East Journal* 59, no. 2 (2005): 209–29.

fluctuations in oil prices. Militarily, Iran's conventional military capabilities are overall qualitatively inferior to those of its main rivals. With these facts in mind, scholars of this school believe that Iran can be an effective spoiler to regional rivals during conflicts, but the regime is structurally limited in its ability to offer political solutions or credibly guarantee long-term stability for its security interests.

Authors of this school of thought often aim criticism, accordingly, toward U.S. policy for the rapid shift in the Middle Eastern security environment which provided Iran with an opportunity to expand its influence in a way which accorded with its strengths. By centering Iran's limited capabilities, the "power parity" school of thought provides an outlook on the Islamic Republic as a state which seeks to revise the distribution of power in its neighborhood but is limited in its ability to do so effectively.

2. Neoclassical Realism

Thomas Juneau rigorously applied the school of Neoclassical Realism to Iranian foreign policy decision-making¹⁵. Neoclassical realism adds new forms of analysis of *how* states conduct their foreign policy, and to varying levels of success. This is a welcome addition to other schools of Realist thought which leave out the *how* in order to focus on the *why*. In this line of thinking, Juneau posits that Iran faced an inflection point in 2003 when U.S. led regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan brought forth a strategic environment more structurally favorable to the Islamic Republic. Neoclassical realism can then be applied to this inflection point by comparing an "optimal" foreign policy to the policies actually pursued. Juneau outlined what an optimal foreign policy outcome would have been in terms of maximizing Iran's relative power vis-a-vis its regional adversaries. Juneau reached the conclusion that the driving reasons Iran's foreign

¹⁵ The most concise analysis on this can be found in this thorough book by Thomas Juneau: Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015).

policy has been suboptimal is its reliance on unconventional military capabilities and an unstable economy¹⁶. This frame of analysis is particularly useful in explaining how Iran's ruling elite held aspirations for its foreign policy after 2003 which exceeded its capabilities.

To further explain this difference between Iranian aspirations and capabilities, Juneau proceeds with a thorough empirical analysis to establish Iran's inferior power base relative to its key adversaries, mainly the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. By delineating the sub-optimal performance of Iran's foreign policy decision making, Juneau seeks to highlight the complexity of the Iranian national security apparatus and how power is imprecise and changing. With many domestic actors, foreign policy is a result of a messy process driven by international and domestic causes. In this school of thought, Iran's security relationship is driven by serious power asymmetry in which the regime's decision making is limited.

Under the umbrella of the Neoclassical Realist school of thought are those scholars who focus internally, on factionalism and domestic politics, when analyzing trends of Iranian foreign policy. Most commonly found in the writing of this "domestic politics" school of thought is the notion that Tehran lacks a "single indisputable center of power".¹⁷ From this evaluation, authors such as Sussan Siavoshi, Mehran Kamrava, and Ali Banuazizi claim that more so than in other states, Iranian decision remains in flux as competing elite factions vie for power and influence.¹⁸ Proponents of this school of thought highlight three groups into which Iranian politics has been split: the conservative traditionalists, reformists, and radicals. Doubling down on the inward focus of this school of thought, many scholars point to the distribution of power outlined in the Iranian constitution and the ways in which Supreme Leaders Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali

¹⁶ The core assumptions used by Juneau: the international system is anarchic, states are the fundamental unit within the international system, and power is central.

¹⁷ Sussan Siavoshi, "Factionalism and Iranian Politics: The Post-Khomeini Experience," *Iranian Studies* 25, no. 3/4 (1992): 27-49.

¹⁸ Ali Banuazizi, "Iran's Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Societal Resistance," *Middle East Report*, no. 191 (1994): 2-8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012708>.

Khamenei have responded to the factions' differences. Kamrava specifically posits that the Supreme Leader leaves bickering factions with a calculated amount of leeway to engage in competition over policy.

Foreign policy is a special arena for this factional dynamic. For example, there is a clear Iranian consensus in favor of achieving nuclear technology, but serious disagreement has ensued between factions over which tactics to use in pursuit of it and the diplomatic costs willing to be incurred.¹⁹ Journalistically, allusions to this school of thought were prominent during the coverage of Iranian presidential elections in 2021. This was apparent as speculation amounted as to how the anticipated hard-line presidency of Ebrahim Raisi would affect ongoing nuclear negotiations with the United States.²⁰ This school of thought, in general, gained particular notoriety in academic circles in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

3. Grand Strategy

In the ten years since the start of the Arab Spring uprisings, an intriguing new field of study has offered a competing explanation of Iranian foreign policy. It centers on why Iran depends on militant clients. Some analysts have gone so far to call the network the new core pillar of the regime's foreign policy.²¹ As opposed to defining Iran's militant clients solely through the lens of terrorism, proponents of this school of thought claim that Iran's proxy strategy has state-making potential and that serious political goals undergird their cultivation and deployment. Most specifically, this "grand strategy" school deems the definition of terrorist as

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ "Opinion | In Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's Clerics Have Groomed and Promoted Their Ruthless Enforcer," Washington Post, accessed November 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/25/ebrahim-raisi-khamenei-iran-president-supreme-leader/>., "Iran Has a New President. What Does That Mean for the Nuclear Deal?," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed November 10, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/iran-has-new-president-what-does-mean-nuclear-deal>.

²¹*Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," n.d., 31.

inaccurate for said groups. This misnomer then is believed to mislead outside understanding of the on-the-ground developments in conflict zones throughout the Levant and Persian Gulf.

The leading scholar in the field who most directly has written on this “grand strategy” school is Afshon Ostovar.²² Interestingly, the earliest work in which Ostovar speaks to this line of thinking is his book which centers on the formation, growth, and dominance of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the national security apparatus within the country. In Ostovar’s introduction to the book, he remarks upon the growing role of what he calls irregular fighting forces in the strategic environment of the twenty-first century Middle East. In his view, the literature has not caught up to these developments and much is needed in future research regarding Iran’s partners and proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. The main purpose of this reframing, then, is for observers to attribute more nuanced understandings of the *political ends* to which Iran’s militant clients serve. In an effort to redefine Iranian clients away from the infamous image of hostage takers and blood-thirsty radicals, this school of thought seeks to associate the determinants of Iran’s client strategy in a way more consistent with classic, western notions of the use of force to advance state interests.

Contending Hypotheses: The Prominent Policy Viewpoints

U.S. policy makers answer two questions when crafting strategic options for containing Iranian influence in the region: 1. How dire is the current Iranian threat?, and 2. How aggressive are Iran’s goals? Answering these questions relies upon the understanding of the determinants of Iranian foreign policy discussed in scholarly circles. In the current policy discourse there are

²² His most important work on this topic are: *ibid.* and Afshon Ostovar author, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

three strategic options which answer these two questions in distinct ways. These policies are referred to as rollback, containment, and modus vivendi.

1. Rollback

Rollback is the most aggressive of the three options. This strategy assumes that Iran's position already poses a significant threat to U.S. regional interests and partners. Its land bridge through Syria facilitates the transfer of advanced weapons to its sub-state allies in the region and threatens Israel at its border. To prevent a perceived encirclement of U.S. allies in Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, this policy option advocates for an active U.S. military campaign in Syria and Iraq to push back against Iranian forces and militant clients. Rollback maintains that direct military confrontation will be necessary to roll back Iranian influence and assumes that Russia's ties to Iran are not so strong as to prompt Russia to risk conflict with the U.S. on Iran's behalf.

Informing these perceptions of Iran's foreign policy and the strategy required by the U.S. are those who see Iran as an "abnormal" state at work.²³ This school of thought dominates American politics. The scholarly underpinning of this school of thought goes back to the neoconservative resurgence during the George W. Bush Administration. Prominent works advocating this school of thought in this time were Charles Krauthammer, Arthur Herman, Norman Podhoretz, and others.²⁴ The main analyses provided by authors such as these describe the Iranian ruling elite as a monolithic group of "mad mullahs" who pursue ideological and

²³ For further reading on foundational texts on Structural Realism, see: "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 5–41.

²⁴ Charles Krauthammer, "In Iran, Arming for Armageddon," *Washington Post*, December 16, 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2005/12/16/in-iran-arming-for-armageddon/f3d39e57-16e8-4303-b123-5da549068aee/>., Charles Krauthammer, "In Iran, Arming for Armageddon," *Washington Post*, December 16, 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2005/12/16/in-iran-arming-for-armageddon/f3d39e57-16e8-4303-b123-5da549068aee/>., "Getting Serious About Iran: A Military Option," *Commentary Magazine* (blog), November 1, 2006, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/arthur-herman/getting-serious-about-iran-a-military-option/>., "The Case for Bombing Iran," *Commentary Magazine* (blog), June 1, 2007, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/norman-podhoretz/the-case-for-bombing-iran/>.

revolutionary Islamist foreign policy. These authors tend to speak most about the Iran-Iraq War and rhetoric coming from regime officials as the foundation of this behavior. They prescribe an apocalyptic conception of Iran's role in regional and international affairs. Specifically, adherents to this line of thinking are determined in their view that the Islamic Republic is primarily driven to wipe Israel off the map and to destroy the "Great Satan": the United States. Militant clients, then, are viewed by these "abnormal state" thinkers to be the vehicles through which the regime will threaten Israel, the U.S., and the world order generally with nuclear weapons.

This school of thought casts a long shadow on U.S. foreign policy. From President Bush's infamous "Axis of Evil" speech to the Trump Administration's campaign of "Maximum Pressure", the designation of Iran as an abnormal state has undergirded the most tense periods of U.S.-Iran relations in the twenty-first century. The core tenets of this school of thought have remained intact. This was demonstrated most succinctly in the reports issued by the U.S. Department of State in 2018 and 2020 on Iran's activities at home and abroad.²⁵ In these reports, then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explicitly refers to the Islamic Republic as "not normal" and a "menace". Iran's cultivation and deployment of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq are placed front and center as the key evidence of these claims. As an abnormal state, proponents of this line of thinking see a direct Iranian military threat always around the corner. These proponents above all prioritize a strategy of coercion above all to bring Iranian behavior into "normality".

²⁵ "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities, 2018," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed November 10, 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/outlaw-regime-a-chronicle-of-irans-destructive-activities-2018/>, "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed November 10, 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/outlaw-regime-a-chronicle-of-irans-destructive-activities/>.

2. Containment

Containment is a strategy which utilizes entirely different assumptions about Iranian foreign policy. These assumptions include: 1. the idea that Iran’s current position does not yet significantly threaten U.S. interests, but could if allowed to persist in the long term; 2. Iran has not overplayed its hand in the region and will continue to advance absent U.S. action; 3. The U.S. can interrupt Iran’s momentum without resorting to direct confrontation; and 4. The U.S. can persuade regional allies to accept the status quo so they don’t “take matters into their own hands”.²⁶ In short, this policy aims to “arrest Iran’s progress, to limit its incentive and ability to undermine regional allies, and to assure U.S. regional allies that Washington shares their concern about Iranian aggression and is determined to halt it”.²⁷

3. Modus Vivendi

Modus vivendi would entail a form of “tense coexistence” between the U.S. and Iran. This approach is predicated on the claim that with a correct combination of pressure and incentives, Iran would accept a “limited but recognized role in the region compatible with the interests of the United States and its allies”.²⁸ This balance would require Iran to curb its activities throughout the region significantly and require Saudi Arabia to accept a new level of Iranian regional involvement it currently finds unacceptable. This strategy assumes that Iran is not ideologically driven to overthrow Sunni Arab regimes or the destruction of Israel, but instead expands wherever it senses an opportunity.

²⁶ “U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Strategic Options | Bipartisan Policy Center,” accessed April 10, 2022, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/us-policy-toward-iran-strategic-options/>.

²⁷ Ibid. 24.

²⁸ Ibid. 26.

Contributing to the policy option of *modus vivendi* are many realist authors who instead perceive Iran as a rational state pursuing its national interests.²⁹ Authors such as David Menashri and Thomas Juneau claim that Tehran acts as a “rational actor” and that its foreign policy can never be solely attributed to expansionist ideology.³⁰ In terms of Iran’s militant clients, this indicates that Iran is unlikely to abandon them entirely. By assuming that Iran’s involvement in the region is driven by opportunism and not a violent upheaval of the regional order, the *modus vivendi* strategy challenges the notion that direct military confrontation would effectively alter Iranian behavior.

My Niche

My thesis research will address gaps and weaknesses in the current literature by assigning more value to the impact of Iran’s foreign policy on the region than to the rhetoric used by officials in Tehran. The existing literature provides adequate answers to several important questions, but has not to date satisfactorily overcome the issue of understanding Iran’s deployment of a network of co-religionist clients as not ideological in origin. In order to do so, my chosen approach will primarily build upon the frameworks of the “power parity” and “grand strategy” schools of thought.

The two research questions I undertake in my thesis research require distinct, but related, analyses of the literature. Before sharpening the discourse on Iran’s militant client, a sufficient

²⁹ Mohammed Ayoob and Danielle N. Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam, Second Edition: Religion and Politics in Muslim Societies* (Ann Arbor, UNITED STATES: University of Michigan Press, 2020), Ray Takeyh and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “Pragmatism in the Midst of Iranian Turmoil,” *The Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (September 1, 2004): 33–56, <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2004.27.4.33>, Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, “Modern Iranian Political Thought,” in *Modern Iran, Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2006), 170–213, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkwwc.15>.

³⁰ David Menashri, “Iran’s Regional Policy: Between Radicalism And Pragmatism,” *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (2007): 153–67., Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi, eds., *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001: Alone in the World*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

foundation must be laid on the determinants of foreign policy. For this, the “power parity” school will allow for a thorough, but tempered, framework for understanding how Iran chooses to pursue its interests internationally. With this established, I will then incorporate the strengths of the “grand strategy” school of thought to my case studies of Iran’s expansive network of partners and proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. My chosen approach will claim that Iran’s clients are utilized to advance key interests for the Islamic Republic, but it will also provide a more accurate analysis of the conflict zones in which battle lines have increasingly formed across Sunni-Shia lines. In this way, the revised assumptions about Iran’s militant clients that I propose in Chapter 3 fit most within the containment and modus vivendi policy viewpoints. This will more effectively respond to the true foreign policy capabilities held by Iran. Absent formal diplomatic channels between the U.S. and Iran, correct threat perceptions of the other is vitally important. Accordingly, my chosen framework will work to recalibrate the American perception of Iranian decision making.

Research Methodology: Aspirations and Constraints

In essence, my methodological approach can be broken down into two parts. First, I seek to answer whether ideology or pragmatism drives Iranian foreign policy. For this reason, I consider Iranian aspirations and the constraints limiting the regime's foreign policy options. On aspirations, I record written and spoken pronouncements of Iranian interests abroad. Iran's national security apparatus can be opaque, but it is possible to obtain some statements and aspirational pronouncements from members of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran. This includes the Iranian President, Speaker of the Parliament, Foreign Minister, Head of the Judiciary, Armed Forces Chief of Staff, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp Commander. From written sources, diplomatic cables and military correspondence are useful. I then use five key factors to measure Iran's foreign policy constraints and overall power. These are 1. geography, 2. population dynamics, 3. economic power, 4. military capabilities, and 5. alliance networks. Chapter 1 consists of this analysis of Iranian aspirations and constraints.

Second, and more methodologically important, is my treatment of case studies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. While I will refer to the public statements by Iranian officials, I assign higher value to the *impact* and outcome of Iranian foreign policy throughout the region. To measure this impact I structure the analysis of Iran's development of militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen with three subsections: 1. Iranian state interests in each country, 2. the history of Iran's client development in each country, and 3. the lessons from each country to be applied to a broad understanding of Iran's foreign policy. This analysis is found in Chapter 2.

Operational Definitions

Precise operational definitions of what has been called “Iranian ideology” and “power-politics” in this project are necessary for the findings to be useful and accurate. First, on ideology. In short, the government structure of the Islamic Republic utilizes key aspects of the regime’s brand of Twelve Imam Shi’ism. I define the state ideology primarily as an adherence to the Guardianship of the Jurist principle (*wilayat al-Faqih*), which is what undergirds the political system with the Supreme Leader at the helm. The most apparent evidence for ideological expansion would be the recruitment of foreign groups and governments to take up this system. Iran’s relationship with the region is more nuanced, however. There are other Shi’a and non-Sunni groups and governments in the region with which Iran has a relationship, but they do not adhere to the same sect. Normative judgements will be made to determine if these relationships are primarily in order to expand ideological strength or to expand Iran’s power posture in opposition to Saudi Arabia and other rivals.

On Iran’s alliance of non-state actors, I use Afshon Ostovar’s definition. Iran’s clients have been widely described as terrorists, militias, insurgents, and quasi state paramilitaries. While these descriptors may apply to individual groups, on the whole they do not sufficiently encompass the spectrum of characteristics shared by Iran’s clients. The terrorist label is particularly inadequate, owing to the fact that Iran’s clients now primarily serve to fight wars and the traditional terrorism label centers on the targeting of noncombatants with the goal of instilling fear. Although some of Iran’s clients may engage in terrorism, that is “no longer their central value for Iran”. For that reason, the term militant client will be used when speaking about groups like Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis, Kata’ib Hezbollah in Iraq, and many more.

In essence, my methodological approach can be broken down into two parts. First, one of my primary research questions seeks an answer as to whether ideology or pragmatism drives Iranian foreign policy. To make a meaningful determination on this issue, I employ a methodology which separates Iranian rhetoric from impact. On rhetoric, I record written and spoken pronouncements of Iranian interests abroad. Obtaining Iranian government documents can be a tough task, resulting from the opacity of Iran's national security apparatus, but it is possible to obtain statements from members of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran. This includes the Iranian President, Speaker of the Parliament, Foreign Minister, Head of the Judiciary, Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp Commander, and more. Iranian rhetoric and belief is, of course, not a monolith.³¹ From written sources, diplomatic cables and military correspondence are useful. A comprehensive written record of official Iranian statements on the Islamic Republic's interests abroad is necessary before further analysis.

Second, and more methodologically important, is my treatment of case studies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. While I will refer to the public statements by Iranian officials, I assign higher value to the *impact* and outcome of Iranian foreign policy throughout the region. I make this distinction between rhetoric and impact because Iranian officials are infamous in western media for inflammatory statements regarding the U.S. and Israel, and I believe overly focusing on such rhetoric sours discourse and is misleading about core determinants of Iranian foreign policy. My measurement of impact is four-fold. First, it is vital to ground my analysis of Iranian clients in demographic data about where there exists a significant Shia population to provide proxies for Iran. Second, I will analyze Iranian troop movements and quantify the power and capabilities of Iran's military in order to provide a clear comparison with its key rivals. Once

³¹ While I compile the statements and correspondence from the ruling elite (who are largely hard-liners today) I will intentionally compile and provide further reading from other groups, from reformists to dissidents. I in no way want to portray Iranians as a monolithic, conservative group and will make that distinction in my research.

the above two criteria are established, I will record the adherence of Iran's clients to the principle of *wilayat al-faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), the ideological underpinning of the regime.

Additionally, I will measure the strength of Iran's diplomatic and soft power clout in the region through public polling in the countries of focus. With the above four measurements of the impact of Iran's foreign policy in the region, I will sharpen my qualitative analysis with empirical data to defend my preferred answers to my primary research questions.

Introduction

This chapter is divided into three parts. Part I outlines five key sources of Iranian power: 1. geography, 2. population dynamics, 3. economic power, 4. military capabilities, and 5. alliance networks. Part II addresses the importance of the discrepancy between the status that Iranian leaders aspire to hold and the status the regime currently holds. Part III then places Iran's network of militant clients in context of its power and aspirations in order to highlight five core interests they serve: 1. maintaining independence from the West; 2. expanding Iran's relationship with foreign groups which adhere to Iran's worldview, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, 3. providing Iran plausible deniability during open conflict with the adversaries, 4. reducing political costs of foreign engagement; and 5. addressing Iran's desperate need for allies.

I. Defining Iranian Power

Power corresponds to "the relative, usable assets that a state can bring to bear upon its foreign policy".³² This definition of power rests on four assumptions: 1. power is relative, 2. power is the possession of specific assets, 3. power is multidimensional and not limited to military power and wealth, and 4. power is dynamic. The sources of power included to meet this definition are geography, population dynamics, economic assets, military capabilities, and alliances.

1. Geography

³² Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015). 55.

Iran is first and foremost the most dominant power in the Persian Gulf, one of Iran's most important geopolitical advantages. The Islamic Republic is a mountainous plateau with plains to the southeast and west, the Caspian Sea to the north, and the Persian Gulf to the south. These features afford Iran key opportunities and benefits. In the west of the country, the Zagros Mountain provides a barrier against invasion. Similarly, much of the central plateau is made up of two uninhabitable deserts, the Dasht-e Kavir and the Dasht-e Lut. Furthermore Iran is 1,684,000 square kilometers, larger than the combined territories of France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Portugal.³³ These factors of mountains, central wastelands, and overall size make Iran difficult to conquer. Still, Iran's geography contributes to key vulnerabilities. In the 1940s, the Soviet Union occupied Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in the 1940s. The most important vulnerability is the Khuzestan Province which is part of the fertile plain of the Mesopotamian basin. The province sits beyond the Zagros mountain range and extends into the southwest corner of Iran. The province's oil wealth and Arab minority, combined with its separation from the mountainous heart of Iran—and proximity to the Arab Gulf—contributes to Khuzestan's status as the Iranian province most prone to volatility.

These aspects of Iranian geography define Iranian power projection. Iran has never been a maritime power because of its geography: Iran's heart is located in the mountains.³⁴ Iran has a direct stake in developments in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia because of it shares land borders with seven states (Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan) and maritime borders with six states in the Persian Gulf (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman).

³³ "The Geopolitics of Iran: Holding the Center of a Mountain Fortress," Stratfor, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/article/geopolitics-iran-holding-center-mountain-fortress>.

³⁴ "The Geopolitics of Iran: Holding the Center of a Mountain Fortress," Stratfor, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/article/geopolitics-iran-holding-center-mountain-fortress>.

2. Population Dynamics

Iran is the eighteenth most populous country in the world (as of 2022) with 83 million people.³⁵ Its population is larger than that of France and Germany, is comparable to that of Turkey, and exceeds that of the combined populations of Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman). In the 1980s, 400,000 male Iranians reached conscription age annually, a rate more than double that of Iraq at the time. This population edge was a significant factor that enabled the young Islamic Republic to weather devastating attacks against a superior military in the Iran-Iraq War. However, population dynamics also represent some risks of internal instability. Ethnic Persians represent more than half of the population and dominate the economy and government, which has contributed to simmering resentment in minority areas. While most ethnic minority groups within Iran don't call for secession and rather seek respect for their rights, the possibility of instability is a latent weakness which could result in diverting resources or external intervention.³⁶

Trends in population also matter as “anticipations of popular growth create expectations of growing power”.³⁷ In line with this thinking, the Iranian government encouraged high birth rates in the 1980s with the mindset that a large population signaled strength. In the four decades after the 1979 revolution, the Iranian population doubled.³⁸ Family planning, however, became a revitalized government policy in 1989 in order to avoid overtaxing social services and the

³⁵ “Population by Country (2022) - Worldometer,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/>.

³⁶ “Iran Minorities 2: Ethnic Diversity,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/sep/03/iran-minorities-2-ethnic-diversity>.

³⁷ Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 57.

³⁸ “Iran’s Declining Birth Rate Alarms Country’s Leaders | Middle East | News and Analysis of Events in the Arab World | DW | 30.07.2020,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-birth-rate-decline/a-54371973>.

education system.³⁹ In the last twenty years birth rates have declined, but Iran’s total population is projected to reach 100 million in the next thirty years.⁴⁰

3. Economic Power

Endowed with abundant hydrocarbon resources and a large, well-educated population, Iran’s economic *potential* is high. Iran’s hydrocarbon reserves constitute its main source of actual and potential economic power and it boasts the world's second largest combined reserves of oil and natural gas. This reserve totals 157 billion barrels of oil—the fourth largest in the world and the equivalent of 11 percent of the world’s reserves—and 948 trillion cubic feet of natural gas—the second largest in the world and equivalent to 16 percent of world reserves.⁴¹ The benefits of this energy wealth were clear in 2001 as a “massive inflow of hard currency” accompanied a sharp rise in global oil prices.⁴² This hard currency provided Tehran with the funds to rapidly increase government spending. This short-term benefit can be a vulnerability, however, as Iran is over-reliant on oil revenues to fund key projects related to its regional power projection. This over-reliance was demonstrated in 2019 when U.S.-led sanctions targeted Iran’s energy sector and Iran’s annual revenue dropped by 50 percent.⁴³ The rift between Iran’s potential and actual economic strength exposes important weaknesses in Iran’s economic power.

In the four decades since the 1979 Revolution, the availability of quick cash from oil exports has masked deeply-ingrained economic issues. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Iranian economy struggled to recover from the shocks of revolution and war with Iraq. The

³⁹ Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, “IRAN’S FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAM: RESPONDING TO A NATION’S NEEDS,” n.d., 8.

⁴⁰ “Iran’s Population to Reach 100m in 3 Decades: Official - Tehran Times,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/425302/Iran-s-population-to-reach-100m-in-3-decades-official>.

⁴¹ “Iran Oil Reserves, Production and Consumption Statistics - Worldometer,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/iran-oil/>. and Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 67.

⁴² Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 66.

⁴³ “Country Analysis Executive Summary: Iran,” n.d., 11.

presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) centered on policies of economic “reconstruction” and did achieve some real successes. But, when oil prices fell to \$10 per barrel in late 1990s, Iran experienced negative growth and per capita income in 2001 was lower than prior to 1979. This turned around in the years 2001-2009 when oil revenue saw a 44 percent increase (totaling \$360 billion), and GDP increased 81 percent. While graced with a massive natural resource in its oil and natural gas reserves, Iran’s economic strength shows relative weakness from its over-reliance on an ever-fluctuating global oil market.⁴⁴

While Iran’s oil and natural gas reserves provide profound *potential* economic power, in recent years its actualization into a stable source of economic power has diminished. Iran’s “aging and inefficient refineries can’t meet its swelling demand for gasoline”.⁴⁵ More worrisome for Iran’s leaders is that as domestic consumption continues to increase by 5 percent annually while exports have steadily decreased. A significant investment of capital and technological advancement is needed to reverse declining production in oil fields, the likelihood for which is low given the lack of discretionary funds available to the Islamic Republic during this period of crippling sanctions. Without an overhaul of the production system, Iran’s oil reserves will remain underexploited and Iran’s economic strength will remain sub-optimal.⁴⁶

Although a significant factor, Iran’s oil and natural gas reserves are but one aspect of a structurally weak economy. Inflation reached an average of fifteen percent between 2001-2009 and has soared to thirty six percent in January 2022.⁴⁷ Government subsidies for energy and basic necessities have contributed to a serious issue of energy overuse (\$30 billion per year) and have

⁴⁴ This over-reliance is clear: “oil exports accounted until 2011 for about 80 percent of export earnings and 60 percent of state revenue” from Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 69.

⁴⁵“Why Is an Oil-Rich Nation like Iran Importing so Much Gasoline?,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/11/why-is-an-oil-rich-nation-like-iran-importing-so-much-gasoline.html>.

⁴⁶ Annual production has remained stagnant around 4million bpd since 2001.

⁴⁷“Iran Inflation Rate - January 2022 Data - 1957-2021 Historical - February Forecast,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/inflation-cpi>.

“mortgage[d] the country’s future”.⁴⁸ Although each five-year plan published by the government since 1979 has contained the goal of strengthening and diversifying the country’s manufacturing base, Tehran has been unable to rebalance its revenue sources and move away from oil. Behind a facade of easy access cash and economic growth during periods of oil price increases, Iranian economic power is fragile and long-term economic sustainability has been ill-prioritized.

4. Military capabilities

Military Capabilities: Iran and its Neighbors⁴⁹

	Iran	GCC Totals	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar
Active Personnel	523,000	374,800	227,000	63,000	8,200	17,500	42,600	16,500
Reserve Personnel	350,000	23,700	--	--	--	23,700	--	--
Main Battle Tanks	1,513	1,937	900	385	180	293	117	62
Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicles	610	1,766	760	405	67	492	2	40
Armored Personnel Carriers	640	3,121	1,340	928	203	260	200	190
Multiple Rocket Launchers	1,476	194	60	88	13	27	108	6
Combat Aircraft	336	748	407	156	38	66	63	18
Submarines	21	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Major Surface to Air Missiles	205	296	236	14	6	40	--	--
Attack Helicopters	--	--	35	--	28	16	--	--
Destroyers	--	3	3	--	--	--	--	--

⁴⁸ This has been done, particularly during the Ahmadinejad presidency, to appease voters and accomplish vows to improve social justice. From Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 68.

⁴⁹ Anthony H Cordesman, “Iran and the Changing Military Balance in the Gulf,” n.d., 262.

Iran has high potential military power from its endowment of geographically protected territory, energy wealth, and large population. Like the rift between Iran's potential and actual economic power, however, Iran's military capabilities contain serious structural weaknesses. To maximize what capabilities remain available to the regime, Iran has developed a novel regional strategy which hinges on asymmetric and retaliatory capabilities. This strategy was formed through the conflicts it participated in after the 1979 Revolution.

The security environment after 2001 was a special time for Iran's military. The Islamic Republic benefited from regional changes and Iran's defense budget doubled.⁵⁰ However, between 2001 and 2009 the manpower of Iran's armed forces barely changed, increasing only by 3,000 to 523,000 total. Still, Iran's status in the region increased dramatically in relative terms. When State B collapses, the power of State A vastly increases in relative terms even if A's power has not changed in absolute terms. This scenario occurred not once, but twice, to Iran after 2001. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, replacement governments to the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regimes, respectively, were weaker and less hostile to Iran. Even more beneficial for Iran, the defeat of Hussein's forces in 2003 created a large vacuum. Although the Taliban army was dwarfed by Hussein's, their antagonistic relationship with Iran at the time nonetheless previously guaranteed a check on Iranian power to its eastern border. No longer checked by either, Iran's military rose in relative power. Today Iran's activity-duty forces total 575,000 and rank as the seventh largest in the world.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Iran does not publish official defense budget figures. Estimates are derived from *Military Balance*.

⁵¹ "Active Military Manpower (2022)," accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/active-military-manpower.php>.

Despite holding some quantitative advantages, in qualitative terms the Iranian Armed Forces suffers from growing weaknesses. The Islamic Republic has enjoyed the largest land force in the region since the fall of Hussein's army. Between 2001-2009 its stock of armored vehicles increased to 600 armored personnel carriers, a key improvement in conventional capabilities. Ninety-five percent of Iran's approximate 900 multiple rocket launchers are light versions (either 107 or 122 millimeter (mm)) compared to Saudi Arabia's 60 units of the more advanced ASTROS II system (127 mm to 450 mm) and Kuwait's twenty seven 300 mm launchers. Similarly, although Iran maintains a numerical advantage in artillery and main battle tanks (MBTs), weak mobility and lack of firepower downgrades the effectiveness of its equipment. For example, Iran's ground forces are dominated by infantry units with towed, and less mobile, artillery; the stock of self-propelled artillery held by the Iranian Armed Forces is only estimated to be around 310. GCC states, at the same time, have fewer but more advanced—and mobile—self-propelled artillery. Iran's armed forces rely on stock acquired in the 1970s from Western suppliers which suffer from severe shortages of spare parts, poor maintenance, and low reliability. This level of obsolescence is the leading cause of the regime's overall weakness in military equipment.

The capabilities of Iran's naval force have not changed substantially since 2001. Iran's navy includes three Kilo-class submarines, seven missile frigates, and three gun corvettes. Much of these are obsolete.⁵² These ten surface combatants have received minimal upgrades since the revolution, and little is publicly known about the Russian-acquired submarines. Iran's navy includes no aircraft carriers, helicopter carriers, or destroyers.⁵³ With these minimal capabilities, the navy is ill-prepared to “conduct and sustain even minimal operations, including amphibious

⁵²Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 62.

⁵³ “2022 Iran Military Strength,” accessed February 25, 2022, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=iran.

operations of more than one brigade”.⁵⁴ Navies of the GCC states are more advanced technologically and numerically as they have increased the total number of surface ships and principal surface combatants by more than 50 percent. The U.S. Fifth Fleet stationed in Bahrain further dwarfs the Iranian Navy.

The Iranian Air Force represents some of the key challenges faced by Iran’s equipment shortage. Roughly two-thirds of Iran’s fleet of combat aircraft are F-4, F-5, and F-14 jets acquired from the U.S. in the 1970s. Of those, many are not operational and others have a 50-60 percent serviceability rate. Furthermore, Iran’s air force has more than eighty-five transport aircraft (many are Hercules from the 1970s) and only seven tanker aircraft.⁵⁵ The capabilities of Iran’s air force, then, is not uniformly composed and reliant upon combat aircraft from different eras and countries. This fact, and the technological challenges facing its older craft, draw into question Iran’s offensive strike capability against its adversaries.

After witnessing the damage wrought by the U.S. Air Force in Iraq, Iran put air defense at the center of its strategy of deterrence. Improvements have come with the acquisition of longer-range more reliable SA-15 Gauntlet and SA-22 Greyhound systems bought from Russia since 2007 and the “dispersion and protection of its air defenses”.⁵⁶ The largest advancement in Iranian air defense came in 2016 when Iran purchased from Russia the SA-300 system. This brought increased mobility and accuracy.⁵⁷ The key improvements of Iran’s air force come from acquiring more advanced defensive missile systems.

Despite this lack of overall conventional military power, Iran has developed a system of unconventional capabilities which can inflict significant damage against neighbors and U.S.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “2022 Iran Military Strength.”

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Russia Completes S-300 Delivery to Iran | Arms Control Association,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/news-briefs/russia-completes-s-300-delivery-iran>.

interests. Heavy emphasis is now placed on mine warfare, anti-ship cruise missiles, and fast boat swarming.⁵⁸ Iran has stockpiled frigates and corvettes capable of mine warfare to both bolster its sea denial operations against more powerful navies and disrupt commercial traffic. These can be laid through helicopters and small-surface vessels.⁵⁹ Tehran has also acquired several hundred coastal defense cruise missiles, small mobile launchers that can be deployed along its coast, and hundreds of Chinese-produced fast missile boats to boost its commando forces to target Gulf oil installations. In total, Iran has increased its patrol and coastal combatants by 400%.⁶⁰

Iran's ballistic missile program is central to its doctrine of asymmetric warfare and has also markedly increased in the previous two decades. Iran now has the largest and most diverse ballistic missile capability in the Middle East with short and medium range missiles (the Shab series), medium range (the Emad, Sajjil, Fateh, Zolfaghar, Dezful, Haj Qasem Soleimani serieses) which can threaten up a range up to 2,000 kilometers.⁶¹ Still, Iran continues to rely on foreign suppliers for key components and the sanctions prohibiting the sale of offensive weapons to Iran will remain a major obstacle in further development.⁶²

Iran remains a relevant regional and international military actor with the capability to challenge, disrupt, and threaten more powerful adversaries. This capability stems from its growing unconventional capabilities which primarily values deterrence, denial, interdiction, and spoiling strategies. Still, Iran's military faces continued structural weaknesses that are exacerbated by a robust international sanctions regime which challenges the development and advancement of its land, naval, and air forces.

⁵⁸American Enterprise Institute, *Iran's Swarm Boat Tactics* | *IN 60 SECONDS*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MSK19RmtwU>.

⁵⁹ Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 62.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 63.

⁶¹ First country to develop a 2,000 km missile without first having a nuclear weapons capability.

⁶²“Iran's Ballistic Missile Program,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program>.

5. Alliances

Iran became an “ascending” power in the twenty-first century. Despite this increase in relative power, Iran remains “bereft of strong, reliable state allies”⁶³. To fill the void of state allies Iran has developed and maintained strong ties to powerful non-state actors across the broader Muslim world, of which the Lebanese Hezbollah is most important. Iran played a key role in Hezbollah’s formation and the group’s ability to remain a formidable military challenge to Israel. Hezbollah now projects Iran’s influence in the Levant. Additionally, Iran has also historically supported a number of Iraqi groups through which Iran has successfully carved out its own power base to influence Iraqi politics. Iran also sponsored groups in the Palestinian Territories, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Bahrain although their respective roles have remained more contained to battlefield campaigns compared to Lebanese and Iraqi allies.

Vital to Iran’s goal of breaking out of international isolation is the regime’s bilateral relationships with Russia and China. These strategic alliances contribute to Iran’s power by weakening the U.S. campaign to isolate Iran entirely and have bolstered Iran’s oil revenues and battlefield campaigns. Both of these UN Security Council members have watered down the strength of the U.S.-led sanctions against Iran and have served as technology and weapons trade partners with Iran. The two superpowers established a policy of hedging and calibrating with Iran. This policy focuses on delaying and weakening sanctions before ultimately signing off with them. This in turn doesn’t antagonize Iran or the U.S. too extremely. Syria continues to be Iran’s only true state ally in the Arab world and the two have maintained strong cooperation for three decades. As a geographical corridor connecting Iran to Hezbollah, the alliance will remain a top Iranian priority.

⁶³Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 71.

Outlook on Iran's Relative Power

In conclusion, Iran's rise in the twenty-first century has expanded the regime's ability to threaten, intimidate, spoil, and deny larger and more powerful militaries in the region. This has come without the complete overhaul necessary to bring its conventional forces to *qualitative* parity with its key rivals. Instead, Iran has invested in a toolkit of unconventional military capabilities composed of asymmetric and retaliatory assets instead of conventional power projection. This toolkit, although formidable, is constrained by structural weaknesses which limit Iran's ability to reach "more constructive goals, yet alone defeat an enemy on a battlefield".⁶⁴ These dynamics solidify Iran's status as a middle power, a sovereign state which holds moderate or large influence, but is still beset with disadvantages and structural weaknesses which keep it below the level of a great power.

II. Status Discrepancy and Iranian Revisionism

Iranian Aspirations

The governing elite in Iran strive for regional power status. This is not unique to the post-1979 period. The country now called the Islamic Republic of Iran was never colonized, unlike many of its neighbors, and it sits as a "Shia and Persian island" surrounded by Sunni Arabs, Turks, and South Asians. Resultantly, Iranian leaders and many among the general population hold close to a strong sense of distinctiveness. Stemming from this history and culture, and typical of any middle power in international politics, the Islamic Republic continues to strive to maximize what it views as its rightful sphere of influence in its regional security environment.

⁶⁴ Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 80.

While foreign policy differences of course differ between the pre-revolutionary and post-1979 Iran, it is important to note how the aspiration for regional dominance has remained in essence unchanged. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was convinced of Iran's rightful place as the preeminent regional power, a belief which undergirded his military and economic modernization programs.⁶⁵ These modernization efforts worked within the U.S. framework for the region. Regional aspirations held by leaders in the Islamic Republic since 1979, however, hinge upon Iran's regional prominence through a pan-Islamic and anti-American prism. This revolutionary framework was enshrined within Article 11 of the Islamic Republic's Constitution: "...all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world."⁶⁶

The most aggressive aspects of this ambition for regional dominance were tempered by several factors in the first decades after the 1979 Revolution: 1. the devastating eight-year war with Iraq (1980-1988), 2. the death of Ruhollah Khomeini, and 3. the presidencies of moderate Ali Akbar Hashemi Rajsanjani (1989-97) and reformist Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005). Instead of forming foreign policies designed to violently export Iran's revolution throughout the region, Iran's regional policy shifted toward a more pragmatic and cautious approach which continues today. Iran thus aspires to dominate the Persian Gulf—its immediate neighborhood)—but will accept a role as just *a* pivotal player in the broader Middle East and

⁶⁵ "The Shah of Iran: An Interview with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi," *The New Republic*, December 1, 1973, <https://newrepublic.com/article/92745/shah-iran-mohammad-reza-pahlavi-oriana-fallaci>. The Shah sought to develop Iran, within a 25 year time frame, into one of the world's top 5 most prosperous nations. He also viewed Iran to be the "key to the world" and remained determined to use the full force of his "strict authoritarianism" to enact his reforms.

⁶⁶United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refworld | Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran," Refworld, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b56710.html>.

South Asia, its regional environment. This post-revolutionary approach undergirds the foreign policy consensus within Iran, with adherents in all factions.⁶⁷ With this consensus, Iran still calls on the international community to recognize it as an indispensable state for regional political, security, and economic issues. In fact, a former IRGC commander claimed that the U.S. had “no option” but to recognize Iran’s power as such.

Iran’s Current Regional Status

Iranian leadership perceives that the country’s rightful status as a vital regional power is being denied by the United States and its allies. Much like its regional aspirations, this perception of low status ascription predates the 1979 Revolution. Most poignantly, a broad understanding in Iran was developed, from the fallout of the oil nationalization crisis of 1953, that Britain and the United States refuse to see Iran develop into a stronger and more independent state. The international alliance which lined up in defense of Iraq, the aggressor of the Iran-Iraq War, during the 1980s supported this understanding. This is a throughline that continues into 2022. More examples include George H. W. Bush’s exclusion of Iran in the war effort to expel Iraq from Kuwait in 1991—despite its promises that no regional state would be excluded—and the far-ranging sanctions regime crippling Iran’s economy today.⁶⁸

Emblematic of Iran’s perception of the status ascribed to it by the U.S. is what Ali Larijani, former Speaker of Iran’s parliament and nuclear negotiator, dubbed the U.S. “theory of denial”.⁶⁹ Concordant with this theory is the fact that the U.S. will not accept an independent

⁶⁷ Former commander of the IRGC Mohsen Rezaei in 2007: “It is our principle and indisputable right to become a regional power.”. Former chair of the Iranian National Security Council (2007-2013) said in 2008 that regional powers like Iran are emerging as the unipolar era is closing down.

⁶⁸“International Sanctions on Iran | Council on Foreign Relations,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/international-sanctions-iran>.

⁶⁹ Larijani, A. “Global Crises--Global REsponsibilities,” Speech to the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy, 9-11 February.

power in the Middle East and instead seeks “the presence of a totally obedient ally” in Iran.⁷⁰ Through this framework, Iranian leaders see the U.S. as leading a campaign of encirclement surrounding Iran through security partnerships with Israel and subservient Arab regimes. This campaign predominantly works to block Iran’s nuclear development, constrain its influence in Iraq, and refuse Iran a role in the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sanctions, then, serve a dual purpose to prevent the development of Iran’s nuclear capabilities and keep Iran weak, isolated, and under threat. This threat is not limited to external actors; regime leaders in Iran fear internal instability from domestic opposition campaigns supported by the U.S. Government.⁷¹

Arab Gulf states fit into Iran’s low status acription. Resistance to Iranian aspirations have grown among them in recent years and Tehran is convinced that GCC states, buoyed by the United States, seek to marginalize Iran. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf countries fear that Iran’s expanding network of influence will come to their own borders through military confrontation or invasion. Saudi Arabia harbors the most mistrust of Iran which has intensified during the so-called Shadow War between the two since 2015. The five small petro-monarchies also oppose Iran’s ambitions, but also fear becoming collateral damage in a larger U.S.-Iran confrontation. They accordingly hedge their bets, “seeking cordial relations with Tehran while increasing security cooperation with the United States.”⁷²

Status Discrepancy and Revisionism

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹“U.S. Support for the Iranian Opposition,” The Washington Institute, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-support-iranian-opposition>.

⁷²Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 85.

Iran's aspirations exceed its perception of ascribed status. This phenomenon is known as a status discrepancy: Iran perceives that the international community, facilitated by the U.S., denies it the regional power status it is entitled to. This fuels Iranian dissatisfaction with its role in the Middle East and broader Arab World. In response, "Iran adopts policies that are generally consistent with its frustration at being denied the status it aspires to"⁷³. Such frustration has manifested in recent decades with a foreign policy primarily aiming to break Iran out of prolonged isolation and weakness. The aggressiveness of this foreign policy, as compared with Iran's policy during the Iran-Iraq War, has been muted in the previous two decades and can be best described as "limited-aims revisionism". The term limited-aims revisionism conveys that Iran intends to interrupt the status quo of power distribution without violently exporting its brand of government ideology. This understanding of Iran's status discrepancy and the regime's current style of revisionism facilitates a more accurate representation of the motivations dictating Iran's foreign policy choices.

III. Why Militant Clients: Explaining Iran's Key Foreign Policy Choice

Following the revolution in 1979, leaders in Tehran adopted a foreign policy which centered on "national independence, proscribed alliances with foreign powers, rejected the status quo of the international system, and downplayed the importance of close relations with neighboring states"⁷⁴. Accordingly, in the four decades since, Iranian leaders have increased its emphasis on the cultivation of militant clients at the sub-state level in lieu of a broad network of state alliances or cooperative relationship with the greater international community. The Quds Force, a branch within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) responsible for

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," n.d., 160.

extraterritorial operations, heads this strategy. In this thesis, the term “militant client” carries a specific meaning.⁷⁵ “Militant” describes groups sponsored by Iran that have utilized armed violence to specifically advance Iran’s strategic goals as an active participant and combatant in conflict or war. The term “client” is applied to groups conditional on the following three terms: 1. if they rely upon Iranian support as the *predominant* means of outside assistance; 2. if they operate in conjunction with, or report directly to, IRGC commanders in conflict zones; 3. and/or if they control enough key territory (specifically airstrips and borders) to facilitate long-term Iranian ground presence and Iranian military support in their areas.⁷⁶ These parameters dictate a focus on Iran’s strongest relationships in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Additional sub-state recipients of Iranian aid, which do not sufficiently meet the above criterion, have been based in the Palestinian Territories, Afghanistan, and Bosnia.

Tehran’s militant clients strategy in the twenty-first century is best understood as a key pillar of the regime’s grand strategy and a consequence of Iran’s identity as a limited-aims revisionist state. Facing a regional security complex lacking sympathetic allies, forging relationships with like-minded foreign militant groups was the remaining option to secure Iran’s independence from foreign powers and directly counter adversaries like the United States and Israel. From the standpoint of Iranian political leaders, client building has been rational and effective for this reason.⁷⁷ The transition to a more cautious and pragmatic foreign policy after the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq War, alongside a favorable strategic environment after 2001, transformed the centrality of Iran’s militant clients within its foreign policy strategy.

⁷⁵ One of the foremost scholars on Iranian foreign policy, and Iran’s network of clients, is Afshon Ostovar. I base my definition of “militant clients” off of his published work.

⁷⁶ Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War,” 167.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 162.

How Militant Clients Were First Chosen

Military leaders in Tehran began penning its strategy with militant clients in the first days of the revolutionary period in 1979. Instead of joining the folds of the status quo and pursuing cooperative relations with foreign powers following up the success of the revolution, Iran's leaders first strove to forcibly bring the region into accord with its government ideology. The IRGC monthly publication, *Payam-e Enqelab*, published this sentiment in its April 1980 issue:

We will export our revolution throughout the world. As our revolution is Islamic, the struggle will continue until the call of 'There is no God but God' echoes around the globe. We have no recourse... and must, with the mobilization of forces in every region, strike fear in the hearts of our enemies so that the idea of invasion and destruction of the Islamic revolution will exit [their minds].⁷⁸

This rhetoric further isolated Iran and antagonized its established adversaries, and in so doing guaranteed the long-term reliance on foreign militant organizations to serve as the so-called "mobilization forces in every region".

Building Clients in Iraq

The Iran-Iraq War contributed significantly to Tehran's militant client strategy. Most importantly, the imbalance of foreign backing during the war solidified the belief in Iran's leaders that "a global cabal by the United States and supported by regional states would stop at

⁷⁸ *Payam-e Enqelab*, no. 5, April 1980, p.39.

little—even total war—to defeat the Islamic revolution”.⁷⁹ During the protracted armed conflict Iraq received billions of dollars worth of financial loans, political backing, intelligence support, and military sales from an array of allies including the U.S., France, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Similar levels of support were not available to Iran. This sense of imbalance and injustice was compounded by Iraq’s chemical weapons campaigns, which relied upon U.S. reconnaissance intelligence and did not face substantive scrutiny by the international community.⁸⁰ The experience during the Iran-Iraq War hardened feelings of alienation toward the international community and “reinforced the necessity of self-reliance in international affairs”.⁸¹

The form of Iran’s militant clients in Iraq took distinct shape in into two main time periods: 1. the Iran-Iraq War during the 1980s and 2. after the toppling of Hussein in 2003. While the Islamic Republic relied most heavily on its own soldiers during the Iran-Iraq War, it still organized Iraqi Shiite expatriates and prisoners of war to cultivate its first clients: the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Badr Corps, the armed wing of SCIRI. The Badr Corps became the most strategically important client for Iran and the group became a division within the IRGC and remained under its command through the 1990s. At first Badr’s impact was limited to modest cross-border operations against Iraqi forces, but its value to Iran ascended after the fall of Hussein’s power in 2003. After 2003 Iran’s Iraqi clients grew into a “formidable mechanism of covert and overt influence in Iraq”.⁸² Although SCIRI and the Badr Corps have since split, Iran remains the leading sponsor to an array of splintered co-religionist groups with considerable influence in Iraq, particularly Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Ketaib Hezbollah. One of Iran’s main levers of influence in Iraq in 2022 is through the Popular Mobilization Forces

⁷⁹ Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War,” 173.

⁸⁰“Exclusive: CIA Files Prove America Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran – Foreign Policy,” accessed February 24, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/26/exclusive-cia-files-prove-america-helped-saddam-as-he-gassed-iran/>.

⁸¹ Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War,” 173.

⁸² Ibid, 174.

(PMF), an umbrella network which largely centralized Iraqi militias. The PMF gained standing after gradual successes against ISIS in 2016, received formal recognition by Iraq's parliament, and became an official state military force.

The Hezbollah Model

Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 served as an additional opportunity for the IRGC to apply its militant client policy. Later branded Hezbollah, the IRGC helped arm, train, and provide logistical support to Lebanese Shiite militants. Hezbollah gradually grew into the most powerful political organization in Lebanon and maintained this status when it was exempted from disarmament requirements in the Taif Agreement of 1989, which ended the Lebanese Civil War. Hezbollah cultivates strong loyalty within the Lebanese Shiite, and to a smaller extent other Lebanese communities, through its expansive social welfare, security, and commercial roles. An adherent of Iran's foundational ideology (*wilayat-al faqih*), and with its military strength established through confrontations with Israel, Hezbollah has most successfully accomplished Iran's strategy as a militant client and consolidated significant political power within Lebanon. The group has since expanded its footprint beyond Lebanon's borders and serves as a training force for other co-religionist clients throughout the region. Iran provides support to Hezbollah through a land corridor with Syria, and in order to protect this easy access Hezbollah fighters were deployed to defend Bashar al-Asad regime during the Syrian Civil War.

Syria: In Defense of its One True Ally

Military and political leadership in Iran viewed unrest in Syria during the Arab Spring as a grave threat to Iranian national security. As a conduit for support to Hezbollah, and an adherent

to Tehran's anti-Israel agenda, Syria has served as Iran's strongest and arguably lone true state ally. The Iranian perception of Syria's territorial importance cannot be overstated. The current head of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization, while serving as the commander of the IRGC's Basij paramilitary division, said that Syria was more vital to Iran's security than Iran's Khuzestan's region. He continued: "If the enemy attacks and aims to capture both Syria and Khuzestan, our priority would be Syria. Because if we hold on to Syria, we would be able to retake Khuzestan; yet if Syria were lost, we would not be able to keep even Tehran".⁸³ The importance of Syria to Iran's regional footprint brought the IRGC's client-cultivating strategy to Syria.

Iran's role during the Syrian Civil War began with sending weapons and personnel in the form of IRGC officers in March 2011. To mitigate its own loss of personnel and quell domestic worries over Iranian citizens dying to fight Asad's war, the IRGC transitioned to facilitating the entry of Lebanese and Iraqi clients into the war. At the same time the IRGC trained pro-Asad Syrians to form the National Defense Forces (NDF) which served under the IRGC. The deployment of Iran's other foreign brigades and the training of the NDF served to increase the IRGC's control over the fight while simultaneously minimizing the casualties of Iranian citizens.⁸⁴

Yemen: The Houthis as Spoilers

Iran's assistance for Ansar Allah (the Houthis) against the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen solidified the transition of Iran's militant clients from operating in the shadows to participating as

⁸³ Translated: Head of Ammar Base: Our Priority is Defending Syria Over Khuzestan, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml; <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20477/>

⁸⁴ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," 177.

key belligerents in the open battlefield. Although the IRGC has a lighter footprint in Yemen than in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, it remains the dominant sponsor of the Houthis. Yemen was not historically central to Iran's regional strategy, but as tensions with Riyadh rose in the previous decade it became an efficient arena for Tehran to spoil Saudi policy and drain the Kingdom's resources. The exact nature of Iranian support during the war has proven elusive, but thus far Iran has been successful in using the sub-state group to bog down a larger adversary.

Militant Client's Value in Aggregate

Conflict zones and wars across the Middle East in the past four decades have provided an environment into which Iran has expanded its network of militant clients. While limited at first to few groups in Iraq and Lebanon during the 1980s and 1990s, Iran's client network has spread into a formidable transnational force. In fact, Iran's militant client program has been ascendant in the 21st century and, absent strong security guarantors and nuclear weapon capabilities, remains the most important of its three pronged approach to defense and deterrence.⁸⁵ Iran has relied on and developed militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen to serve five key national security interests consistent with Iran's grand strategy: 1. maintaining independence from the West; 2. exporting its worldview to foreign Shiite communities, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon; 3. providing Iran plausible deniability during confrontations with Iran's enemies; 4. reducing political costs of foreign engagement; and 5. addressing Iran's need for allies.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ The other two prongs are Iran's ballistic missile program and cyber-warfare capabilities.

⁸⁶ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," 180-4,

Outlook

Iran faced an opportunity to actualize its regional aspirations during the twenty-first century when its relative power in the Middle East increased. With a perception of its rightful status being systematically denied by the United States and its allies, Iran used this opportunity to invest in its unconventional military capabilities. In this chapter I have discussed the factors which drove Iran to make its key foreign policy choice: the cultivation of a network of like-minded and sympathetic clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. These clients have since become the key pillar of Iran's grand strategy, Tehran's main tool to reject the status quo of power distribution in the Middle East, and have successfully solidified their positions as key players in the political and security landscapes of each host country.

Introduction: Militant Clients as Part and Parcel of Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's foreign policy in the last three decades has centered on countering the status quo of power distribution in the Middle East. To do so, Iran has activated the IRGC to establish a transnational network of militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. This network is a key pillar of Iran's grand strategy: the regime's long-term plan to advance and achieve its highest priorities.⁸⁷ This claim challenges the notion that Iran's militant clients are aberrations in international politics or purely ideological extremists. Instead, the clients are strong Iranian allies that convert battlefield successes into a consolidation of political power which maximizes Iran's regional influence. To defend that Iran's militant clients should be defined as part of the regime's grand strategy, this chapter will comprehensively cover Iran's clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. To do so the forthcoming subsections will discuss Iran's interests, the history of militant clients, and the lessons for Iranian foreign policy in each country.

Iraq: Reshaping a Historically Antagonistic Relationship

Summary of Iran's Interest in Iraq

Iran and Iraq's history spans centuries, empires, and revolutions. The border between the two is the largest for both and the states are further bound by cultural and religious heritage. Shi'ites constitute between 55-60% of the total Iraqi population in 2022. It is important to note that Iran's political and military involvement in Iraq is not a phenomenon limited to the post-1979 period. During the Ottoman-Persian Wars of the 16th and 17th Century the two fought for control of the strategically important Shatt al-Arab, a dispute which continued through the

⁸⁷ For more on grand strategy I recommend: *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198840299.001.0001> ; and Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy,'" *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 27–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073>.

late twentieth century. In recent years Iran has used the Shatt al-Arab, which constitutes its border with Iraq and flows down into the Persian Gulf, to transport a high quantity of its crude oil.⁸⁸ The Khuzestan Province is another historical flashpoint. Khuzestan is the Iranian province with the oldest history and is referred to as the “birthplace of the nation”. Iraq lays claim to the province as well because of its significant Arab minority and Iraq invaded the province during the Iran-Iraq War.

Since 2003 Iran has pursued two primary interests in Iraq: 1. expanding economic ties and political influence through the Shi’a community and 2. moderating the strength of the Iraqi to prevent it from threatening Iran again as it did during Saddam Hussein’s rule. With the toppling of Hussein’s regime, Iran seized an opportunity to ensure that Iraq would not continue as the largest threat to Iranian security. In the post-Baathist period solidifying Iraq as a diminished threat was Iran’s primary goal. Still, stability serves Iran’s political and economic interests. Supreme Leader Khomeini has gone so far as to say that “Iran recognizes the security of Iraq...as its own security”.⁸⁹ To maximize this perceived interwoven security, Iran has become Iraq’s second largest trading partner and the Iraqi financial system has eased the toll of Western sanctions.⁹⁰ Further, Iran hopes to maintain Iraq’s territorial integrity as it pertains to its minority communities. Taken together, Iran’s interest in Iraq is that of “qualified stability” where Iran can benefit economically and politically from a friendly relationship without fearing Iraq militarily.

History of Iran’s Client Development in Iraq

1. 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s: Hussein, War, Occupation, and Expansion

⁸⁸“Iraq-Iran: From Water Dispute to War | Climate-Diplomacy,” accessed March 17, 2022, <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/iraq-iran-water-dispute-war>.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Mohammad Ali Shabani, “Making Sense of Iran’s Iraq Policy,” n.d., 8.

The Islamic Republic's militant client strategy originated in Iraq during the earliest days of the revolutionary period. During the Iran-Iraq War, regime leadership instructed the IRGC to organize Iraqi Shiite expatriates and prisoners of war into the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI became Iran's first Iraqi client and trained its armed wing, the Badr Corps. Of the two, Badr assumed a more strategically important role for Iran and even received training from the Quds Force of the IRGC to attempt an overthrow of Hussein.⁹¹ Badr remained under direct command of the IRGC through the 1990s.

The U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003 "was the single most important event in the transformation of Iran's client strategy".⁹² Iran's clientage grew at this time into a formidable mechanism of covert and overt influence in Iraq. During 2003-2011 Iran's clients served two purposes simultaneously: 1. fill the power vacuum to facilitate the expansion of Iranian power in post-Baathist Iraq and 2. directly harass foreign actors hostile to Iran. Through this experience Iran's Iraqi clients grew in sophistication, capability, and relevance.

SCIRI and Badr made inroads into the new Iraqi political (SCIRI) and security (Badr) sectors, respectively, along with the Dawa Party and other Shiite groups. Although SCIRI distanced itself from Iran in 2007 and downplayed its former embrace of the Khomeinist style theocracy, Badr remains closely allied with Tehran and has expanded its mission beyond the security sector. It has thoroughly integrated into the post-2003 political order and now controls the Interior Ministry, Iraq's largest ministry. Additional Iraqi militant clients are Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asai'b al-Haq, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. Through this array of militant clients, Iran has provided various Iraqi clients with rocket-propelled munitions and other weaponry that solidified these clients as significant actors in Iraq political and military affairs.

⁹¹ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies," 31.

⁹² Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2019): 174.

The array of Shiite clients which have operated in Iraq since the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime are a product of the Baathist brutality of the 1990s and the disorder and violence of the U.S. Occupation. United in grievances and a sense of victimhood, these groups serve to prevent a Baathist resurrection, which is how the Shiite militias frames the emergence of ISIS, and to maintain the power secured for Iraqi Shiites after 2003⁹³. These groups are not inclined or qualified to engage in governance, but specialize in armed conflict and the underground economy. This can be seen in their shows of intimidation and retaliation during Iraqi elections.⁹⁴ A symptom of large-scale state collapse and institutional failure, these armed state groups have filled the vacuum brought forth by the U.S.-led regime change.

2. 2010s-Present: Consolidation

2014 marked the next transformation of Iran's militant clients in Iraq. Through conflict with ISIL, Iraq's armed militias emerged in place of the struggling state armed forces. Although the Iraqi armed forces have since recovered, the state's weakness at the time "allowed many of these paramilitary groups to continue to control territory in liberated areas from Mosul to Kirkuk".⁹⁵ After Iraq's top cleric issued a call to arms against ISIL, more than sixty Shi'a militant groups joined the conflict. These factions emerged under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a group which was established by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki after the fall of Mosul and was composed of 60,000 fighters in the Spring of 2015. Although composed of three distinct factions with competing allegiances, "the most powerful

⁹³ Ranj Alaaldin and Sumaya Attia, "Shiite Militias in Iraq: Why Context Matters," *Brookings* (blog), May 11, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/shiite-militias-in-iraq-why-context-matters/>.

⁹⁴ "In Iraq, Powerful Militias Kill Protesters with Impunity - The Washington Post," accessed March 17, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-militia-assassinations-fear/2021/05/12/501474c0-b1cc-11eb-bc96-fdf55de43bef_story.html.

⁹⁵ "More Than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces Are Here to Stay - War on the Rocks," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>.

groups and leaders in the PMF come from a network of conservative Shia Islamists who enjoy good relations with Khomeini and the regime in Tehran”.⁹⁶ PMF forces served on the front lines of most of the initial fighting, played a key role in the liberation of territory, and have since recruited local fighters to serve as a *de facto* national guard.

Composed of a fluid network of primarily Shi’a groups—including the Badr Corps, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba—the PMF has resisted attempts to fully integrate into the Iraqi armed forces. Instead, the group has reached greater institutionalization while maintaining some level of autonomy. The Iraqi parliament recognized the PMF as a legitimate armed entity linked to the Commander-in-Chief, which has solidified the PMF as an “independent entity parallel to the traditional security agencies...no longer interested in the previous options for integration”.⁹⁷ In this context, “The Iraqi state is best understood as a network of power and the PMF as an array of forces connected to this network”. With the greater consolidation of Iran’s clients in Iraq into the PMF force, Iran has accumulated greater influence in the operations of the Iraqi state.⁹⁸

Lessons for Iran’s foreign policy

Since 2003 Iran has fared well in maximizing its power, security, and influence in Iraq. The Islamic Republic did so by preventing the further disintegration of Iraqi sovereignty while simultaneously harassing and threatening the expansion of the U.S military presence. Iran further established itself as an indispensable player in Iraqi political affairs and outmaneuvered its Sunni

⁹⁶ Ibid.; Renad Mansour Jabar Faleh A., “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future,” Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed March 17, 2022,

<https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ “Networks of Power,” Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, February 25, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/networks-power>.

Arab neighbors in doing so.⁹⁹ Through its connections to both elected and unelected authority in Iraq, Iran has pursued an agenda of “decision-shaping”. These successes became possible because of the connection to Shi’a militant groups, a relationship which began during the earliest days of the Islamic Republic. From this foundation these groups have grown in power and capacity after the toppling of the Hussein regime. Through these militant clients Iran has a button which can be pressed to confront, intimidate, eliminate, or injure actors it sees as threatening to Iran’s interests. These groups further serve as a buffer that allows Iran to distance itself from blame and international condemnation for human rights abuses.¹⁰⁰

More than all other factors, Iran benefits from a relatively weak and more cooperative Iraq. This is a complete reversal from Iran-Iraq relations for the first two decades of the Islamic Republic. Iran is satisfied with the so-called “qualified stability” which ensures economic cooperation and political influence while simultaneously guaranteeing that Iraq cannot threaten Iran as it did from 1980-2003.¹⁰¹ Inspired to not recreate the American experience in Iraq, Iran would prefer to *manage* rather than *own* Iraq and not be bogged down in a quagmire. This demonstrates a key lesson from Iran’s foreign policy: its strength is in taking advantage of its adversaries’ foreign policy mistakes. Iran’s militant clients in Iraq, armed groups which are not trained in or inclined to take the responsibility of governing, serve this purpose effectively and will accordingly remain central to Iran’s foreign policy in Iraq for the foreseeable future.

Lebanon: Hezbollah as the Model Militant Client

⁹⁹ “How Saudi Arabia Pushed Iraq Into the Arms of Iran - Lawfare,” accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-saudi-arabia-pushed-iraq-arms-iran>.

¹⁰⁰ Attia, “Shiite Militias in Iraq.”

¹⁰¹ Shabani, “Making Sense of Iran’s Iraq Policy.”; Afshon Ostovar, “Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1237–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/ijy185>.

Iran's Interests in Lebanon

The Shiite community equals Lebanon's Sunni population, making up 31.2% of the overall population, and serves as Iran's connection to the country. Iran-Lebanon relations transformed after Iran fostered the foundation of Hezbollah in 1982. Operational and financial support from Iran has shaped Hezbollah into a powerful militia and an ongoing, strong deterrent against Israel. Throughout the period of civil war in the 1980s, Hezbollah's military development and successes brought the group notoriety and infamy. As it stands today, Hezbollah has been called the "world's most heavily armed non-state actor" and "a militia trained like an army and equipped like a state".¹⁰² With this status Hezbollah provides Iran with invaluable access to pursue its interests in the Levant and will be a major component of any conflict involving Iran.

Although not adjacent by border, through the Shia community Lebanon has become a focal point of Iran's foreign policy.¹⁰³ Iran's involvement in Lebanon, particularly through the military and religious development of Lebanon's Shiite militias, has made Hezbollah the regime's most valuable strategic investment.¹⁰⁴ Leadership in Iran perceives three major interests to be served through its relationship with Hezbollah: 1. Creating a front through which to deter and threaten Israel, 2. Bolstering Iran's ability to defend the Assad regime in Syria, and 3. heightening Iran's relevance to the West, particularly the U.S., through greater proximity to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

¹⁰² "Hezbollah's Missiles and Rockets," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/hezbollahs-missiles-and-rockets>.

¹⁰³ "Lebanon People 2020, CIA World Factbook," accessed March 17, 2022.; "Lebanon - United States Department of State," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/lebanon/>.

¹⁰⁴ Afshon Ostovar, Rebecca Edelston, and Michael Connell, "On Shifting Sands: Iranian Strategy in a Changing Middle East," 26.

History of the Iran-Hezbollah Relationship

1982 was a key year in the Iran-Lebanon relationship. Clerics of the Da'wa Party, many of whom studied under Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, organized Lebanese Shi'a into what was later publicly unveiled three years later as Hezbollah. At this time Iran deployed 1,5000 Revolutionary Guards forces to Lebanon's Bekka Valley to develop Hezbollah's military wing.¹⁰⁵ Through this relationship Hezbollah served to bridge Shiite Arab-Persian divides, and establish Iran's militant client strategy beyond Iraq.

Hezbollah established itself as the strongest foreign adherent to the revolutionary ideology of the nascent Islamic Republic. The 1985 Open Letter penned by Hezbollah outlined the group's vision and mirrored Iranian revolutionary language. The Open Letter first and foremost speaks to the factor which most contributed to the sympathy held by the Lebanese Shi'a for Iran's revisionism: a deep sense of Shi'a victimhood. Inspired by the Islamic Republic's proclamation to be in defense of the oppressed, Hezbollah considered itself a continuation of the Islamic revolution "made victorious by Iran".¹⁰⁶ The group accordingly instituted much of Iran's ideology. Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah declared that the party's "leadership, direction, mandate, decisions of war and peace, and so on, is in the hand of the *Wali al-Faqih*", a claim repped and maintained by Nasrallah in the subsequent three decades.¹⁰⁷ Strengthened by Hezbollah's adherence to *Wilayat al-Faqih* ideology, Iran seized this opportunity to establish Hezbollah as a militant client successfully pursuing Iranian interests outside of the Persian Gulf.

Key victories for Hezbollah against Israel, as well as the group's political enshrinement in Lebanon, has strengthened its ability to serve as an effective client for Iran. A turning point for

¹⁰⁵ "Iran and Lebanon," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-lebanon>; These IRGC forces then evolved into the IRGC's Quds Force.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/The%20Hizballah%20Program%20-%20An%20Open%20Letter.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ "About Hezbollah | Hezbollah," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://hezbollah.org/about-hezbollah>.

Iran's ability to benefit from Hezbollah came in 2000. After more than a decade of fighting, the "militia-cum [political] party progressively consolidated its position" when Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah took credit for this withdrawal and used the event to elevate its international status. Hezbollah's status in Lebanon continued to increase in 2005 and 2006, further multiplying Iran's benefits from their relationship. Hezbollah became more directly dependent on Iran in 2005, a net gain for Tehran, as the Cedar Revolution led to the forced withdrawal of the Syrian military from Lebanon. The 2006 Lebanon War, which ended with the withdrawal of most Israeli forces, resulted in major public relations victories for Hezbollah and Iran. With the widespread perception across the Middle East that Hezbollah won the 2006 war, through resisting the air and ground assault by the Israeli Defense Forces, Nasrallah became a hero among Arab populations. In this moment Hezbollah regional appeal was maximized and polls showed that the two most popular leaders in the Arab street with Hezbollah's Nasrallah and Iran's Ahmadinejad.¹⁰⁸ To solidify Iran's gains in popularity at this time, Iran further invested in social services. Within one year of the 2006 war Iran rebuilt 48 mosques and churches, 64 power stations, 149 schools, 504 roads, and 19 bridges.¹⁰⁹ The battlefield successes, and subsequent consolidation of power, of Iran's militant client in Lebanon brought stronger capabilities against Israel as well as new heights of regional sympathy to Tehran.

In total it is estimated that Iran has provided Hezbollah with hundreds of millions of dollars, trained thousands of Hezbollah fighters in Iran, and transferred more than 130,000 rockets and missiles to the group through Syria. This support has contributed to Hezbollah's evolution as the most heavily armed non-state actor in the world. Today, the group's arsenal

¹⁰⁸ "Hizbullah Winning over Arab Street," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 18, 2006, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0718/p01s03-wome.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015). 154.

consists of mostly small, man-portable and unguided surface-to-surface artillery rockets.¹¹⁰

Despite lacking precision, their sheer number make them effective “weapons of terror”. Lacking any air force, Hezbollah prefers ground wars in its own territory to bombardment from the skies.

To guarantee confrontation with Israel through ground forces, Hezbollah utilizes indiscriminate rocket fire from small, easily transportable launchers as well as anti air missile systems¹¹¹.

Hezbollah’s formidable military capability affords Iran a proxy through which it has successfully repelled Israeli occupation and facilitated Iran’s power projection to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

Lessons for Iran’s foreign policy

In accordance with the foundational tenets of its grand strategy and regional ambition, Iran cultivated Lebanese Hezbollah as a militant client. Wartime in the 1980s brought about a strategic opening for Iran through the Lebanese Shi’a community. Through this opening Iran successfully established a strong ally which has tallied battlefield successes and consolidated political power in the last three decades. Hezbollah’s proximity to Israel, and its proclamation of victory against the IDF in 2000 and 2006, enhances Iran’s regional relevance and facilitates a more direct influence for Iran in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most recently, Hezbollah has assumed a role traditionally performed by the elite Quds Force of the IRGC and the led training of other clients in Syria and Yemen. In total, the Iran-Hezbollah relationship advances two key foreign policy priorities for Iran: 1. Enhancing deterrence capability vis-a-vis Israel, 2. extending Iran’s power projection outside of the Persian Gulf..

¹¹⁰“Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah,” Missile Threat, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/hezbollahs-rocket-arsenal/>.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

In many ways Hezbollah exemplifies the optimal outcome for Iran’s militant clients. Hezbollah dwarfs all other Lebanese parties in terms of organization, funding, physical resources, number of followers, and military capabilities.¹¹² This has enshrined the group’s influence “throughout the Lebanese state, from the presidency of the republic to representative political institutions and the civil service, as well as Lebanon’s military and security institutions. Still, it is not in Hezbollah’s—or Iran’s—interest for Hezbollah to seize full control of the government. As a “hybrid actor”, an actor that enjoys legitimacy and operates within and outside the state, Hezbollah can wield power while mitigating the threat of civil war or international sanctions on the country. It can intimidate opponents and serve as the de facto authority in Lebanon without having to address the needs of the citizens at large. This exceptional status for Hezbollah affords Iran unmatched strategic value and serves as a role model for Iran’s long term aspirations for its other militant clients.

Syria: The Establishment of an ‘Axis of Resistance’

Iranian Interests in Syria

Unlike the other host countries for Iran’s militant clients, in Syria Iran has kept a state ally in political and military affairs since the first years of the Islamic Republic’s foundation. This alliance resulted from a shared cause and common enemies. With shared strategic visions and animosity for regional foes, the ostensibly odd pairing has remained vital in securing and expanding each other’s military, political, and economic priorities. Above all, the two cooperated in attempts to contain Iraq.¹¹³ These shared interests have overcome ideological, political, and

¹¹² “How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State,” Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, June 30, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state>.

¹¹³ “Iran and Syria,” accessed February 2, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-syria>.; “During the 1990-1991 Gulf War against Iraq, Syria contributed troops to the U.S.-led coalition and Iran remained neutral. Damascus hoped to reap the benefits of having its agenda included in subsequent Middle East peace efforts, while

religious differences for three decades as only 13% of the population is Shi'a.¹¹⁴ The alliance still provides each with a better chance for survival.¹¹⁵

The prominent interests driving Iran's alliance with Syria center on the strategic value of Syria's geography.. This was communicated recently when the current head of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization, while serving as the commander of the IRGC's Basij paramilitary division, said that Syria was more vital to Iran's security than Iran's Khuzestan's region. He continued: "If the enemy attacks and aims to capture both Syria and Khuzestan, our priority would be Syria. Because if we hold on to Syria, we would be able to retake Khuzestan; yet if Syria were lost, we would not be able to keep even Tehran."¹¹⁶ This is the case because of Iran's use of Syria to reach Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran relies on Syria to transport military equipment and other forms of aid and training to Hezbollah, its strongest important client.¹¹⁷ Without this conduit, regime leaders perceive that its deterrent and retaliation potential against Israel would be seriously diminished. On this topic Ali Akbar Velayati, senior foreign affairs adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, said, "Syria is the golden ring of resistance against Israel, and if it weren't for Syria's active government the country would become like Qatar or Kuwait. Iran is not prepared to lose this golden counterweight". Maintenance of the status quo in Syria, in order to protect this conduit, drives Iran 's multi-billion dollar defense of the Bashar al-Asad regime since 2011.

Iran did not try to check the growing U.S. military presence, in hopes it would ultimately weaken Baghdad's power in the region."

¹¹⁴ 11% are Alawi, 1% are Ismaili, and 0.5% are Twelver.

¹¹⁵ "Iran and Syria," accessed February 2, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-syria>.

¹¹⁶ Translated: Head of Ammar Base: Our Priority is Defending Syria Over Khuzestan, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml;

<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20477/>

¹¹⁷ "The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/hezbollah-connection-syria-and-iran>.; "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks | Middle East Institute," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>.

History of Iran’s Militant Client Strategy in Syria

Foundational to Syria’s ability to serve as a key location for Iran’s militant client strategy is the closeness of the bond between the two governments. The initial appeal which drove Iran toward Syria was its location in the Levant, particularly through its proximity and relationship with Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel. Post-revolutionary Iran provided Syria’s leader, Hafiz al-Asad with an opportunity to counterweight Israel and Iraq and was the first Arab leader to recognize the Islamic Republic. Iran welcomed a partner in opposition to Saddam Hussein and saw Syria as a conduit to the Shia community in Lebanon. The alliance was put into action during the Iran-Iraq War, as Asad was one of the few Arab leaders to side with Iran.

In the first decade after Bashar al-Asad assumed the presidency in 2000, three major events further pulled the two countries together: the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005 after the “Cedar Revolution,” and the 34-day Israel–Hezbollah war in 2006 solidified the Syria–Iran alliance.¹¹⁸ At the same time, Asad struggled to maintain relations with other Arab nations (particularly Saudi Arabia) and the West which were built by his father and Syria.¹¹⁹ This struggle made Asad more reliant on Iran for military and political support. This reliance was codified in 2006 when the Iranian and Syrian defense ministries signed a mutual defense pact.¹²⁰ While details of the agreement were not made public, the countries committed to cooperation against common threats and Iran’s former defense minister went so far as to say, “Iran considers Syria's security its own security, and we consider our defense capabilities to be those of Syria.” To defend what Iranian leaders perceive to be its

¹¹⁸ Mohsen Milani, “Why Tehran Won’t Abandon Assad(ism),” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.861715>, 82.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ “Syria’s Alliance with Iran | United States Institute of Peace,” accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2007/05/syrias-alliance-iran>.

own security interests in Syria, and through general maintenance of the Syrian state, Iran increased its investments in Syria to \$1-3 billion.¹²¹

Iran introduced its militant client strategy to Syria in the context of the Arab Spring when a popular uprising threatened Assad's hold on power. For leadership in the Islamic Republic, protecting Iran's existing relationship with Syria is foundational to Iran's security. This is because Tehran views Syria as the foundation of the 1,600 mile "Corridor of Resistance" which spreads "from Herat in Afghanistan to Iraq to Lebanon to Syria" and it magnifies Iran's strength against the United States and Israel.¹²² This corridor facilitates access to Hezbollah, Iran's strategic prize. Iran's activation of militant clients in Syria fits within this context. To protect the status quo in Syria Iran has pursued two aims through militant clients: 1. the establishment of Syrian domestic clients, and 2. the activation of international foreign fighters.

To develop Syrian clients, Iran encouraged the Shi'a minority in the provinces of Aleppo, Raqqqa, and Deir ez-Zor to form special militias.¹²³ In some cases these militias were, and continue to be, recruited on a sectarian basis "under the pretext of defending holy locations to the Shi'a community."¹²⁴ Recruitment relied on Iranian forces which numbered 2,000 IRGC personnel at its peak.¹²⁵ The solely Shi'a militias in Syria include: the Aleppo branch of the Imam al-Hajjah, the Mahdi Army in Nubul and Zahra, the Damascus branch of the Rukia Brigade, the Idlib branch of the al-Waed al-Sadiq Corps, the Homs branch of the forces of Imam Reza, and others.¹²⁶ The National Defense Forces (NDF) and Local Defense Forces (LDF) recruited from Alawite, Sunni, and Druze communities alike and have been the two largest Iran-backed clients

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ "Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria - Atlantic Council," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies."

¹²⁶ "Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria," *Atlantic Council* (blog), November 5, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>.

in Syria. Under the supervision of IRGC commanders, the NDF grew to be the largest paramilitary force in Syria and was formed via “rebranding, restructuring, and merging of Popular Committees and other pro-Assad militias’ ”.¹²⁷ The IRGC commanders used their experience in Iraq to form a Syrian equivalent of the Iraqi PMF. In 2018, however, Assad dismantled the NDF and reintegrated its forces into pre-existing army units. With the dismantling of the NDF, Iran’s focus shifted to the LDF. With an estimated 50,000 fighters the LDF is the largest Iran-backed group in Syria and is officially a part of the Syrian army. As per an agreement between Iran and Syria, Iran is in charge of the LDF’s leadership and governs “until the crisis in the Syrian Arab republic has ended or a new resolution has passed”. While IRGC recruitment centered on Syria’s Shi’a communities, Iran’s largest clients do not share the Islamic Republic’s ideology, political worldview, or strategic goals. Still, Iran’s influence in the conflict remained strong and almost all Iran-backed militias in Syria are still dependent on Tehran’s direct financing.¹²⁸

The second-prong of Iran’s client strategy in Syria was the deployment of foreign Shia forces. Iran-backed Afghan and Pakistani fighters in Syria (members of the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun Brigades, respectfully) are estimated to be between 10,000 to 20,000 and have been reportedly integrated into the ranks of the Syrian army. The bulk of mobilized foreign fighters, however, came from Lebanese Hezbollah. The entrance of Hezbollah was critical in defeating Syrian rebels on behalf of the Syrian government and centered on protecting Shi’a populations near the western Syrian city of al-Qusayr and other areas in Syria near Hezbollah’s stronghold in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley.¹²⁹ The largest of its deployments anywhere else in the world, the

¹²⁷ “Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?,” Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215>.

¹²⁸ A former IRGC commander acknowledged that Qassem Soleimani personally oversaw the financing of some Iran-backed brigades. Radio Farda, “Former IRGC Official Says Soleimani Asked Him for Money.”

¹²⁹ “The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria | Center for Strategic and International Studies.”

number of Hezbollah's highly-trained personnel in Syria numbers between 7,000-10,000. At their disposal, Hezbollah has amassed in Syria an array of short-range ballistic missiles, anti-tank guided missiles, man-portable, anti-tank missiles, armored personnel carriers, main battle tanks, unmanned combat aerial vehicles, and Katyusha rockets.¹³⁰

Syria has always been vital to the Islamic Republic's regional aspirations. In connecting Iran territorially to its clients in Lebanon, Syria enables the efficacy of Iran's militant client strategy elsewhere in the region. In wartime, however, Syria itself became a benefactor of the strong capabilities of Iran's militant clients. These clients, both foreign and domestic, have padded pro-Asad forces and have been integrated to various degrees into the state security apparatus. Their use indicates the regime's preferred method to protect one of its most valuable national security priorities.

Lessons about Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's militant client strategy in Syria since 2011, and general alliance with Syria over the previous four decades, speak to three lessons about Iran's foreign policy. First, access to Hezbollah and the maintenance of the "Corridor of Resistance" is perceived as an existentially important state interest. This explains Tehran's willingness to incur significant military and economic costs by supporting the Asad regime since 2011. Second, the resilience of the Iran-Syria alliance demonstrates the regime's prioritization of regional power status over ideological differences. Disagreements have threatened to seriously interrupt cordial relations between Iran and Syria. Ayatollah Khomeini did not believe Hafiz al-Asad to be a "real Muslim"

¹³⁰ Ibid. Hezbollah forces have amassed a range of weapons and systems in Syria, such as the Fateh-110/M-600 short-range ballistic missile, Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 short-range ballistic missiles, Toophan anti-tank guided missiles, Kornet man-portable anti-tank guided missiles, M113 armored personnel carriers, T-72 main battle tanks, Karrar unmanned combat aerial vehicles, and Katyusha rockets.

and the elder Asad never visited Iran while the ayatollah was alive. Further, Syria supported the Amal movement in Lebanon, a mobilization of the country's Shia community which rivaled Hezbollah. Still, shared regional interests have maintained their cooperation and have demonstrated Iran's dedication to increasing its power politics even while compromising ideologically. Finally, Iran's transnational militant clients are tactically effective. Iran utilized the full toolkit of its militant client strategy and vitally contributed to Asad's defense. In 2022, the Iran-Syria relationship is significantly defined by Iran's militant clients.

Yemen: The Houthis as Effective Spoilers

Iran's Interests in Yemen

Yemen has historically been an unconventional source of Iran's engagement in the region. Compared to the economic, geographic, and Shi'a interests found in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, Iran's interests in Yemen are relatively low. Yemen's Shi'a community makes up 35% of the country, of which almost all are Zaydi.¹³¹ Instead of these traditional state metrics of power maximization and projection, Iran's interest in Yemen was piqued by the expansion of the Ansar Allah (Houthi Movement) in the 1980s and 1990s. The ensuing Iran-Houthi relationship has made Yemen key to the Islamic Republic's power projection and regional influence. Iran's interest in the Houthis is not primarily a result of the group's Zaydi Shi'a identity, but from the group's opposition to the status quo dominated by the United States and its local partners.¹³² Within the context of this shared revisionism, Iran has brought its militant client strategy to Yemen in order to advance three interests: 1. forging a new front against its rivals, 2. elevating

¹³¹ "Yemen," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/yemen/>.

¹³² Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs (London)* 92, no. 3 (2016): 647–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12599>.

Iran's position as an indispensable player in a major regional conflict, and 3. enhancing Iran's capability to threaten and retaliate against Saudi Arabia.

Iran's relationship with the Houthis is best explained within the context of Iran's competition with Saudi Arabia. While the Yemeni Civil War is driven overwhelmingly by domestic forces, the Saudi-Iran rivalry has superimposed over the conflict since 2011. In this context, the previous decade has been transformational for the Iran-Houthi relationship and, as their relationship stands today, Iran maintains influence over the Houthis by serving as their only state sponsor. By sacrificing little while simultaneously draining Saudi Arabia's resources significantly, Yemen serves as a vital arena of the Islamic Republic's anti-status quo foreign policy.

History of Iran's Militant Clients in Yemen

The foundation onto which Iran's support for the Houthis originated is the movement's anti-status quo political ideology. The Houthis emerged as a Zaydi resistance to Ali Abdullah Saleh, a republican general who came to power in 1978 and ruled Yemen for 33 years. After a decade of anti-corruption rhetoric, the Houthi movement became deeply radicalized with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹³³ At this time the Houthis adopted the infamous slogan "God is great, death to the U.S., death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam". Whereas previously "Yemen was simply not on the Islamic Republic's list of foreign policy priorities", during this phase of radicalization. At this time Iran began providing the group with limited amounts of military, financial, and political support.¹³⁴ Whereas this turning point for the group

¹³³ "Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>.

¹³⁴ One leaked memo from 2009, for example, argues that the Yemeni government 'has yet to produce evidence that Iranians were smuggling arms to the Houthis'.³⁹ According to another memo, 'most analysts report that the Houthis obtain their weapons from the Yemeni black market and even from the ROYG [Republic of Yemen government] military itself' by buying them from corrupt commanders and soldiers; it added that 'the military covers up its

was relatively unrecognized at the time, it was this adoption of more revisionist ideology that laid the foundation for the group to accord with Iran's militant client strategy.

Yemen's Arab Spring unrest further intensified the shared revisionism between Iran and the Houthis. With Saudi Arabia's entrance into the conflict, Iran viewed the Houthis as a mechanism through which to retaliate and threaten its strongest Arab adversary. The Houthis got the upper hand on the Saudis at the start of their intervention in 2015 and are now positioned to capture the last city in the north, Marib, controlled by Riyadh's Yemeni clients.¹³⁵ The Houthis now routinely attack targets inside Saudi Arabia, and now in Abu Dhabi, with missiles and drones using technical expertise from Iran and Hezbollah.¹³⁶ As the Houthi's position stands today, the group has shown remarkable resilience—and success—against the Saudi-led coalition as a nonstate actor without a navy or air force.

Lessons on Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's relationship with the Houthis primarily sheds light on Iran's strategy to counter Saudi Arabia.¹³⁷ There is an asymmetry of interests between Tehran and Riyadh over Yemen. Yemen is "Saudi Arabia's soft underbelly" because instability in the country situated on Saudi Arabia's southern flank represents an important threat to Saudi security¹³⁸. This is far from the case for Iran. All in all, what happens in Yemen concerns Saudi Arabia's vital interests, whereas Tehran perceives the conflict in Yemen to bring opportunities, not threats. Tehran has

failures by saying the weapons come from Iran'.⁴⁰ US officials, in fact, were at the time more concerned that growing American military assistance destined for the fight against AQAP was being diverted by Saleh for his own struggle against the Houthis.

¹³⁵ Bruce Riedel, "The Houthis Have Won in Yemen: What Next?," *Brookings* (blog), February 1, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/01/the-houthis-have-won-in-yemen-what-next/>.

¹³⁶ "Drone Attack in Abu Dhabi Claimed by Yemen's Rebels Kills 3 | AP News," accessed March 17, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/business-dubai-united-arab-emirates-abu-dhabi-yemen-8bdefdf900ce46a6fd6c7bc685bf838a>.

¹³⁷ Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen."

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 662.

accordingly pursued an efficient strategy in Yemen through spending a small fraction of what Riyadh does to successfully bog down the Saudi military. This has been demonstrated through estimates of defense spending. Whereas Iran spends a few million dollars per month, it has cost Riyadh \$6 billion monthly.¹³⁹

Iran's footprint in Yemen then further reinforces that militant clients are Iran's key foreign policy pillar. Iran's influence over the Houthis is minimal and the IRGC was way more hands off in the early days of the group's founding than it was with Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraq's SICRI. Still Iran remains the sole state sponsor of the Houthis, and the Houthis have aligned well into pieces of Iran's militant client strategy. As compared with Iran's cultivation of clients in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, the Iran-Houthi relationship demonstrates the range of environments in which Iran relies upon militant clients to advance its regional ambitions.

Outlook: What Clients Offer Iran in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen

Iran's foreign policy is defined by limited-aims revisionism, the aspiration to interrupt the status quo of power distribution without violently exporting its brand of government ideology. Iran has successfully cultivated like-minded clients to advance Iran's revisionism and state interests in four ways: 1. strengthening Iran's deterrent capacity against leading adversaries (Israel, Saudi Arabia, and U.S. personnel), 2. consolidating the political power of sympathetic Shi'a communities in historically antagonistic countries, 3. securing Iran's 'corridor of resistance' connecting Iran to Lebanon, and 4. spoiling the military campaigns of its adversaries. Through militant clients Iran has developed an efficient and successful mechanism to pursue its highest interests and priorities. With this established it is apparent that Iran's militant client strategy is driven more by realpolitik than ideology. Further, the realpolitik consideration takes a

¹³⁹ Riedel, "Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?"

peculiar form in Iran's clients. As is exemplified with the history of Lebanese Hezbollah, it is evident that Iran has crafted a strategy for its militant clients to remain non-state agents of influence instead of encouraging them to take over power directly. This maximizes the utilization of the clients' strengths while avoiding their weaknesses in governance.

Introduction: Applying Broad Lessons To Larger Policy Ends

This thesis defends the claim that militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen are a key pillar of Iran’s grand strategy. This militant client strategy has developed out of the Islamic Republic’s identity as a ‘limited-aims revisionist’ state. Given Iran’s aspirations for greater regional clout, and the constraining factors limiting the regime’s foreign policy toolkit, militant clients are viewed by regime decision makers as an overwhelmingly rational and effective tool. U.S. policy for Iran writ-large must account for this. As of now, however, there is a growing consensus in American policymaking and think tank circles—across the political spectrum—that the U.S. lacks a clear, comprehensive, and integrated strategy for Iran and its clients.¹⁴⁰ To meet this need, this chapter provides assumptions about Iran’s militant clients that will enhance the effectiveness of U.S. policy going forward.

The main claim of this thesis is that the misunderstanding of the grand strategic role served by Iran’s militant clients is a dominant factor contributing to insufficient U.S. foreign policy. To change this, this chapter proposes a simple response to the meet realities on the ground: accept the *strength* of Iran’s clients when necessary, but exploit their *weaknesses* where possible. To defend this viewpoint, this chapter is broken down into three subsections. First, the strategic cost-benefit analysis of Iran’s militant client strategy will be distilled. Second, guiding principles on the regional status of Iran’s militant clients will be provided. Third, revised

¹⁴⁰ “U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Strategic Options | Bipartisan Policy Center,” accessed April 10, 2022, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/us-policy-toward-iran-strategic-options/>.

assumptions at the country-specific level are proposed that should be used to formulate future U.S. policy.

The Main Takeaway: Accept Strengths, Exploit Weaknesses

This subsection provides the strategic cost-benefit analysis of Iran's militant client strategy. In essence, the grand strategic role ascribed to the regime's clients has made them vital actors contributing to some of the largest scale conflicts in the Arab World. Yet, Iran has yet to overcome its relative power inferiority and as a result continues to rely on unconventional and asymmetric capabilities to spread its influence. This subsection describes this phenomenon in detail in order to better match U.S. policy to these realities.

Strategic Strengths

U.S. policy has historically fallen into the trap of assuming that Iran's clients are strategically marginal or indicative of extremism.¹⁴¹ Instead, demonstrated in Chapter 2, the strategic benefits afforded to Iran through its clients are substantive. These benefits are most apparent during armed conflict because of their ability to magnify and maximize Iran's deterrence capabilities, retaliation potential, and overall relevance during regional negotiations. The impact of these clients are transnational and effectively increase Iran's regional relevance.

Iran's militant client strategy brings three overarching strategic benefits to Iran. First is their tactical value during foreign wars. Using domestic groups in foreign conflicts ensures superior knowledge of the terrain and population, as well as advantages in overall operational capabilities. Second, these client groups are utilized to minimize costs, measured in blood or

¹⁴¹ "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities, 2020," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed April 10, 2022, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/outlaw-regime-a-chronicle-of-irans-destructive-activities-2020/>.

treasure.¹⁴² Finally, Iran’s clients serve the purpose of avoiding the political and legal constraints that would arise if Iran deployed its own armed forces abroad.¹⁴³ Iran’s network of clients, in broad terms, then “represent an appealing combination of low costs, high benefits, and plausible deniability”.¹⁴⁴ With these benefits in mind, Iran’s militant client strategy is consistent with President Eisenhower’s claim that proxy wars are “the cheapest insurance in the world”.¹⁴⁵

The power and strength of Iran’s militant clients is most evident, and most efficiently demonstrated, during armed confrontation with Iran’s adversaries. This can be seen by lobbing missiles into the Arab Gulf, repelling Israeli personnel from Southern Lebanon, and striking U.S. military bases in Iraq. Additionally, Iran’s clients have received high quality training from the IRGC Quds Force and have proven effective at securing strategic territory. This was exemplified by Lebanese Hezbollah’s mobilization along the Lebanon-Syria border during the Syrian Civil War. As the region stands today Iran has cemented the political relevance of sympathetic groups in post-Baathist Iraq, risen to become the dominant entity in Lebanon, avoided the collapse of its only state ally in Syria, and remains in control of 80% of the population in Yemen. It is then apparent that Iran’s militant clients are formidable, established, and tactically effective in long-term armed conflicts. The successful utilization of these militant clients has ensured that Iran has had more success “than perhaps any other regional state in capitalizing on contemporary conflicts in the Middle East.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² “Surrogate Warfare | Georgetown University Press,” accessed April 10, 2022, <http://press.georgetown.edu/book/georgetown/surrogate-warfare>.

¹⁴³ “A Proxy War in Ukraine Is the Worst Possible Outcome — Except For All the Others - War on the Rocks,” accessed April 10, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/a-proxy-war-in-ukraine-is-the-worst-possible-outcome-except-for-all-the-others>.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Andrew Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 40–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733>.

¹⁴⁶ Afshon Ostovar, “Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1237–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/ijy185>.

Strategic Weaknesses

While a rational policy choice given the above mentioned areas of strategic benefit, Iran's militant client strategy nonetheless is accompanied by weaknesses. Similar to the risks associated with proxy wars generally, Iran sacrifices some level of control when relying upon foreign clients.¹⁴⁷ This loss of control generates risks of entanglement. Support from a large patron like Iran could embolden the militant clients to trigger unwanted escalation.¹⁴⁸ Iran's clients could plausibly also use the flow of financial and military aid for their own ends, diverting resources to favored constituencies and using troops trained by the IRGC for purposes unintended by Iran.

The weaknesses of Iran's clients are demonstrated in postwar periods. Most militant clients are ill-prepared and uninterested in governance. Thus, Iran's investment in these groups does not guarantee that Iran's interests will be secured in the long-term. Even Lebanese Hezbollah, the strongest and most viable Iranian client in the long-term, perceives itself to hold little interest in becoming the sole state authority.¹⁴⁹ While the most effective tool *available* to Iran to maximize its power projection, the Islamic Republic's militant client strategy is not optimally effective in the preservation of political power in the long-term.

Outlook: Tactical Nuts and Bolts

In aggregate, the power of Iran's militant clients has been ascendant in the past twenty years. They have demonstrated effectiveness in Iran's deterrence, intimidation, and retaliation capabilities. In effect, militant clients have become the tactical nuts and bolts of Iran's long-term

¹⁴⁷ "Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents," Empirical Studies of Conflict, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://esoc.princeton.edu/publications/proxy-wars-suppressing-violence-through-local-agents>.

¹⁴⁸ "A Proxy War in Ukraine Is the Worst Possible Outcome — Except For All the Others - War on the Rocks," accessed April 10, 2022,

<https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/a-proxy-war-in-ukraine-is-the-worst-possible-outcome-except-for-all-the-others>.

¹⁴⁹ "How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State," Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, June 30, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state>.

strategy for the region, but the regime's reliance on asymmetric and retaliatory assets instead of conventional power projection ensures a degree of structural weakness. From the Arab Gulf to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Iran can intimidate or threaten, spoil or deny, and massively increase the cost incurred by its adversaries. Still, because of the strategic weaknesses of militant clients, the regime's ability to attain more productive goals—let alone shape the region in its ideological image—is “inherently limited and well below its potential”.¹⁵⁰

Proposed Assumptions

Any comprehensive U.S. policy for Iran demands that two main questions be answered and defended: 1. How dire is the current Iranian threat?, 2. How does this proposed policy compel a desired change in Iranian behavior?. Using the data presented in this thesis, this chapter outlines the key assumptions which must be utilized in order to answer these questions. Given the growing chorus of scholars calling for a re-evaluated and comprehensive U.S. policy vis-a-vis Iran and its clients, the assumptions presented in this section are as necessary as ever. Further scholarship would be served well to expand on these assumptions and produce a detailed policy prescription. For now, given the lack of in-depth research on the grand strategic role of Iran's militant clients, this section is confined to the first step of the process. This section is divided into two parts. First, three assumptions are provided on Iran's militant clients at the regional level. This is then followed by key assumptions about Iran's clients in each of the four countries in focus.

¹⁵⁰ Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity*. 72.

Understanding Iran's Militant Clients on the Regional Level

No state in the twenty-first century has had “more success in utilizing militant clients outside of its borders toward strategic ends than the Islamic Republic”.¹⁵¹ As these clients stand today, they have evolved into effective forces which advance Iran's interests across the Arab Gulf and Levant and serve as key tools in Iran's power maximization. Despite this, Iran's militant clients are frequently overlooked or oversimplified. To update this understanding, this section proposes three key assumptions about the strategic role of these clients in the broad, regional view: 1. Iran's clients thrive off of instability, 2. Iran's transnational network of militant clients are here to stay, and 3. Iran's militant clients are not proxies.

Assumption 1: Iran's Clients Thrive Off Of Instability

In the past forty years Iran has found great success in expanding its influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen during wartime and generalized instability. In fact, Iran has relied on war to do so. Under the management of Iran's elite Quds Force, a division within the IRGC, Iran has repeatedly seized opportunities during wars to buttress the power of its clients and secure key territory. Through this process Iran elevated its relevance in the domestic dynamics of each country. Thus, Iran's capabilities during times of war and instability is a relative strength of the regime and Iranian leaders will continue to view war in the region as an opportunity to expand its network of militant clients.

Assumption 2: Iran's Clients Are Here To Stay

Iranian decision makers view militant clients as a key pillar of Iran's grand strategy. The regime has poured billions of dollars into maintaining its relationship with its clients, even at risk of public disapproval and domestic instability.¹⁵² Accompanying this level of investment, it is

¹⁵¹ Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients.” 159.

¹⁵²“Iran Rocked by Protests as Images of Khamenei Set on Fire and Banks Burned,” *Haaretz*, accessed April 10, 2022,

unlikely that their relevance in Iranian foreign policy will diminish in the long term. Although each client's relationship with Iran is not immune from tension, Iran's overarching strategy for regional relevance hinges upon the continued development of militant clients.

Assumption 3: Iran's Clients Are Not Proxies

Although understandably used frequently in scholarship and media coverage, proxy is not the best label to ascribe to Iran's non-state allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Even though a militant client can at times function like a proxy, "its relationship to a supporting power is not necessarily one of deference or mutual strategic vision".¹⁵³ Most importantly, the term proxy exaggerates the role of religion in the principal-agent relationship. Surely, shared religious background is important and facilitates contact and trust between Iran and its clients.¹⁵⁴ While these factors are an important and an undeniable facet of Iran's relationship with its clients, it is insufficient in explaining their existence. In fact, the utility of religion in strategic relations "is perhaps no better a determinant of lasting partnerships than other factors".¹⁵⁵ The limits of religious ties is best demonstrated by Iran's relationship with the Islamic Council in Iraq, which despite its Twelver Shi'a identity distanced itself from its Khomeinist foundation once its group's

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran-rocked-by-protests-as-images-of-khamenei-set-on-fire-and-banks-burned-go-viral-1.8135607>.

¹⁵³ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients." 167.

¹⁵⁴ Afshon Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion," *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 1, 2018): 1237–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy185>. 1255

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, for an in-depth explanation see page 1239: "Iran's relations with its clients are strongest when three conditions exist: first, those clients share Iran's theocratic interpretation of Shi'a Islam; second, Iran is the sole patron and/or the leading outside source of political and material support (e.g., materiel, money and training) to the client; and third, domestic goals are shared and Iran's regional goals are accepted—meaning that the client supports (or does not oppose) both Tehran's various political ambitions and activities in the client's country and its strategic activities across the region. Where all those factors have been present, Iran has been successful at preserving strong ties with clients over time. However, the strength of those ties is dependent on the constancy of those factors, which can be susceptible to change in response to shifts in the political context or circumstances of the client. If such change occurs, then Iran's attractiveness as a patron can decline, its ties to the client may weaken, and space can be created for competing powers or domestic political concerns to create incentives for shifts in the client's behaviour. As a result, a client might distance itself from Iran to seek relations with other outside powers, fracture into smaller groups, or break away from Iran to gain greater autonomy and improve its domestic political position.11 Shared religious perspectives and identity are fundamental to Iran's success as a patron; but in the absence of the other two factors identified above, religion-based ties alone are unlikely to foster an enduring strategic partnership."

political survival demanded it. While overlapping ideological and religious beliefs can facilitate the relationships between Iran and its militant clients, the agency wielded by Iran's clients—particularly during postwar settings—draws into question the utility of the term proxy to define them.

Understanding Iran's Militant Clients in Their Domestic Context

While militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen fit into the overarching framework of Iran's regional strategy, the dominant groups in each country are unique and demand distinct policies to address these differences. To meet this need, this section provides key assumptions about Iran's clients within their own domestic context.

Iraq: An Array of Groups

Assumption 1: Beware of Unintended Consequences

No event transformed Iran's militant client strategy more than the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Provided with the opportunity to fill a vacuum created after Saddam Hussein's ouster, Iran ensured its ongoing influence in Iraq's political and security affairs through militant clients. Going forward it is then necessary to anticipate the downstream effects of American foreign policy in the region, particularly that which has destabilizing potential.

Assumption 2: Make the Alternative More Appealing

Iran can struggle to retain a strong relationship with its clients in postwar settings. This uniquely applies to Iraq where the political and security sectors in Iraq are filled by an array of diverse factions, militias, and Iranian clients. While Iran's influence in Iraq's affairs remains strong overall, it has been demonstrated by the Islamic Council of Iraq that it is possible for Iran's

clients to distance themselves from the regime when domestic political survival is perceived as more desirable. Exploiting this weakness could diminish Iran's footprint in the country. A key opportunity to do so is for the U.S. to strengthen efforts by the Iraqi government to co-opt militias into the Iraqi Armed Forces and disarm those which refuse.

Lebanon: Hezbollah

Assumption 1: The Strongest of Them All

Lebanese Hezbollah is formidable and established. Its position in Lebanon is guaranteed as long as the current political system continues.¹⁵⁶ While frequently derided for its history of terrorism, the militant-group-cum-political-party has demonstrated itself to be nimble and resilient in order to maintain its relevance. Its eradication, from today's viewpoint in 2022, appears impossible.

This understanding necessitates that U.S. policy avoid an attempt to rollback Hezbollah's consolidated domestic position, and instead focus on challenging the group's ability to train and prop up groups in other countries throughout the region. This is especially applicable to the conflict in Yemen, where the U.S. could ramp up efforts to seize arms shipments in the Arabian Sea.¹⁵⁷

Assumption 2: Uninterested in Becoming the State

Hezbollah has effectively risen to become the most influential political organization in Lebanon despite being a hybrid actor: a group which enjoys legitimacy within the Lebanese state but which is able to operate without the popular accountability and responsibility required of a state institution.¹⁵⁸ Already publicly blamed for being partially responsible for corruption and

¹⁵⁶ "How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State.?"

¹⁵⁷ Jon Gambrell, "US Navy Seizes Arms Shipment in Arabian Sea Likely Bound for Yemen," Navy Times, May 9, 2021, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2021/05/09/us-navy-seizes-arms-shipment-in-arabian-sea-likely-bound-for-yemen/>.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

mismanagement in the country, Hezbollah does not see an interest in becoming more responsible to the demands of the citizens. Hezbollah further wishes to avoid another civil war, a real possibility as Lebanon's non-Shi'a communities are unlikely to accept an armed takeover of the country by the Iran-backed group. This hybrid status could become the model for Iran's militant clients in other countries which seek continued relevance without seeking to take on sole governing responsibility.

Assumption 3: Strongest When Branded as Lebanon's Defender

Hezbollah is ill-prepared to succeed as an accountable, transparent, and trusted governing body to all communities in Lebanon. Instead, Hezbollah's strength lies in branding itself as a righteous and necessary defender of the country. Undercutting the viability of this message would subsequently undercut Hezbollah's strength.

Syria: In Asad's Context

Assumption 1: The Indication of Iran's Go-To Military Tool

Iran's strategy during the Syrian Civil War demonstrates that militant clients are the regime's go-to foreign policy tool, even in countries which previously were not hosts to Iran's clients. Historically Iran did not cultivate militant clients in Syria; their presence was simply unnecessary in Iran's sole state ally in the Arab World. When Iran was called upon to support its ally during the Arab Spring, however, militant clients filled the role instead of Iran's armed forces. This demonstrates the predominance of militant clients in Iran's foreign policy toolkit and indicates that this choice will be repeated in future conflicts.

Assumption 2: Proximity Matters

Beyond demonstrating that militant clients are Iran's favored foreign policy tool, the conflict in Syria revealed which key state interests Iran uses them to defend. The strategic corridor formed by Syria which connects Iran to Lebanon through Iraq is vital to the regime. A loss of Iran's access to it would diminish Iran's hopes of becoming a more dominant regional actor. Even an incomplete return to the *status quo ante* as a result of Assad's ostensible 'victory' was perceived as vital to Iranian security because of the importance of maintaining this 'corridor of resistance'.

Assumption 3: Postwar Weaknesses

Iran's clients are inefficient in maintaining Iranian influence when the guns are put down. While effective in securing territory and mobilizing soldiers, they do not hold significant power in conflict resolution settings. This is true even in Syria: Iran's strongest, and sole, state ally in the Arab world. Currently Iran is competing with Russia for the spoils of the war and Iran's success in guaranteeing its interests is in no way guaranteed.¹⁵⁹ Despite securing Assad's ostensible victory in the war, Iran is limited in its ability to produce an optimally productive postwar political environment.

Yemen: The Houthis

Assumption 1: Established and Effective

Entering the eighth year of war in Yemen, the Houthis' position appears established despite facing a quantitatively and qualitatively more advanced military campaign by the Saudi-led coalition. In addition to securing key territory, the Houthis continue to disrupt life for its Sunni

¹⁵⁹ "After Backing Assad, Iran and Russia Compete for Influence and Spoils of War," *Washington Post*, accessed January 28, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-war-russia-iran-influence/2021/05/19/7d26851e-a9d1-11eb-bca5-048b2759a489_story.html.

Arab neighbors by firing missiles and drones at targets in Saudi Arabia and at times the United Arab Emirates. Attempt to rollback the advance of the Houthis has proven ineffective and primarily prolonged a devastating humanitarian catastrophe. Revised U.S. policy may need to accept this fact and rebalance toward a combination of economic and diplomatic coercion and compellence.

Assumption 2: Analyze Militant Clients in Relation to Iran’s Adversaries

The strategic value offered to Iran by the Houthis is not immediately obvious, but becomes clearer when analyzing the group’s impact vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia. Yemen itself provides little for Iran in terms of resources or territory, relative to Lebanon and Iraq and Syria, but is nonetheless a powerful tool to compete with and bog down Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia far outspent the Houthis during the war but “completely failed” to defeat them.¹⁶⁰ The ability for Iran to sacrifice little while draining the resources of its chief Arab adversary demonstrates the strategic value of clients as an asymmetric tool.

Assumption 3: Anti-Status Quo Status Underlies Relationship

Iran’s relationship with the Houthis further defends the notion that Iran’s militant clients are not confined to the label of proxy. The Houthis, a group which is not Twelver Shi’a nor an adherent to Khomeinism, remain relevant to Iran because of specific strategic interests. It is a shared anti-status quo belief system which facilitated their relationship, and Iran’s status as the Houthis’ sole external sponsor which continues it. U.S. policy can make the anti-status quo “axis of resistance” less appealing to the Houthis in two ways: 1. Avoid Yemeni civilian casualties by conditioning any U.S. aid to the Saudi-led coalition, and 2. Propose a U.S.-led coalition of aid to rebuild the country to make the Houthis’ dependency on Iran less strong.

¹⁶⁰ Bruce Riedel, “Yemen War Turns Seven,” *Brookings* (blog), March 24, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/03/24/yemen-war-turns-seven/>.

Outlook

U.S. policy making lacks a comprehensive understanding of the role of militant clients in Iran's regional strategy. The proposed assumptions in this chapter begins the process of updating this understanding by meeting U.S. foreign policy to the realities on the ground. This process serves to answer a key question which must drive any policy recommendation: How dire is the Iranian threat? The assumptions explained in this chapter are based on the understanding that Iran's influence in the region in the last two decades has spread through its use of militant clients and this enhances Iran's ability to interrupt the interests of the U.S. and its allies. The Islamic Republic and its militant clients flex their ability to do so regularly. In Iraq, Iran's clients launch strikes aimed at U.S. bases and personnel.¹⁶¹ From Yemen, the Houthis demonstrate their influence by launching missiles toward Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁶² Iran's cultivation of clients in Syria have maintained their relevance by participating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶³ Finally, Lebanese Hezbollah has risen to a managerial position as they now partake in the training and enablement of other clients. Iran's militant clients are well trained, established, and are here to stay; they credibly threaten U.S. allies and economic interests in the Middle East.

At the same time, the Iranian threat is tempered by structural weaknesses in Iran's foreign which allow for the potential of U.S. policy to address their threats. These realities point to a key tenet which can raise the effectiveness of U.S. policy: *accept the newfound strengths* of Iran's

¹⁶¹ Ample evidence can be found on this point through the cycle of strikes in Syria and Iraq over the past two years. For some examples, see: Associated Press, "Iran Claims Responsibility for Missile Strike near US Consulate in Iraq," "Biden Takes First Military Action with Syria Strike on Iran-Backed Militias - BBC News," accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56205056>.

¹⁶² *The Guardian*, March 13, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/13/iran-claims-responsibility-missile-strike-erbil-iraq-us-consulate>; "Houthis Escalate Attacks on Saudi Arabia, Striking Oil Facility,"

¹⁶³ "Syrian Fighters Ready to Join next Phase of Ukraine War," AP NEWS, April 18, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-islamic-state-group-syria-europe-4ede428219450a58b0439912bc43cc15>.

militant clients where they exist, but *exploit their weaknesses* when possible. This guiding principle is necessary because U.S. policy has traditionally downplayed their strengths and ineffectively exploited their weaknesses by misunderstanding the grand strategic role they serve for Iran. To jump start this process, this chapter provides three assumptions about Iran's militant clients at the regional level: 1. Iran's clients thrive during periods of instability, 2. Iran's clients are here to stay, 3. Iran's clients are not proxies. The following section then provides the maintain takeaways for Iran's clients within Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, respectively. In so doing, the principle of "accept their strengths, but exploit their weaknesses" can be applied. With these assumptions provided, further scholarship will be well-suited to prescribe detailed policy to answer the second question demanded of U.S. policy: how does the proposed policy compel a change in Iranian behavior?

Conclusion

This thesis has explored a fundamental question about the Islamic Republic of Iran: what drives its foreign policy? In answering this question, Chapter 1 outlined the five key sources of Iranian power which shape its global footprint: 1. geography, 2. population dynamics, 3. economic power, 4. military capabilities, and 5. alliance networks. Using these metrics, this thesis claims that regime decision makers face a status discrepancy: there is a sizable gap between the status for Iran that its leaders aspire to hold and the role in the regional hierarchy that it is allowed to maintain by its Sunni Arab adversaries. In order to expand its influence and eradicate this status discrepancy, Iran has developed its foreign policy to rely upon one major tool: the cultivation of militant clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. As a key pillar of Iran's grand strategy, this thesis argues that Iran's militant clients advance five primary state interests for the Islamic Republic: 1. maintaining independence from the West, 2. expanding Iran's relationship with foreign groups which adhere to Iran's worldview, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, 3. providing Iran plausible deniability during open conflict with the adversaries, 4. reducing the political costs of foreign engagement, and 5. addressing Iran's desperate need for allies.

Iran's militant clients are strong allies that convert battlefield successes into a consolidation of political power. To demonstrate this, Chapter 2 covers the history of Iran's militant clients in each of the four countries in focus: Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. In addition to a clear presentation of this history, Chapter 2 provides an overview of Iran's state interests in each country as well as an analysis of overarching lessons about Iranian foreign policy. In comprehensively spanning Iran's footprint across the Levant and Arab Gulf, this

chapter thoroughly defends the assertion that Iran's militant clients have become a key pillar of the Islamic Republic's grand strategy.

Chapter 3 applies these lessons to a growing need in U.S. foreign policy. Despite decades-long continuity in prioritizing scaling back the spread of Iran's influence throughout the Middle East, Iran's militant clients have continually expanded and consolidated their positions. They have taken on larger, more advanced militaries and played to their strengths to advance their own political survival as well as Iran's regional interests. This thesis posits that the main reason for this unsuccessful U.S. policy is a misunderstanding about the form of Iran's militant clients. Without proper assumptions guiding strategy, U.S. policy cannot optimize its effectiveness. To address this, Chapter 3 applies the lessons uncovered in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 to propose new sets of assumptions about the grand strategic role of Iran's militant clients.

The understanding of Iran's militant clients—and in effect the understanding of Iranian foreign policy—outlined in this thesis is relatively new, but its relevance and necessity is only growing. With militant clients across the region, Iran has buttons of influence to push to exert its presence and influence for the ensuing decades. They will remain part and parcel of Iranian foreign policy, and subsequent research will be suited well to expand upon the findings in this thesis in crafting more detailed proposals for future U.S. foreign policy.