



MIDDLE EAST TODAY



# Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars

Ofira Seliktar · Farhad Rezaei

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# Middle East Today

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## ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	Anti-Access, Area-Denial
AAH	Asaib Al al Haq
AIPAC	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
AMIA	Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association
AQI	Al-Qaida in Iraq
ATGM	Advanced Anti-Tank Guided Missiles
CCC	Commodity Credit Corporation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CJSOTF	Combined Joint Special Operation Task Force
CNAS	Center for a New American Security
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CTC	Counterterrorism Center
DGSE	Direction Generale de la Securite Exterieur
DOP	Declaration of Principles
DOT	Department of the Treasury
EFP	Explosively Formed Projectile
ESA	External Security Apparatus
FEDAT	Field of Expansion of Deployment of Advanced Technology
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GIA	General Intelligence Apparatus
4GW	Fourth Generation Warfare
HHN	Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IAF	Israel Air Force
IAO	Islamic Action Organization

ICSIRPP	International Conference in Support of the Islamic Revolution of the People of Palestine
IDF	Israel Defense Force
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IFLB	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain
INC	Iraqi National Congress
INF	Islamic National Front
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
IRP	Islamic Republican Party
IRU	The Islamic Resistance Unit
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISF	Iraqi Security Force
ISG	Iraq Study Group
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JC	Jihadi Council
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JI	Jamaat Islamiyah
JSOC	Joint Special Operations Command
LDF	Local Defense Force
MAFAT	Ministry's Administration for the Development of Weapons and Technological Infrastructure
MEK	Mujahedeen-e Khalq
MNF	Multination Force
MOIS	Ministry of Intelligence and Security
NDAS	National Democratic Action Society
NDF	National Defense Force
NEDSA	<i>Neyroze Daryaaee Sepah-e Iran</i>
NIF	National Islamic Front
OGR	Office of Global Revolution
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OIRAP	Organization for Islamist Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula
OLM	Office for Liberation Movement
ORHA	Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance
OSP	Office of Special Plans
PA	Palestinian Authority
PCMDSZ	Popular Committee for the Mobilization to Defend Sayyidah Zaynab
PFLP	Popular Front of Liberation of Palestine
PIAC	Popular Islamic and Arab Congress

PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
QF	Quds Force
SATJA	Sazman-e Enqelabi-e Todehay-e Jomhory-e Islami-e Iran
SCID	Strategic Counterintelligence Directorate
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SFLI	Students Following the Line of Imam
SID	Special Investigative Directorate
SIHCC	Syrian-Iranian Higher Cooperation Committee
SISM	Somali Islamic Salvation Movement
SIUP	Somali Islamic Union Party
SOLA	South Lebanon Army
SLA	Shiite Liberation Army
SNA	Somali National Alliance
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council
SOU	Security Organ Unit
SRG	Somali Revolutionary Guards
SRGC	Syrian Revolution General Commission
TAJ	Jamaat Tawhid al Jihad
TFL	Terrorism Financial Links
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction



## CHAPTER 1

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# Exporting the Revolution and Building Hegemony

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini arrived in Tehran on February 1, 1979. His tumultuous welcome was the crowning touch of the revolutionary turmoil which swept away the Pahlavi dynasty from power. The Islamic Republic of Iran that Khomeini established was destined to send shock waves throughout the Middle East and the world. Its subsequent politics have never left the headlines. In the name of exporting the Islamist revolution, Iran used assorted Shiite militias to carve out a sphere of influence known as the Shiite Crescent. These revolutionary foot soldiers engaged in terrorism and other forms of violence to destabilize neighboring countries and strike out against real and perceived enemies of Khomeini's brand of Islamism.

As in other cases of revolution regimes, underpinning the lofty rhetoric of revolutionary export were more pedestrian concerns of regime survival and national interests of Iran as a nation-state. These tangled imperatives could be best understood by analyzing the peculiar duality of Iran.

### THE DUALITY OF THE NEW REGIME: IRAN AS A STATE AND AN EXPORTER OF THE REVOLUTION

There was nothing in traditional Shiite theology to indicate an inclination to partake in political activism. In the conventional Shiite jurisprudence, the issues of governance and government have rarely been mentioned. Known as quietism, this tradition stipulated that the leadership of the society rests solely with Imam Mahdi, the 12th Imam believed to be

hidden in the Major Occultation. Until his return to bring justice to the world, Muslims must tolerate the government and the concomitant idolatry and oppression. Because of this stipulation, the religious class, the ulama, remained largely apolitical and never proposed an alternative to the ruling system.

Shiite quietists justify their stance by referring to a hadith of Imam Jaafar al-Sadeq, the sixth Shiite Imam who asserted that raising any flag before the return of Imam Mahdi was idolatrous. According to this hadith, Shiites should avoid imposing their true belief on the government, no matter what its nature is, to give them a chance to live under adversity imposed by the unjust rulers.<sup>1</sup>

Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi, the *marja-e taqlid* (the Source of Emulation), who founded the Qom Seminary—the central religious authority in the Shiite world—was a strong advocate of clerical quietism. Borujerdi explained that politics is a highly complex issue, which the ulama were ill-prepared to tackle. For instance, he repeatedly noted that “the Constitutional Revolution in Iran taught me not to get involved in political affairs if I did not have a clear idea of their origins and outcomes.” During the tumultuous period of Mohammad Mosaddegh<sup>2</sup> rule and the debate about nationalizing Iran’s oil industry, Borujerdi forbade clergy to interfere in political affairs. Because the Grand Ayatollah was universally revered, quietism officially prevailed in Iran until his death in 1961.<sup>3</sup>

For all his influence, Borujerdi encountered opposition from activist clergy associated with the teaching of Ayatollah Abulqassem Kashani, a left-leaning clergy closely involved with the anti-colonial movement in Iran. Kashani, who opposed, capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, was only of the clergy to defy Borujerdi to support Mosaddegh. Although he subsequently had a falling-out with the nationalist leader, Kashani has been considered a true leader of the activist camp. Indeed, to demonstrate the synergy between religion and politics, Kashani went on to serve in the Iranian parliament in the 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *As-Sahifa Al-Kamilah Al-Sajjadiyya*, published by Moasesat AlElmi Al-Matboat, Beirut, pp. 26–27.

<sup>2</sup> Mosaddegh was Iran’s prime minister from 1951 to 1953 when his government was overthrown by a coup d’état orchestrated by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the United Kingdom’s MI6.

<sup>3</sup> Marjaeyat va Syasat: Ayatollah Boroujerdi Political Biography, [www.broujerdi.ir/index.php/2016-03-25-16-38-40/2016-03-25-16-40-41/393-2016-03-26-07-11-50](http://www.broujerdi.ir/index.php/2016-03-25-16-38-40/2016-03-25-16-40-41/393-2016-03-26-07-11-50).

<sup>4</sup> Nasrullah Shifte, Relationship between Mosaddegh and Kashani, Islamic Studies Center, <http://iscq.ir/?part=menu&cinc=menu&id=308>.

More consequentially, Kashani did not limit his activities to legitimate politics. He joined up with Navab Safavi, a devotee of the Sayyid Qutb, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who advocated political violence. Kashani and Safavi believed that the Muslim regimes needed to be “purified,” and it was up to the true believers to get rid of “corrupt” government officials by assassinating them. They founded the first Islamist terrorist group in Iran, the *Fadā’iyān-e Islam* (Fighters of Islam). The *Fadā’iyān-e Islam* was involved in several assassinations and assassination attempts. On December 25, 1955, Safavi and three other members of the group were executed. Ayatollah Borujerdi, who expelled the *Fadā’iyān-e Islam* from Qom in 1950, refused to intervene on his behalf.<sup>5</sup>

Sayyid Ruhollah Mūsavi Khomeini, a rising star in Qom, however, was far more sympathetic to the cause of the *Fadā’iyān*. Although loyal to Borujerdi, the young cleric felt it was imperative for the ulama to get involved in the political realm. Indeed, Khomeini was well acquainted with both Kashani and Safavi who visited him in 1943 and 1944. It was also through Safavi that Khomeini became open to the Muslim Brotherhood idea of Muslim ecumenism. In one of his early writings, *Kashf al Asrar* (Uncovering of Secrets), Khomeini revealed his predilection for engaging in the political arena. The pamphlet was a radical denunciation of the secularization of the society and a thinly veiled attack on the anti-clerical activist and historian Ahmed Kasravi. Khomeini decreed Kasravi to be a *Madhur-al-Dam* (one whose blood needs to be shed by believers). On March 11, 1946, two members of the *Fadā’iyān*, Hoseein and Ali-Mohamed Emami murdered Kasravi and his assistant. Khomeini intervened with the Shah to spare their lives.<sup>6</sup>

If the Kasravi murders were an early indication that Khomeini was willing to embrace political violence, his subsequent history revealed a radical transformation in personality and ideology. Following an unsuccessful effort to derail the Shah’s White Revolution, an attempt to modernize and Westernize Iran, Khomeini was exiled to Turkey in 1964. Less than a year later, in November 1965, Khomeini was allowed to move to Najaf, the center of Shiite learning in Iraq, where many of his students followed him. Despite the shared faith, Khomeini found Najaf less than congenial, often referring to it as a “den of snakes.” What bothered Khomeini the most was

<sup>5</sup> Con Cochlin, *Khomeini’s Ghost*, HarperCollins, e-edition, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah*, 1985, 98, 102; Con Cochlin, *The Ghost of Khomeini*, 104.

the fact that senior Iraqi Shiite leaders were quietists who frowned on his activism and especially his evolving notion of a theocratic state. Instead, he surrounded himself with a handful of like-minded activist clerics such as Ayatollah Mohammed Bakr al Sadr, the founder of the Dawa Party, and Musa Sader who became part of the so-called Najaf circle. Khomeini's former students in Qom who attended classes in Najaf noted the change in his demeanor: "In Qom he wanted to be a religious leader; in Najaf he wanted to be a political leader" in the words of one of them.<sup>7</sup>

Khomeini first articulated his political vision in a series of lectures in Najaf, "The Islamic State," which appeared in a 1970 book published in Beirut. In a radical departure of historical Islamic practices, Khomeini used post-Occultation theology to postulate that a proper Islamic order needed to be based on a principle of *velayat-e faqih*, the rule of a capable jurist. The government of the *faqih* was essentially a form of guardianship awaiting the arrival of the truth ruler, the Hidden Imam. While the theocratic feature captured much of the popular attention, a deeper analysis of Khomeini's teaching revealed that it amounted to a radical revision of Shiism, known as neo-Shiism or Khomeinism.

It is not entirely clear how many of participants in the anti-Shah revolution realized that the rule of the monarchy would be replaced by an all-encompassing neo-Shiite philosophy. However, shortly after the arrival of Khomeini, decisive steps were made to turn the *velayat-e faqih* theory into practice.<sup>8</sup>

Although Khomeini received a tumultuous welcome, his top advisers, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, realized that the democratic fervor which toppled the Shah needed to be acknowledged. To satisfy the democratic impulse without undermining too much of the rule of the *faqih*, the Khomeinists created a complex system of representation. The Majlis (parliament) members and the president were elected by popular vote, albeit from a list of names approved by the

<sup>7</sup>Con Coughlin, *Khomeini's Ghost: The Iranian Revolution and the Rise of Militant Islam*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2014, pp. 151–154.

<sup>8</sup>Ruhollah Khomeini, *Velayat-e faqih*, The institute for compilation and publication of the works of Imam Khomeini, 2005.

Council of Guardians. The Council was also in charge of making sure that the Majlis legislation was compatible with the Koran. The Constitution of November 1979, which codified this peculiar “theocratic democracy,” stipulated that an 86-member body known as the Council of Experts would choose the *faqih*, elevated to the position of a Supreme Leader.

Even with the added constraints of Islamist theocracy, Iran could have passed as a conventional nation-state. As in other countries, the Constitution provided for a hierarchical power structure in which a higher level indicates a more significant measure of power and control over the lower levels and the chain of command extends from top to bottom. According to the Constitution, the executive branch—that is, the president—the government, the state bureaucracy, and the security forces were in charge of the political and economic system. The Majlis and the duly elected officials were called upon to uphold the national interest of the state within the limits of international law and partake in the community of nations. Since the international community operated within the framework of the Treaty of Westphalia which elevated the principle of the sovereign state, the Islamic Republic was expected to refrain from interfering in the affairs of other sovereign nations.

However, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers were not content with creating an Islamic Republic in Iran alone. *Velayat-e faqih* asserted that the mandate of the religious ruler extends beyond Iran to include the entire *Ummah*, the universe of Muslim countries. Indeed, according to Khomeini, the nation-state was a Western construct, and part of the imperial-colonial design considered heresy (*kufir*) in Islam. Liberating the *mustazafeen* thus required propagating Islam (*tabligh-e islam*) and exporting the revolution (*sudur engilab*). For instance, on January 14, 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini stated: “We are at war against the infidels..., I ask all Islamic nations, all Muslims, to join the holy war. There are many enemies to be killed or destroyed. Jihad must triumph.” In a New Year message on March 21, 1980, he announced that “we must strive to export our revolution throughout the world and must abandon all ideas of not doing so.”<sup>9</sup>

Khomeini was hardly alone in espousing revolutionary export. If anything, Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, a one-time heir to Khomeini,

<sup>9</sup>Yossef Bodansky, *Target America: Terrorism in the U. S. Today*, S.P.I. Books, 1993, 167; Richard J. Leitner and Peter M. Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings: The Lost Reports of the Congressional Task Force*, p. 193; Shmuel Bar, *Iranian Terrorist Policy and Export of Revolution*, Institute for Policy and Strategy, Working Paper, 2009.



emerged as the most enthusiastic booster of a global Islamist revolution. In his words, exporting the revolution meant “supporting the oppressed [Muslim] nations.” Montazeri noted that the Prophet said “a person who spent one night while he does not care about the affairs of the Muslims, is not a Muslim, and a person who has heard an oppressed voice which calls for help from Muslims, but he does not answer to him, he is not a Muslim.” On another occasion, he stated that under Islamic ethics, it was the responsibility of Muslims to help each other and that this help should extend to the realm of foreign affairs.<sup>10</sup>

While highly enthusiastic, Khomeini and his fellow exporters faced considerable opposition from the government of the moderate politician Mehdi Bazargan. Even some stalwarts of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), such as Ayatollah Mohamed Beheshti and Ali Akbar Rafsanjani who represented the landowning clergy and the merchant class, had little appetite for an immediate revolutionary push. Realizing early on that this kind of foreign policy adventurism would hurt the national interest of Iran, they tried to tamper the “Trotskyites.” With neither side holding the upper hand, the bitter debate about “the logic of the state versus the logic of the revolution” had underlaid the functioning of the regime and would periodically break public. In what was the most conspicuous display of this struggle, the hard-liners were forced to agree on the nuclear negotiations leading to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A study of the nuclear project revealed that the international sanctions created a profound crisis of legitimacy and persuaded the embattled Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to side with the moderates.<sup>11</sup>

However, the lesson that foreign policy adventurism could bring punishing costs was still in the future. In the meanwhile, even those worried about the potential damage stemming from “Trotskyite” impulse with Khomeini agreed that to safeguard the revolution, a set of dedicated institutions outside of the purview of the state needed to be created.

On April 22, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini announced the foundation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), known popularly as the Revolutionary Guards. Ostensibly, the IRGC was limited to domestic

<sup>10</sup> Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Islam Dine Fetrat*, Nashr-e Sayeh, 2009, p. 400; Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, Oxford University Press, 2016, loc. 2435.

<sup>11</sup> Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Israel, and the United States: The Politics of Counter-Proliferation Intelligence*, NY: Lexington Books, 2017.

operations, but it was quite clear that spreading the revolution was also on the agenda. As Montazeri put it in a talk to IRGC commanders, “You Guardian brothers, should protect Islam and the Islamic Revolution, and with your efforts, our Islamic revolution will be exported to other countries.”<sup>12</sup> He added that “We want people of the region, affected by the essence of our revolution, to wake up and start their revolutionary movement.” In due time, the IRGC described its mission in transnational terms: “The Islamic Revolution does not have any borders... The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corpse does not have the word ‘Iran’ in its title. This means that it seeks to defend the Islamic Revolution and its achievements without regard to particular borders.” As one observer put it, the Guards declaration was nothing short of “an assault on the Westphalian system.”<sup>13</sup>

Rhetoric aside, the IRGC was given considerable independent resources to carry out its mission. The organization could count on a large number of foundation (*bonyads*) and other “charitable” institutions such as the *Mustazafeen Foundation*, *Astan-e Qods-e Razawi Foundation*, Martyr’s (*Shahid*) *Foundation*, *Imam Khomeini Emdad Committee*, *Setad-e Ejray-e Farman-e Imam*, known as *Setad* (the Headquarter for Executing the Order of the Imam), among others. In due course, the Guards would create a vast economic empire which made them largely independent from the state, let alone accountable to it. As would be discussed in later chapters, they used some of their assets such as the *Khatam al Anbia* Construction Company to build terror infrastructure in Lebanon and Sudan.<sup>14</sup>

This separate parastatal structure posed a considerable challenge to the statist part of the regime. Theoretically, the Supreme Leader was tasked with settling the debates between the state and the parastatal, but in practice the process was cumbersome and opaque, involving endless negotiations, bargaining, strong-arming, and intimidation. Due to absence of a clear hierarchical delineation of power, the complex negotiating political order made tracking decision-making difficult, a feature which observers have often complained about. As one of them noted, “decision making remained secret ... in a complex web of institutions and circles, constantly in flux.” Another likened the “bitter and complex infighting” to a

<sup>12</sup> Hossein Ali Montazeri, *The Memoir*, Ketab Corp, 2001, p. 565.

<sup>13</sup> Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*, Lanham, MD. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, loc. 158; Montazeri, *The Memoir*, p. 565.

<sup>14</sup> Iran: *The Rise of the Revolutionary Guards’ Financial Empire*, *National Revolutionary Council of Iran*, National Revolutionary Council of Iran, 2017, loc. 427–438.

“kaleidoscope ... [for] as soon as one pattern formed, it was quickly shaken apart, only to reform in a different pattern.” Another lamented that “Iran’s lines of power and authority are almost impossible to follow. They seem to change between morning and night.”<sup>15</sup> Whatever configuration *de jour* had emerged, the unresolved tension between the interest of the state and the interest of the revolution was always in the background. As Henry Kissinger famously quipped, “Iran must decide whether it is a nation or a cause.”<sup>16</sup>

Much as the international community hoped that Iran would revert to a traditional nation-state, the “Trotskyites” developed a powerful narrative against the West.

### THE ENEMIES OF ISLAM: THE GREAT SATAN AND THE LITTLE SATAN

For Khomeini and Montazeri, and the cohort which came of age during the nationalist upheaval in Iran, the West was a primary enemy. In the early twentieth century, it was the British Empire that epitomized in their eyes the enemy that was aggressive and rapacious with imperialism and colonialism. It was also the source of collective humiliation and shame that, according to one historian, was growing since Napoleon smashed his way into Egypt in 1798. Together with the British, the colonial project robbed Islam of its dignity.<sup>17</sup>

By the early fifties, however, the United States had replaced Great Britain as the arch-enemy of Iranian nationalist clergy like Ayatollah Kashani. Khomeini had his reasons to oppose the United States which, in his view, pushed the Shah into a process of modernization embodied in the White Revolution. Anti-American sentiments were rife in the “Najaf circle,” which exposed Khomeini to the writings of Ali Shariati, a leading sociologist and philosopher who proposed a synthesis of socialism and Islam. Shariati, in turn, was influenced by the anti-Western crusader Jalal al Ahmad who warned his countrymen about the danger of *gharbzadegi*, Westoxification, his term for Westernization.

<sup>15</sup>Ofira Seliktar, *Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Sean Durnes, “Forty Years of Misreading Iran.” *Washington Examiner*, February 11, 2019.

<sup>17</sup>Ed Husain, *The House of Islam, A Global History*, 2018, 5.

Khomeini's speeches and writings were rife with anti-American sentiments. Typically, he would declare that "the biggest betrayal of America to our nation is imposing Pahlavi regime on us and supporting it unconditionally and this is only a part of America's oppressing our nation." He would add that "America is the number one enemy of Islam and our nation because it is supporting the Shah. America wants to humiliate the dignity of mankind. It is the responsibility of all Muslims to stand up against and eliminate America; otherwise, the world will remain corrupted as far as America is alive." Montazeri was in total agreement, writing in an open letter: "It is the responsibility of all Muslims to stand up against America and Israel. America wants to destroy Islamic countries by any possible means. People should not forget that America is the number one enemy of Islam."<sup>18</sup>

Seizing power only increased Khomeini's motivation to challenge the United States. To sacralize the struggle, Khomeini and numerous regime representatives had begun referring to the United States as the Great Satan. Chants of "death to America" were a routine part of every rally, whipping up a public frenzy and motivating vigilantes who thrived in the chaotic first year of the revolution. On November 4, 1979, one such group, Students Following the Line of Imam (SFLI), attacked the American embassy in Tehran and took the embassy staff hostage. Despite efforts by the Bazargan government to free the diplomats, they were held in captivity for 400 days. The unprecedented breach of international protocol cemented the regime's status as a revolutionary crusader and an uncompromising foe of the Great Satan.

While tracing the logic of the anti-American animus was easy, the origin of the hostility to Israel, the "Little Satan," was not clear. There was nothing in the traditional Shiite tradition to indicate an even passing interest in the subject of Jerusalem, the Palestinians, or the Jews. Since the return of the Mahdi was not conditioned on controlling any particular of real estate, Muslim holy places were only marginal to the Shiite eschatology. Mecca and Medina were worshiped sacred space where the revelation and the writing of the Koran took place but had no intrinsic value in the process of salvation through the coming of the Mahdi. To the extent that the clergy referred to the issue of Israel, the topic was political and not theological. For instance, in 1933, the Iraqi Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammad Hossein Kashful-gheta, apparently influenced by the tension between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, issued a fatwa urging Muslims to fight against Jews.

<sup>18</sup> *Kayhan* Newspaper, November 2, 1979.

When the Shah recognized the State of Israel, Seyyed Javad Hosseini, an influenced cleric in Qom, attempted to mobilize his cohorts against the move. Ayatollah Borujerdi, however, banned him from public speaking.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of historical precedent did not bother Ayatollah Khomeini who launched a full-throated attack on the Jews while in exile in Najaf. In *Velayat-e faqih*, Khomeini quoted a passage from the Koran to claim that “from the very beginning Islam was afflicted by the Jews. They established anti-Islamic propaganda and engaged in various plots against the Muslims.” Khomeini described the Jews as sinful and as being constantly reprimanded by God for their wickedness. In his view, Jews plotted against Muslims more recently as well, seeking to undermine the most important feature of Islam to facilitate the imperialist penetration of the Muslim countries. As Khomeini put it, “the Jews may God curse them are opposed to the very foundations of Islam and wish to establish Jewish domination throughout the Islamic world. They meddle with the text of the Koran and published false translations that distort its meaning to slander Islam.” Echoing Shariati and Al-e Ahmad, Khomeini describes the Jews as fifth columnists in the Islamic world and as subversive agents of the West who attempts to undermine Islam. Most specifically, he argued that the Shah was a “Jew in disguise” who was subservient to Israel and used to destroy Islam in Iran.<sup>20</sup>

Harsh as these statements were, they could be viewed as part of a classic anti-Semitic repertoire popularized by Al-e Ahmad and Shariati, an opinion espoused by the extensive literature on the regime’s anti-Semitism. However, to the surprise of many, Khomeini’s real radical innovation pertained to the place of Jerusalem and Palestine in the Shiite theology. In 1979, Khomeini declared that the liberation of Jerusalem the central component of Iran’s Islamic ideology. Following the 1979 revolution, Khomeini declared Shiite Islam to be the new liberator of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Zionist enemy, or Little Satan. Khomeini argued that the Islamic Revolution in Iran was a prelude to the liberation of Jerusalem and the revolution would not be completed until Jerusalem was back in Muslim hands. He defined the conflict with Israel as the struggle between good and evil, adding that it was the religious obligation of all

<sup>19</sup> Montazeri, the Memoir, pp. 145–147.

<sup>20</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *Velayat-e Faqih*; Hawzah, *Zionism Waist Broke in Iran*, [Hawzah.net](http://hawzah.net), <https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/5737/6768/80895>; Katajun Amirpur, *Iran’s Policy Toward Jewish Iranians and the State of Israel*, *Die Welt des Islam*, 52 (2012), 370–399.

Muslims to resist the profane Jewish entity. In other words, the liberation of Jerusalem was not considered to a Palestinian responsibility alone, but an undertaking of the entire Muslim world led by Tehran.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars who analyzed Khomeini's narrative pointed out that elements of it were adopted from the teachings of Qutab who considered the secular Muslim leaders to be "crypto-Jews" bent on destroying Islam from within. Indeed, Ayatollah Khomeini often charged the Shah of being a "crypto-Jew." However, others noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran espoused "the most radical anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist position in the Muslim Middle East." In this view, the regime practiced "redemptive anti-Semitism," a highly virulent form of anti-Semitism which considered the physical annihilation of Israel to be the highest callings. There is little doubt that redemptive anti-Semitism was an integral part of neo-Shiism. Still, the obsessive focus on Jerusalem might have had a realpolitik purpose as well. Since the Saudi Kingdom, the main rival of Khomeinism, was the custodian of Mecca and Medina, Khomeini tried to even the playing field by declaring the Muslim shrines of Jerusalem to be of equal value and essentially appointing Iran as its custodian.<sup>22</sup>

## ERECTING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR REVOLUTIONARY EXPORT: ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE BY PROXIES

Although Khomeini declared America to be a "fake power" and boasted that "our nation will defeat this fake power," the new regime realized that Iran could not win a conventional war because of the huge disparity in power. Brigadier General S.K. Malik, an Islamist who served on the Pakistani General Staff, offered a solution to the quandary of power imbalance in his popular book, the *Koranic Concept of War*. Malik argued that unlike Western military strategy, Islamic warfare was rooted in jihad, the holy war which was, by definition, asymmetrical. He added that jihad allowed for terror operations, including suicide attacks on civilians. Malik explained that terror operations create fear and panic among the target population, lowering its morale and eroding its staying power in a conflict.

<sup>21</sup> A Quick Look at the History of Struggle Against Zionism by Shiite Ulama, <http://revolution.pchi.ir/show.php?page=contents&cid=4928>.

<sup>22</sup> Meir Litwak, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism," *Journal of Israeli History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2006; Ben Cohen, "Global anti-Semitism Now Has a Leader," *The Tower*, September 2015.

As for Muslim civilians, Malik postulated they were bound by the Koran to sacrifice their life for the jihad. To the individual volunteer, the title of *mujahid* (holy warrior) gave meaning in life and bestowed greatness after death. Not incidentally, this type of redemptive sacrifice was the only way to avenge the Western-inflicted *Karama*, a notion that both the Shiite and the Sunni jihadis have shared. To them, jihadi terror was “holy terror,” to be used in the conflict between good and evil. Analysts subsequently confirmed Malik’s assumption. As one of them put it, “terrorism—use of violence by a non-state actor primarily against noncombatants,” creates a political and psychological reaction “which is out of proportion to the actual destruction it inflicts.”<sup>23</sup>

While neither Khomeini nor Montazeri was a strategist, they could rely on a cadre of professional revolutionaries and guerrilla fighters led by Mustafa Chamran. A physicist who lived in the United States, in 1965, Chamran created the Red Shiism organization to train Shiite militants. Chamran propagated his ideas during his travels to Egypt and Cuba, eventually moving to Lebanon in 1971, where the Palestinians put him in touch with an international terror network. In 1972, George Habash, the head of the Popular Front of Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), organized a conference in Baddawi, a Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The Baddawi summit forged the International Center for Resistance of Imperialism, Zionism, Racism, Reaction, and Fascism, a loose alliance of Middle East terror groups which Chamran had joined. He established close links with Yasser Arafat who offered him and other Iranian militants, including the sons of Khomeini and Montazeri, to train with the elite unit, Fatah Force 17.<sup>24</sup>

In 1979, these revolutionary cadres returned to Iran where they played a leading role in the Revolutionary Guards and *Sazman-e Engelabi-e*

<sup>23</sup> S.K. Malik, *The Quranic Concept of War*. Lahore, Reprint in India: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 1979; Ed Husain, *The House of Islam, A Global History*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, 5; Daniel E. Price, *Sacred Terror: How Faith Becomes Lethal*, Praeger, 2012, 65, 183; Ronen Bergman, *the 30 Year Old War: The Secret Struggle*, 378; Nance, Malcolm, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe*, Skyhorse Publishing, 2016, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> MNA, The story of the most powerful Lebanese Student of Shahid Chamran, Mashregh News Agency, June 23, 2014, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/320827/>; ماجرای قوی‌ترین شاگرد لبنانی شهید چمران; ISNA, Martyr Chamran According to Adel Aoun, Iranian Students News Agency, June 21, 2015, <https://www.isna.ir/news/94033117479/>; شهید چمران به‌روایت عادل‌عون.

*Todehay-e Jomhory-e Islami-e Iran* (SATJA). Mohammed Montazeri, son of Ayatollah Montazeri, was in charge of SATJA, but after his death in 1981, Mehdi Hashemi, his close associate, took over the group, renaming it Office for Liberation Movement (OLM). In 1984, OLM joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ahmed Vahidi, the head of the intelligence department of the Guards, co-directed the foreign operations group SATJA and OLM, until in 1989 when he was appointed to head the newly created Quds Force (QF).

Even before the revolutionary project was formally institutionalized within the Quds Force, the IRGC launched a multipronged program to carry out Khomeini's mandate. At the theoretical level, the Guards invested considerable efforts in developing the asymmetrical warfare doctrine and tactics. Hassan Abbassi, a noted strategist, helmed the Center for Borderless Doctrinal Analysis (*Markaz-e Barresihay-e Doctorinal Amniyat-e Bedone Marz*), also called the Yaghin think tank (*Andishkadeye Yaghin*). In 2005, the IRGC's Imam Hussein University founded the Center for Asymmetrical Warfare. Ali Jafari, a future IRGC chief, served as the first head and, in a testimony to its importance, virtually all top IRGC-QF commanders either graduated or taught there.<sup>25</sup>

Asymmetrical warfare has been used throughout history, but four innovations gave the Iranians a winning edge. First, the Guards networked with both Shiite and Sunni proxies on a sliding scale principle, according to network theory. Hezbollah and other Shiite militias enjoyed close and intense contacts with the Guard. On the other hand, relations with Sunni groups like Al-Qaeda were undertaken to achieve a narrowly defined goal, and were minimal and sporadic. The resultant network made intelligence work challenging. Terror network experts noted that "diffuse networks and unclear sponsorship" resulted in failure to connect the dots. Parts of the terror web could turn into the "dark network" with an "undetermined amount of missing data." With regard to Iran—proxy network in particular—"the blending of jihadist groups Shiites and Sunnis is a hard target for intelligence agencies and law enforcement to track and interdict due to the fluid and sometimes short-lived nature of such alliances."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Hassan Abassi, *Soft Government and Doctrine of Asymmetrical Warfare*, <http://andish-kadeh.ir/حکومت-نرم-و-دکترین-اقدام-نامنقارن-در-جه/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ian O. Lesser, et al. *Countering the New Terrorism*, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1999; James F. Morris and Richard F. Deckro, *SNA Data Difficulties with Dark Network*, "Behavioral Science of Terrorism and Political Aggression, vol. 5, 2013 issue 2, 70–93; Dave



Use of proxies gave Iran deniability which “prevented the state actor from being tainted by the actions, allowed it to negotiate in apparent good faith by claiming they are not responsible for the actions of parties who are merely sympathizers or avoid being accused of belligerent actions or war crimes.” In the words of one commentator, these “connections were largely circumstantial, buried in complex, poorly understood networks of operatives, fundamentalist leaders and wealthy Arab donors.”<sup>27</sup> Even when linkage was suspected, the covert nature of IRGC’s project enabled the regime to either strongly deny or obfuscate its role. For instance, the Quds Force worked with cultural and philanthropic organizations to conceal its input or send “volunteers” in civilian clothing, acting as advisors, or removed markings from weapons and munitions. Financial contributions were so well concealed, making estimations difficult.<sup>28</sup>

Second, by adopting suicide bombing as a weapon of choice, IRGC-QF achieved “the best of both worlds: the precision and sophistication of the most complex technology and the reliability and simplicity of delivery.” The Israeli military described this tactic as the “poor person’s smart bomb,” a tribute to the ingenuity of the Guards. Because the Koran forbade suicide, Ayatollah Khomeini had to break new theological grounds on this score as well. Initially, Khomeini praised the collective sacrifice of the teenage boys deployed by the Guards as human waves against the Iraqi military. When one of them, Hossein Fahmideh, threw himself on a tank in what was an act of suicide, the Supreme Leader declared him to be a martyr. Sheikh Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah, used the Fahmideh precedent to issue a fatwa declaring that suicide bombings are equivalent to combat action which could also be perpetrated against enemy civilians. Known also as “offensive jihad” or “martyrdom operations,” this so-called sacred terror became part of Islamist indoctrination disseminated in pamphlets and brochures to battlefield militants.<sup>29</sup>

Dilegge, Iranian and Hezbollah Hybrid Warfare Activities, *Small Wars Journal Anthology*, 2016, 253.

<sup>27</sup> Assaf Moghaddam, *Nexus of Global Jihad Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actor*, New York: Columbia University Press, 73; John Miller, *The Cell: Inside the 9/11 Plot, and Why the FBI and CIA Failed to Stop It*, Simon & Schuster, 2002, 139.

<sup>28</sup> Austin Carson, *Secret Wars Covert Conflict in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Helmer, “Hezbollah Employment of Suicide Bombing,” *Military Review*, vol. 86, July–August 2006; Dilegge, *Iranian and Hezbollah Hybrid Warfare Activities*, p. 287.



however, the militias played an important role in deterrence. As one observer summarized the unspoken rule of engagement as “either we are safe, or no one is,” meaning that attempts against Iran would trigger a wave of terror in the Middle East and beyond. Interestingly enough, after signing the nuclear agreement in 2015, threats to active proxy terror network had increased, much to the dismay of the Obama administration which hoped to convert Iran into a law-abiding member of the international community. As the following chapters indicate, the regime used terror threats and terror attacks against an array of its enemies.<sup>33</sup>

To train militants, the IRGC opened a facility in Manzariah Camp (Shahid Bahonar Camp) in Tehran which Ayatollah Khomeini inaugurated on February 11, 1982. The sprawling facility was a laboratory for asymmetrical warfare tactics, known as “niche means.” Suicide bombings, hijackings of planes, bomb-making, large explosive devices, guerrilla warfare were among the skills taught. Ayatollah Fazlollah Mahdizadeh Mahalati, known as Fazlollah Mahalati, Khomeini’s representatives to the Revolutionary Guard, lectured in the suicide program for specially selected volunteers. The first commander of Manzariah was Abbas Golru, a Guardsman who distinguished himself in 1981. Golru and his successors reached out to experts from North Korea, Syria, and various radical Palestinian groups. Farsi-speaking KGB officers joined the foreign trainers. Between 1981 and 1985, a total of 3000 individuals were trained, making Iran the second-best terrorist state after the Soviet Union, according to some accounts. By the summer of 1996, intelligence sources revealed the existence of 11 camps which graduate some 5000 extremists annually.<sup>34</sup>

In yet another innovation geared toward exporting the revolution, the IRGC-QF worked very closely with the Foreign Ministry to utilize the Iranian embassies. The idea was the brainchild of Javad Mansouri, the first commander of the IRGC who went on to assume the post of the Deputy Foreign Minister on March 20, 1981. Shortly after, on November 1, Mansouri was placed in charge of “transforming every Iranian embassy

<sup>33</sup> Chahram Chubin, *Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated*, Gulf Research Center, September 2012, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Richard J. Leitner, Peter M. Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings: The Lost Reports of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare*, Washington, Crossbow Books, 2007, p. 194; Bodansky, *Target America*, 10–11; Tabnak, In Memory of Martyr Fazlollah Mahalati, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/149217/به-یاد-شهید-فضل-الله-محلاتی>; Coughlin, Khomeini’s Ghost, pp. 325–329.

abroad into an intelligence center and a base for exporting the revolution.” Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, a disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini from his Najaf days and a collaborator of Mohammed Montazeri in SATJA days, became a prototype of the ambassador-revolutionary exporter. As would be discussed in Chap. 2, Mohtashamipour, who served as the ambassador in Damascus, was pivotal in establishing Hezbollah.<sup>35</sup>

Along the military side, “soft measures” such as political activism, propaganda, education about Khomeinism, and other forms of outreach have been developed and lavishly funded. Iranian cultural centers became ubiquities throughout the Middle East as well as the Muslim communities around the world. The Quds Force identified promising “identity entrepreneurs,” who specialized “in articulating and publicizing ethnoreligious grievances.” After a process of “maturation,” these groups were counted upon to foment social protest. In more advanced cases, proxy groups morphed into political parties, a process which the Iranians encouraged and nurtured. These dual-use proxies garnered political legitimacy while offering a cover for terror. Altogether, the combination of tactics fits the characteristics of Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), which described as a conflict where lines between politics and war, civilians and combatants, are blurred.<sup>36</sup>

4GW experts explained that the simultaneous use of all available networks “political, economic, social and military” aimed at persuading the enemy decision makers that its “strategic goals were either unachievable or too costly.” Inflicting heavy casualties on the civilian population was one way to prove this point. Another way was to keep the enemy in perpetual violence-laced tension. This so-called strategy of tension was said to cause “psychological exhaustion” among policy makers and rank and file alike, causing a retreat.<sup>37</sup>

The structure of the book is well suited to analyzing the working of the proxy system. Each chapter covers a project engineered by the Iranian regime acting through the IRGC-QF; it offers a detailed analysis of the way in which the goals of revolution export are melded with the imperative of regime defense and national interests. Chapter 2 covers the

<sup>35</sup> Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, 193.

<sup>36</sup> William S. Lind, “The Changing Face of War. The Fourth Generation,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989; Matthisen, *The Other Saudis*, 2015, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Dilegge, *Iranian and Hezbollah Hybrid Warfare Activities*, 75; Jonathan Spyer, “Iran Response: The Strategy of Tension,” *Jerusalem Post*, June 1, 2018; Michael Griffith, *Islamic State, Rewriting History*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, 179.



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## CHAPTER 2

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# Hezbollah in Lebanon: Creating the Model Proxy

In many ways, Lebanon was an ideal country to test the new formula of revolutionary export by proxy. By the early 1970s, the confessional political system of Lebanon dominated by the Maronite Christians, the Sunnis, and the Shiites had unraveled. An early example of the so-called failed state, Lebanon was plagued with corruption, struggles over profits from the flourishing narcotics trade, and finally a fully-fledged civil war. After King Hussein expelled the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Jordan in 1970, Yasser Arafat relocated his Fatah group to the south of Lebanon, followed by other PLO factions. Arafat understood that the weak government of Lebanon would not challenge him, but he did not count on the pushback from the Christians and, to a lesser extent, the Shiites who found themselves unwilling hosts to the well-armed and violent militants.<sup>1</sup>

Even without the Palestinian intrusion, the Shiites, an economically and politically marginalized minority, were receptive to Khomeini's appeal to the *mustazafeen*. Mousa Sader and other Lebanese members of the Najaf circle were well acquainted with the writings of Ali Shariati and his syncretic take on Islam and socialism. Subhi Tufayli, the most radical member of the Najaf clergy, was a passionate spokesman for the Shiite poor. His movement, *Thorat al-Jiyya* (Revolution of the Hungry), urged a

<sup>1</sup>Jonathan V. Marshall, "The Lebanese Connection," Corruption, Civil Wars, and International Drug Traffic, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, 259–260.



fully-fledged political revolution in Lebanon, with a particular emphasis on sectarian redistribution of wealth.

It was, however, Musa Sader, a highly charismatic cleric, who emerged as the leader of the fledgling movement. The Iranian-born Sader came from a distinguished clerical dynasty in Lebanon but spent most of his early years in Iran where he enjoyed close relations with some of the first followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. Upon return to Lebanon, Sader formed the Amal movement (*Harakat Amal*) which, in line with the proxy theory, comprised a political and military wing. Mustafa Chamran, a veteran revolutionary who formed the anti-shah Red Shiism group and received training in terrorism in Cuba and Egypt, advised Sader on military affairs. Chamran, who was involved in the International Center for Resistance of Imperialism, Zionism, Racism, Reaction, and Fascism and had good relations with the Palestinian terror groups, recommended that Amal members train in Fatah camps. The secret collaboration was exposed when, in April 1975, a training accident killed some 30 Amal recruits. A year later, Imad Mughniyah, a Shiite from a modest background, and his cousin Mustafa Badreddine joined another Fatah training camp. Mughniyah demonstrated impressive organizational and military skills from a young age, according to Anis Nakash, the Lebanese terrorist who headed one of the camps. Soon after, Mughniyah founded the Students Brigade, a group of 100 young Shiite men who fought with Arafat's elite Force 17.<sup>2</sup>

In August 1978, while on a visit to Libya, Sader disappeared under suspicious circumstance. With the leader missing, tensions within Amal had quickly surfaced. Nabi Berri, a secular lawyer, took over the organization, but the Islamists within the movement pushed to embrace the *velayat-e faqih* ideology. The success of the Khomeini revolution deepened the split between the so-called Saderists and the Khomeinists, also known as the "turbaned" Shiites. Sheikh Hassan Fadlallah, a prominent cleric who settled in Lebanon in 1966 after spending years in Najaf, emerged as the de facto leader of the group. Sheikh Subhi Tufalyi, Ragheb Harb, Abbas Musawi, and Hassan Nasrallah, among others, joined the group. Signaling their early commitment to Khomeinism, Harb became the head of the Committee to Support the Islamist Revolution in Iran. In the summer of 1979, he and a large delegation of clerics traveled to Tehran to meet with Chamran, the soon-to-be defense minister. Meanwhile,

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Blanford, *Warriors of God, Inside Hezbollah's Thirty Year Struggle Against Israel* 2011, loc. 459, 557.

Mohammad Montazeri, who co-founded *Sazman-e Engelabi-e Todehay-e Jomhori-e Islami-e Iran* (SATJA) with Chamran, sent 100 Iranian volunteers to start an Islamist revolution in Lebanon. Their plans collapsed when Hafez Assad of Syria, then in partial control of Lebanon, stopped them while in transit in Damascus.<sup>3</sup>

It fell to Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, a close associate of Khomeini and a leading revolutionary exporter, to implement the Lebanon project. Mohtashamipour, appointed as an envoy to Damascus, turned his embassy into a fully-fledged political-military operation, along with the directives of Javad Mansouri mentioned in the previous chapter. Unlike other ambassadors, he had a large budget and was said to use the diplomatic pouch to transfer military supplies. He worked hard to unite several small factions, namely, the Lebanese al Dawa, al-Amal al Islamiya (Islamic Amal), the Islamic Jihad, the Association of Islamic Students, Hussein Suicide Squad, Jundallah (Soldiers of God), and the Islamic Jihad Organization. Quds Force (QF) emissaries and embassy employees mounted an outreach to the Shiite clans in the Beqaa Valley. While the stronger clans aligned with Berri's Amal, some of the weaker ones—al Sayeeds, al Tahas, al Tufalys, the al Younis, and the al Musawis—followed the Khomeinists. By 1983, Mohtashamipour could claim the title of the architect of Hezbollah.<sup>4</sup>

Not to be outdone, Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) sent its representative, Hussein Sheikholeslam, a protégé of Chamran to Lebanon; Sheikholeslam was one of the hostage takers in the American embassy who served as an assistant for political affairs in the foreign ministry. Ayatollah Montazeri dispatched Sheikh Mohammed Ismael Khaleq “Razali” as his personal envoy. The rush of envoys signified the importance of Lebanon as the anchor of the regime's revolutionary project. Mohtashamipour was very explicit on this point: “Hezbollah is part of the Iranian rulership ... a central component of the Iranian security and military establishment, the ties between Iran and Hezbollah are far greater than those between a revolutionary regime and a revolutionary party outside its borders.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Shimon Shapira, *Hizbullah between Iran and Lebanon*, Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2000, p. 71 (Hebrew), p. 71 (Hebrew); Mohammed Ataie, “Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 20, Summer 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Nizar A. Hamze “Class Conflict, Hezbollah and the Lebanese State,” *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, winter 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Ofira Seliktar, *Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama*, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 49; David Dilegge, *Iranian and Hezbollah. Hybrid Warfare Activities*, *A Small War Journal Anthology*, Small Wars Foundation, 2016, 286.

## THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY STRUCTURE OF HEZBOLLAH: A STATE WITHIN A STATE WITHIN AN UMMAH

Following the proxy blueprint, Hezbollah was conceived as a hybrid organization whose political and social wings were designed to garner popular legitimacy. Duplicating some of Iran's bonyads, Hezbollah sat up a comprehensive welfare system for the Shiite poor. The organization offered discounted or free medical services, free education, and cultural event. Abbas Musawi, the soon-to-be Secretary General of Hezbollah, established a prominent seminary in the Beqaa Valley where Hassan Nasrallah, its future leader, became his protégé. Promising students were sent on scholarships to Iran. Hezbollah moved energetically to create its own mass communication system, featuring newspapers, radio, and TV stations. As Sheikh Abbas Musawi noted, "When the stands of the mosques will associate themselves with the modern stands of television, it is at this moment that we would be able to create the Ummah." One analyst commented that this totalistic neopatrimonial system created a "culture of dependency ... a bedrock on which Hezbollah could build its society of resistance." Such a unique blend of "religious observance with violence" gave Hezbollah a steady flow of foot soldiers and commanders alike. Musawi acknowledged that all Hezbollah operations, military, and others "were part of a plan launched by the Islamic resistance to seize the initiative and escalate the jihad" in Lebanon first, and then to the Muslims of the world.<sup>6</sup>

On the advice of the Iranians, Hezbollah joined the political process in Lebanon. In their first election in 1992, the party gained 12 seats in the 128-seat parliament. Although in subsequent polls, Hezbollah went down to 10 and 8 places, respectively, it rebounded in 2004, winning 14 seats. Hezbollah's showing in local elections was also quite respectable, garnering an average 20 percent of the municipalities in the 2000s. While valuable in their own right, the political activities of Hezbollah provided a protective shield to its terrorist wing. As one scholar summed it up, "you cannot single out a legitimate political party for an attack."<sup>7</sup>

None of Hezbollah's extensive infrastructure came cheap. Several large Iranian foundations funded the revolutionary export. The Imam Khomeini

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Joseph Dahar, Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God, Pluto Press, 2016*, p. 159; *Blanford, Warriors of God*, loc. 1453, 1491; *Yossef Bodansky, Target America: Terrorism in the U.S. Today, 1993*, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> *Dilegge, Iranian and Hezbollah*, 251.

Relief Committee (IKRC), founded on March 5, 1979, was vital in this effort. Better known as the *Emdad Committee*, it provided the bulk of the funds, but help to Hezbollah came through new foundations, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and even its construction arm, *Khatam al Anbiya* (Construction Headquarters). Over the years, Iranian underwriting of its key proxy had varied; current estimates put the figure at some 800 million dollars.<sup>8</sup>

Building a state within a state required a tightly controlled, authoritarian party structure. After the process of consolidation, the founding groups agreed that the Decision-Making Consultative Body (Majlis Shura al-Qarar) would run Hezbollah. Commonly referred to as Shura, it comprised the Secretary General of the party, his deputy, and five high-ranking members. The General Convention (*al Mutamar al Am*), a body of some 200 high rankings of Hezbollah, elected the Shura.

Nominally, Shura controlled the party's civil and military wings. However, the military *al Majlis al Jihadi*, Jihadi Council (JC), enjoyed considerable autonomy in running its three military departments. As a state within a state, the Security Organ Unit (SOU) has operated as a "quasi-state apparatus" responsible for the security of Hezbollah members and campaigns against "internal enemies," ranging from the rival Amal to individual critics of the organization. The SOU also runs extensive counterespionage and counterterror operations. The Islamic Resistance Unit (IRU) was geared toward the struggle with Israel, and the External Security Apparatus (ESA) was in charge of operations conducted outside Lebanon. The SOU, IRU, and ESA were an iteration the Special Research Apparatus (*Jihaz al-Mubakhathat al Kassa*), renamed Unit 980, which Mughniyah and his brother-in-law Mousa Badreddine established in 1981. Three brothers from the Hammadi clan were also close to the inner circle. Abdul Haddi Hammadi was the chief of security of Hezbollah, and his two brothers, Mohammad Ali, and Abbas Ali, occupied important positions in the ESA.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> NCRI-U.S. Representative Office, IRAN: The Rise of the Revolutionary Guards' Financial Empire: How the Supreme Leader and the IRGC Rob the People to Fund International Terror, National Council of Resistance of Iran-US Office, 2017; Hagai Amit, More Powerful Than Nuclear Weapons: Iranian Money Is Taking Over the Mideast, Haaretz, May 11, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-more-powerful-than-nukes-iranian-money-is-taking-over-the-the-mideast-1.6075916>.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Dahar, *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God*, Pluto Press, 2016, p. 232; Magnus Ranstorp, *Hezbollah in Lebanon: The Politics of Western Hostage Taking*, p. 99; Ronen Bergman, "The Megaterrorist Who Never Gave Up on the Good Life," *Ynet News*, May 15, 2016.

Quick to recognize his skills, the IRGC commander, Mohsen Rezaei, commissioned Mughniyah as an officer, and Ahmed Vahidi, the head of the newly created Quds Force, placed him under his direct control. Having been aware that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) built an individual listening station on Mount Sannine, the Iranians constructed two independent telephone exchanges to protect Mughniyah's communications. Hundreds of Hezbollah militants trained in Manzarieh and other camps in Iran, while Quds Force commanders had opened compounds in the Beqaa Valley.<sup>10</sup>

### THE ISRAELI INVASION OF LEBANON: IRAN'S CARPE DIEM MOMENT

The Israeli invasion in June 1982 proved highly fortuitous for the Iranian hardliners. On June 6, 1982, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) crossed the border to start the Operation Peace of Galilee which, to the surprise of many in the Likud cabinet, ended in Beirut. By executing this allegedly deceptive move, Ariel Sharon, the Ministry of Defense, and Lieutenant General Rafael Eitan, the IDF chief, hoped to install a pro-Israeli government under Bashir Gemayel. However, Gemayel was assassinated in September, and the Christian Falangists retaliated by massacring some 800 Palestinians and Shiites in the Sabra and Shatila camps. Although the IDF did not directly participate in the atrocity, the international community roundly condemned Israel. Facing a public backlash, the IDF had gradually withdrawn to a security belt in the south of Lebanon controlled with the help of the South Lebanon Army (SOLA), a Christian militia under its control.

Ali Khamenei, the then president of Iran, declared that "to us, there is no difference between the fronts in the South of Iraq and South Lebanon." Far from hyperbole, Khamenei was signaling to the Bazargan government, an opponent of the expansionist foreign policy, that the Israeli occupation changed the parameters of the discourse and that IRGC-QF would be free to intervene. Hassan Nasrallah subsequently acknowledged that there would be no Hezbollah without the Israeli occupation.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> David Crist, *Twilight Wars, The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year War with Iran* (New York: Penguin Books, 130); Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power*, Free Press, 2008, 360; Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 1342.

<sup>11</sup> Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 801; Crist, *Twilight Wars*, 124.

Less than a month after the invasion, the Revolutionary Guards moved to create the infrastructure for implementing the asymmetrical warfare strategy. In July 1982, Mohtashamipour facilitated a meeting between a delegation of Guards commanders and President Hafez Assad to request permission for an IRGC contingent to cross into the Beqaa Valley. Assad, whose forces had suffered a humiliating blow at the hands of the Israeli Air Force, was open to the overture. Brigadier General Ali Reza Ashgari was put in charge of the operation, and a contingent of 1500 Guards from the Mohammed Rasullulah Division under Mohsen Rafiqdoost arrived, ostensibly to fight the IDF. Rafiqdoost, another alumnus of the PLO training camps, had a good grasp of the problems on the ground. The 500 volunteers who stayed on set up an operational base in the Sheikh Abdullah Barracks in Baalbek and a training camp in Jana. While the Guards trained the Lebanese volunteers in traditional guerrilla methods, suicide bombing received special prominence. A notice on the door of the Guards office “proclaimed them to be lovers of martyrdom.”<sup>12</sup>

In the Lebanese context, extortion to martyrdom was hardly an empty slogan. Except for the human waves in the Iran-Iraq war, martyrdom operations were not popular in Iran. The Lebanese Shiites, however, embraced Khomeini’s call to martyrdom with uncommon zeal. Sheikh Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah, praised suicide bombing as the highest form of sacrifice. He argued that foreign occupation of Muslim land justified such means, notably because it was the only weapon that could make even the odds against Western military might.<sup>13</sup>

Mughniyah’s Special Research Apparatus was in charge of implementing the asymmetrical warfare strategy through a series of devastating suicide bombings that caught both the Americans and the Israelis by surprise. Using his PLO connections, Mughniyah procured explosives from Yasser Arafat’s second-in-command, Khalil Wazir, known as Abu Jihad. Ahmed Qassir, a teenager from the village of Deir Qhanoun Al Nahar, volunteered for the first mission. On November 11, 1982, Qassir drove a car packed with explosive into the IDF headquarters in Tyre, killing 75 people. Encouraged by the success, in March 1983, Mughniyah met with

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey William Lewis, *The Business of Martyrdom. A History of Suicide Bombing*, 113; Bergman, “The Megaterrorist Who Never Gave Up on the Good Life.”

<sup>13</sup> Daniel E. Price, *Sacred Terror: How Faith Becomes Lethal*, Praeger, 2012, 65, 183; Daniel Helmer, “Hezbollah Employment of Suicide Bombing,” *Military Review*, vol. 86, July–August, 2006.

Mohtashamipour and Syrian intelligence officials to plan more attacks. Mughniyah took it upon himself to provide the organizational structure, the Syrians furnished intelligence, and the Iranians supplied the finances. On April 18, a suicide bombing destroyed the American embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people, including Robert C. Ames, the CIA lead Middle East intelligence officer, and many of his colleagues. The CIA believed that the Syrians supplied the information on the intelligence gathering in the embassy. On October 24, a suicide bomber drove a truck into the marine barracks in Beirut, with the loss of 241 lives. Within seconds, a suicide bombing targeted the French barracks, killing 55 paratroopers. The Americans and French troops who served as part of the Multination Force (MNF) subsequently withdrew from Lebanon.

On November 4, a suicide attack killed 28 personnel in an IDF compound. In another blow to the United States, on September 20, 1984, a total of 24 people died in an explosion in the Annex of the American embassy in East Beirut. Propelled by these successes, suicide bombing, a rapidly diffusing technology, became a staple of both Sunni and Shiite jihadism.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to suicide bombings, legitimizing kidnapping proved controversial. Fadlallah for once argued that the type of moral justification accorded to suicide martyrdom could not be applied to kidnapping and hostage-taking. Much to the surprise of his followers, he defined such acts as “inhumane and irreligious” and “un-Islamic methods.” Fadlallah explained that kidnapping and hijacking had “many negative aspects” whose costs outweigh the benefits. In his words, “we must not get carried out by this method. Today you do the highjacking and tomorrow you are a victim of a highjack.” However, the IRGC overrode his objection on the ground that abductions leveled the asymmetrical playing field between “oppressed nations” and “imperialists.” Fadlallah admitted as much in an article published in *Middle East Insight* in 1986 titled “Islam and Violence.” In his words, “I came up against a blank wall because there is a mysterious force that is behind this action.”<sup>15</sup>

There was little mystery about the “mysterious force” which Fadlallah complained of. Both the Quds Force and Mughniyah considered abductions an important tool in eroding American willingness to project its

<sup>14</sup> Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 967; Jeffrey William Lewis, *The Business of Martyrdom: A History of Suicide Bombing*, Naval Institute Press, 2012; Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 162.

power in Lebanon and beyond. Besides, the different clans and families associated with Hezbollah turned kidnappings for ransom into a profitable cottage industry. Between 1982 and 1992, a total of 96 Western hostages were seized; Americans led with 25 hostages, followed by British and French. David S. Dodge, the president of the American University in Beirut, was the first to be kidnapped on June 19, 1982; Terry Anderson, a journalist released on December 4, 1991, was the longest kept hostage. William B. Buckley, the CIA chief in Beirut, abducted on March 16, 1984, was tortured to death before disclosing enough information to fill a 400-page report. In 1988, Colonel William R. Higgins who served with the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission was kidnapped in southern Lebanon while returning from a meeting with Amal representatives. Mohtashamipour and Brigadier General Ali Reza Asgari (nicknamed “Reza Chieftain” by his colleagues) ordered the action. Higgins was tortured and killed; a year and a half later, his captors released images of his body hanged by the neck. When informed about the circumstances of Higgins death, Ali Shamkani, then Minister of Revolutionary Guards, was outraged because of a loss of valuable hostage.<sup>16</sup>

Details of the Iranian involvement in the abduction network were revealed when Terry Anderson sued Hezbollah in an American court. Robert Oakley, a former ambassador to Pakistan and the director of the State Department’s Office of Terrorism, “positively identified the head of MOIS as responsible for the seizure of the Americans in Beirut.” Giandomenico Picco, a UN official in charge of the hostage negotiations, recalled that a slightly disguised Mughniyah was sometimes present at the meetings. As for Buckley, the listening post on Mount Sennine indicated that the CIA chief was held for a while in Guard’s Sheikh Abdullah Barracks in Beqaa.<sup>17</sup>

While the Lebanese militants tried to consolidate their enterprise, the IRGC-QF sought to deploy them more directly in the Iran-Iraq war.

<sup>16</sup>Walter Reich, ed. *Origins of Terrorism. Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies and States of Mind*, 154; Martin Kramer, “ Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran: The Challenges for Israel and the West,” *The Sydney Papers* (Sydney), vol. 18, no. 3–4 (Winter-Spring 2006), pp. 19–27; VOA, *This Day in History: Journalist Terry Anderson Abducted in Beirut*, VOA, March 16, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ap-journalist-terry-anderson-abducted-in-beirut-this-day-in-history/3768836.html>; David Crist, *The Twilight War. The Secret History of America’s War with Iran*. 2012, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup>Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 167; Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 1342; Giandomenico Picco, *A Man without A Gun, One Diplomat’s Secret Struggle to Free the Hostages, Fight Terrorism, and End a War*, Crown, 1999.



## RETRIBUTION FOR OPERATION STAUNCH: THE ATTACK IN KUWAIT

Caught unprepared by the Iran-Iraq war, the Reagan administration was initially hesitant about getting involved. There were even some in Washington who felt that the mutual blood-letting by the two rivals was beneficial to American national interests. However, as Iraq had begun losing momentum, the White House decided to help Saddam Hussein as the lesser of two evils. In early 1983, Washington declared a global embargo on arms known as "Operation Staunch" which deprived Iran of desperately needed arms and ammunition. Iraq was given satellite intelligence on the movement of Iranian troops, and some restrictions on selling American dual technology items were lifted. The administration also opened a line of credit through the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) that ultimately reached one billion dollars annually.<sup>18</sup>

In an act of retaliation, the Quds Force orchestrated massive coordinated attack against multiple targets in Kuwait on December 12, 1983. A suicide bomber detonated explosives in front of the American embassy, and a car exploded close to the gate of the French embassy. Kuwait's main oil refinery, the Shuaiba Petrochemical Plant, the desalination plant, the airport, the Electricity Control Center, and the living quarters of the American employees of Raytheon Corporation were also targeted. If successful, the attack would have been the "worst terrorist episode in the twentieth-century in the Middle East," according to one analyst. Luckily, only a fraction of the poorly rigged devices exploded, leaving six people dead. The Islamic Jihad Organization, one of the names which Hezbollah used, and the Iraqi-based Shiite group Dawa, took responsibility for the bombing. The Kuwaiti authorities tried 17 perpetrators, including Mustafa Badreddine.<sup>19</sup>

To free his brother-in-law Badreddine and the other prisoners from the Kuwaiti jail, Mughniyah orchestrated a string of kidnappings and plane hijacking. On August 26, 1983, he ordered the hijacking of an Air France airplane to force the release of Kuwaiti terrorists. On July 31, 1984,

<sup>18</sup> Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf*. New York: Times Books, 1990, p. 145; Jentleson, Bruce W. 1994. *With Friends like These: Reagan, Bush and Saddam 1982–1990*, New York: W.W. Norton; Teicher, Howard, and Gayle Radley Teicher. 1993. *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm: America's Flawed Vision in the Middle East from Nixon to Bush*. New York: William Morrow.

<sup>19</sup> Caryle Murphy, "Bombs, Hostages Family Link," *Washington Post*, July 24, 1999.

another Air France flight was hijacked in Germany and flown to Iran, where the Islamic Organization for the Release of Jerusalem destroyed it after releasing the passengers. On December 4, 1984, a Kuwaiti plane was forced to land in Iran in a bid to free the Dawa prisoners.<sup>20</sup>

On June 17, 1985, a Trans World Airlines (TWA) plane in Athens was hijacked and flown to Beirut with 153, mostly American, passengers aboard. The hijackers, who included Mughniyah, threatened to kill the Americans if their compatriots in Kuwait and Israel were not released. To show their resolve, the hijackers murdered a navy diver, Robert Stethem, and threw his body onto the tarmac. The United States planned a rescue operation and moved the aircraft Nimitz off the coast of Beirut, prompting Assad and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the powerful Majlis Speaker, to mediate. Syria offered the hijackers a haven, and Israel released 300 Shiites from its prisons as a gesture of goodwill to the United States. Much to the disappointment of Hezbollah, the Kuwaiti government stood firm and refused to release the so-called Kuwaiti 17. Badreddine and the others escaped after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.<sup>21</sup>

## THE GREAT DEBATE: THE LOGIC OF STATE VERSUS THE LOGIC OF REVOLUTION

For the IRGC-QF, the architects of the asymmetrical war, the suicide bombings, kidnappings, and hijackings were a low-cost game. Mohsen Rezaei and Ahmed Vahidi could point out that the United States, whose citizens suffered the brunt of the attacks, had shown little appetite for retaliation, an argument which was crucial for assessing the cost and benefit of the policy. Indeed, even a cursory glance of the American policy seemed to corroborate their claim. Although President Ronald Reagan promised to challenge Iran, his administration was paralyzed by a split between those who wanted to punish the Revolutionary Guards and those who urged caution. William Casey, Reagan's CIA director, and the National Security Adviser William P. Clark pressured the president to approve the bombing of the Guards barracks in the Beqaa valley. The

<sup>20</sup> Helen Chapin Metz, *Iran: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1987), 223; Michael Rubin, "Tehran Is the Obstacle to U.S.-Iranian Talks," Middle East Forum, November 25, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Halah Jaber, *Hezbollah Born with a Vengeance* (Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 127–129; Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 162.

French government, acting on the evidence of Direction Generale de la Securite Exterieur (DGSE), had also urged Washington to shell the Iranian bases. However, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger argued that there was not enough evidence to link Hezbollah with Iran, leaving the angry French to act on their own.<sup>22</sup>

Washington also lacked resolve in freeing the hostages. The CIA helped Eli Hobeika, a commander in the Christian Falangist militia, to train a special commando unit "Strike Force" to rescue the kidnapped Americans. The plan collapsed because the Americans demanded an assurance of success which the Lebanese could not provide. Saddled with the hostage situation, Reagan described his considerable anguish because he "could not bring them home." Anguish aside, the president understood well that the ordeal of the hostages "made [his] declaration about American strength seem ridiculous," in the words of one commentator. Adding to the pressure on Washington was the hijacking of the TWA plane and the very public execution of the navy diver. Two more Americans were murdered in the hijacking of a Kuwaiti plane on December 4, 1984.<sup>23</sup>

Robert McFarlane, the National Security Adviser, and William Casey, helped by the Israelis, devised a plan to trade the hostages for arms. As part of what became the Iran-Contra affair, McFarlane delivered 700 TOW missiles to Iran to gain the freedom of several hostages. While three hostages were released, three more Americans were subsequently kidnapped by Subhi Tufayli's militia acting on the orders of Mohtashamipour and Asgari. Mohtashamipour, who was ousted from his position in Damascus and transferred to the Foreign Ministry in 1985, was a bitter opponent of any ties with the United States.<sup>24</sup>

America's lack of resolve stood in sharp contrast to the reaction of the Soviet Union. In September 1985, a group calling itself the Khaled Al-Walid Force, a Hezbollah surrogate, took hostage four Soviet diplomats. The KGB chief of station in Beirut allegedly ordered the kidnapping of relatives of the hostage takers, killed and mutilated one of them, and

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle: The Untold Story of Israel's Role in the Iran-Contra Affair*, Free Pr, 1988; Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, Routledge, 1990, 118; Ofira Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure? The Politics and Intelligence of the Oslo Peace Process* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 32.

<sup>23</sup> Crist, *Twilight Wars*; Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 1315; Helen Chapin Metz, *Iran: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1987), 223; Michael Rubin, "Tehran Is the Obstacle to U.S.-Iranian Talks," *Middle East Forum*, November 25, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Seliktar, *Navigating Iran*.

warned that others would meet the same fate. The three diplomats who survived the kidnapping were promptly released, and no further attacks on the Russians were attempted. After the murder of Higgins, *Washington Post* ruefully asked, “If Higgins Was Russian, Would He Be Free Now?”<sup>25</sup>

While the hardliners in Tehran mocked the cautious and bumbling response of the Americans, Rafsanjani developed doubts about the aggressive tactics of the revolutionary exporters. Put in charge of the overall conduct of the war, Rafsanjani realized that Iran’s image as a rogue state made weapon procurement extremely difficult. As noted, he intervened to release the TWA passengers and worked on the release of some American hostages. However, in the negotiated political order, Rafsanjani could not reign-in the revolution exporters. Ayatollah Montazeri, in particular, was determined to carry on the legacy of his son Mohammed who was killed in 1980. Montazeri relocated several operators of the Office for Liberation Movement (OLM) to his compound in Qom under the name of Office of Global Revolution (OGR). He appointed Mehdi Hashemi, a close friend of Mohammed, and the brother of his son-in-law, Hadi, to run the new organization. Mohtashamipour and other radicals from the former SATJA rallied behind the Hashemi brothers whose main support came from the network loyal to Montazeri. In the words of one analyst, “combating imperialism and liberating Jerusalem remained in the forefront of their agenda. They saw Lebanon as a successful example of what exporting the revolution could achieve.” As Chap. 6 would illustrate, Hashemi’s men were also accused of smuggling weapons into Saudi Arabia to disrupt the haj in 1986, and of kidnapping and beating the Syrian chargé d’affaires in Tehran in October 1986.<sup>26</sup>

Notching up his public posture, on November 3, 1986, Montazeri gave a speech in Qom, asserting that the revolution needed to be exported and criticized those who were too squeamish about supporting revolutionary violence. Rafsanjani responded in a statement of his own, blasting those “who spread rumors that tarnish the image of the believers.” Fearing the destabilizing effect of the freelancing Hashemi brothers, Rafsanjani and Khamenei ordered the head of MOIS, Mohammad Reyshahri, to move against Montazeri and his followers. In the ensuing sweep, on October 12, the brothers and other members of the Office of Global

<sup>25</sup> Terrell E. Arnold, February 8, 1988.

<sup>26</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, Oxford University Press, 2016, loc. 2706; Seliktar, *Navigating Iran*.

Revolution were arrested, along with three Majlis members and some influential officers in the Artesh and the IRGC. Montazeri retaliated by mobilizing activists from the Students Following the Line of Imam (SFLI) who protested in Tehran, accusing Reyshahri of plotting against Iran and the Hashemi brothers.<sup>27</sup>

To put further pressure on Rafsanjani, Montazeri supporters disclosed details of the secret mission of McFarlan which Mohtashamipour had leaked to them. Because of censorship in Iran, the story was published in the Lebanese newspaper *al Shiraa* on November 3, 1986. The article deplored the developing schism between the “logic of the state” and the “logic of the revolution,” and “glorified the export of the revolution.” Not coincidentally, the piece also disclosed that, in addition to the hostages, McFarlane sought assurances from his interlocutors that Iran would stop exporting the revolution and guarantee the stability of the Gulf states. The article’s subtext was clear; Rafsanjani was ready to sell out the revolution for better relations with the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Fearing a drawn-out contest with the feisty cleric, the Special Clerical Court convicted Mehdi Hashemi and sentenced him to death. Despite Montazeri’s emotional appeal to Khomeini, Mehdi was speedily executed in September 1987, allegedly before the latter could intervene. The adroit maneuvering saved the mainstream leadership from an immediate challenge—the prospect that Montazeri, whom the ailing Khomeini designated as his successor, would soon assume the mantle of the Supreme Leader was unsettling. To prevent this from happening, detractors started circulating rumors that Montazeri was incompetent and senile, psychologically damaged after spending long years in the Shah’s prisons. In a subsequent book, Ahmad Khomeini, who ran the office of his father, wrote that it was “the stubbornness and naivete” of Montazeri which brought him down. Ahmad Khomeini, Rafsanjani, Khamenei, and Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, a member of the Assembly of Experts, persuaded Khomeini to disinherit Montazeri. When Khomeini died in 1989, they picked Ali Khamenei, a move which marginalized the once prominent Ayatollah.<sup>29</sup>

There is little doubt that dismantling the Qom base of the radical revolutionary exporters trimmed the interventionist foreign policy of Iran.

<sup>27</sup> Seliktar, *Navigating Iran*, 63–65.

<sup>28</sup> Toby Matthieson, *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent, and Sectarianism*. Cambridge University Press, 2014, 131–132.

<sup>29</sup> Seliktar, *Navigating Iran*, 63–65.

Even so, the negotiated political order gave elements in the IRGC-QF, who opposed Rafsanjani policies, considerable leeway. As noted earlier, Mohtashamipour and Brigadier General Ali Asgari ordered the murder of Colonel Higgins, a significant embarrassment for Rafsanjani and the Amal leader Berri. Subhi Tufayli, their principal agent in Lebanon, was also behind the kidnapping of the three Americans mentioned earlier on January 24, 1987.<sup>30</sup>

Tufayli also shared Mohtashamipour's disdain for Rafsanjani's request that Hezbollah join the political process. The fiery cleric denounced the plan and chastised Hezbollah for abandoning its revolutionary ethos. With the tacit support of fringe elements in the IRGC-QF, Tufayli created a small militia which, in 1989, occupied a Hezbollah religious school and touched off a violent confrontation with the Lebanese army. Rescued by Syrian forces stationed nearby, Tufayli set up a small opposition base in his home town. According to rumors, Saudi Arabia took over the support of Tufayli who had morphed into one of the fiercest critics of Iran.<sup>31</sup>

Although Montazeri and Tufayli were marginalized, Rafsanjani won only half of his battle on behalf of the "logic of the state." By the end of the 1980s, the IRGC-QF had full control of Hezbollah which accepted the destruction of the "Zionist enemy" as a sacred national mission.

### THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION AS A LABORATORY FOR ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE BY PROXY

When the IDF crossed into Lebanon and proceeded to take Beirut, its goal was to dismantle the extensive terror structure of the PLO. Ariel Sharon, the Defense Minister, and Chief of Staff Raphael Eitan enlisted the help of the Maronite Christians and hoped to install Bashir Gemayel as the head of a pro-Israeli government. But Gemayel was assassinated in September, and the Christian Falangists retaliated by massacring some 800 Palestinians and Shiites in the Sabra and Shatila camps. Although the IDF did not participate in the atrocity, the international community roundly condemned Israel, and domestic opposition had begun questioning the wisdom of the decision.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 65–66.

<sup>31</sup> Gary C. Gambill and Ziad K. Abdelnour, Hezbollah: Between Tehran and Damascus, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 4, no. 2, February 2002.

To make matters worse, the Israelis had little understanding of the Shiite community, and Imad Mughniyah was hardly a household name in the Military Intelligence Division of the IDF known by its Hebrew acronym Aman, the Mossad, and the Shin Bet (the equivalent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—FBI). Yitzhak Rabin, the iconic military and political leader, expressed his surprise: “It was as if the Shiite genie was released from the bottle, in a way that no one had foreseen. The most neglected ethnic group in Lebanon suddenly seized the opportunity to battle for its role within the Lebanese society by uniting Shiite interests with terrorism against the IDF.”<sup>32</sup>

The bombing of the military government building in Tyre in 1982 was a case in point. The seven-story structure collapsed, killing 76 Israeli soldiers, border law enforcement officers, and Shin Bet agents, along with others. Although witnesses saw a small Peugeot car driving into the building, the official report claimed that malfunctioning cooking gas cylinders had caused the disaster. It was much difficult to dismiss the second suicide bombing in Tyre almost a year later, where 28 Israelis died. While the Israeli learning curve had subsequently improved, the Iran-Hezbollah nexus eluded intelligence officials. Crucially, they could not decipher the “hierarchical arrangements between the various components of Hezbollah and Syria and Iran.” Neither could they figure out the place of Imad Mughniyah in the complex network. The investigative journalist Ronen Bergman maintained that even after a prolonged debate, the intelligence community could not form a consensus on the question.<sup>33</sup>

More to the point, the Israelis, like their American counterparts, played down the importance of Shiite suicide terror. Neither the Mossad nor Aman paid attention to a report about a memorial service which Hezbollah had organized for Ahmed Qassir, the 17-year-old driver of the Peugeot, in his village near Baalbek in 1985. The information about a certificate signed by Ayatollah Khomeini honoring the “martyr Qassir” which was read at the ceremony was similarly ignored.<sup>34</sup>

However, Israel had a harder time overlooking the increasingly aggressive tactics of Hezbollah against its soldiers. In early 1985, the military

<sup>32</sup> Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 106; quoted in Daniel Sobelman, *New Rules of the Game. Israel and Lebanon After the Withdrawal from Lebanon*, Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, Memorandum No. 69, January 2004, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, pp. 151, 360.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

withdrew from Sidon and established a new security zone south of the Awali River. Emboldened by the success, Hezbollah released its manifesto which read like a declaration of war: “We see in Israel the vanguard of the United States in our Islamic world. It is the hated enemy that must be fought until the hated ones get what they deserve. Therefore, our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated. We recognize no treaty with it, no cease-fire, and no peace agreements, whether separate or consolidated.” In 1986, Nasrallah added that “our strategy is to build a future for ourselves through confrontation with the Zionist enemy.”<sup>35</sup>

The National Reconciliation Accord of 1989, known as the Taif agreement that ended the civil war in Lebanon, had improved Hezbollah’s position. While other militias were forced to disband, Hezbollah retained its title as “resistance group” because of the Israeli occupation of the south. Facing no credible threat from its former enemies, Hezbollah could relocate its fighters and receive more advanced training and weapons systems. In addition to the “poor man’s smart bomb,” the Quds Force instructed the Hezbollah fighters in a range of asymmetrical warfare tactics. Chapter 1 noted that these tactics were geared toward inflicting maximum casualties on the enemy which was deemed to be highly sensitive to the loss of human life.

One popular method was the roadside bomb, the improvised explosive device (IED) deployed against the IDF and its SOLA partners. An inexpensive and easy-to-manufacture device, the IEDs killed and wounded scores of Israeli soldiers and SOLA personnel. The more sophisticated explosively formed projectile (EFP) was more lethal, being capable of penetrating armor effectively. The IRGC also supplied Hezbollah with AT-3 Sagger and Sam-7 anti-tank missiles and the 122 mm Katyusha to shell Israeli settlements. As one observer put it, “for so long the Middle East nasties practices had taken shape first in the petri dish of Lebanon, tested there and then replicated with great fury elsewhere.”<sup>36</sup>

To minimize the cost of its actions, Hezbollah dispersed its infrastructure and fighters among the civilian population. As noted, Malik and other ideologues of jihad stipulated that using civilians as human shields would give Muslims a chance of martyrdom. Heavenly rewards aside, embedding had a critical tactical benefit. In 1999, Nasrallah explained that in guerrilla

<sup>35</sup> Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 1425.

<sup>36</sup> Thanasis Cambanis, *A Privilege to Die: Inside Hezbollah’s Legions and the Endless War Against Israel*, p. 67; Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 378.



warfare it is essential to “reduce the importance of the [enemy] air force by hiding targets and not appearing openly.” Israeli officials agreed, writing that the [embedding] tactics posed challenges to acquiring intelligence that has “assimilated into the villages and disappeared in real time.” They also admitted that dispersion among the population limited the IDF range of responses because of the concept of proportionality in the laws of armed conflict. Accordingly, “the loss of life and damage to property incidental to the attack must not be excessive. In other words, the military goal must be achieved “without causing excessive incidental loss of life, injury or damage to civilians.” By hiding among civilians, Hezbollah forced Israel to choose between suboptimal tactics and international law which, as noted in the preceding chapter, demanded proportional response to provocations.<sup>37</sup>

To prepare Hezbollah for a future conflict with Israel, the IRGC designed and funded an impressive hybrid warfare infrastructure in southern Lebanon commanded by Brigadier General Mir Faysal Baqr Zadeh. Using a false cover story, the Iranian embassy in Beirut imported North Korean engineers who constructed an intricate network of tunnels, command and control bunkers, and storage facilities. Also, Hezbollah created a system of autonomous cells in villages which, using preplanned coordinates, positioned Katyusha rocket launchers in local houses and public institutions, including mosques. To foil the Israeli intelligence, Hezbollah employed decoys and dummy traps. The Center for Special Studies directed by Efraim Halevy, a former Mossad chief, would later describe this sophisticated build-up: “The construction of a broad military infrastructure, positioned and hidden in populated areas, was intended to minimize Hezbollah’s vulnerability. Besides, it was designed to provide it with a kind of immunity to IDF attacks by using civilians as human shields, rely on the knowledge that it is IDF commitment to avoid harming civilians whenever possible. Hezbollah would also gain a propaganda advantage if it could represent Israel as attacking innocent civilians.” The report went to state that “to this end, Hezbollah instituted a broad logistic system in south Lebanon based on hundreds of private residences and public institutions (including mosques).”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Itai Brun, “Air Force Intelligence, in Amos Gilboa and Ephraim Lapid, *Silent Defenders. Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence*, Tel Aviv: Gefen Publishers, 2016, 264; Amos Gilboa, “Intelligence and the Lebanese Arena,” In Amos Gilboa and Ephraim Lapid, *Israel’s Silent Defenders*, 118.

<sup>38</sup> David Dileggo, Alma Keshavarz, Robert J. Bunker, eds. *Iran and Hezbollah. Hybrid Warfare Activity, A Small Wars Journal Anthology*. Bloomington, Indiana: 2016, 251–261;

Short of a full-blown conflict, the Hezbollah found support for its assumption that Israel's Achilles heel was extreme sensitivity to human loss as manifested in the Ron Arad affair. Arad, a navigator, shot down in 1982, was captured by Amal and ended up in the hands of Mousa Dirani, Amal's security chief, whom Nabih Berri subsequently expelled over the murder of Colonel Higgins. Dirani took Arad with him to the village of Nabi Chit in the Beqaa Valley, and by all accounts, sold him to Asgari for millions of dollars. Frantic to recover the missing airman, Israel launched Operation Body Heat, a massive multipronged search effort. Frustrated by the lack of results, Ehud Barak, then Chief of Staff, planned the kidnapping of Abbas Musawi, the Hezbollah Secretary General. When the abduction was foiled, Barak ordered Musawi assassinated on February 16, 1992.<sup>39</sup>

Retaliation was virtually instantaneous. On March 17, a massive explosion hit the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 32 diplomats and Argentinian civilians and injuring 252. Two years later, on July 18, 1994, a suicide bomber drove a van into the Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building. The explosion leveled the structure and caused extensive damage to adjacent buildings. The human toll was staggering: 85 people killed, and hundreds wounded. Argentinian authorities, as well as Israeli and American intelligence, determined that officials at the highest levels of the regime were involved. On August 14, 1993, a meeting which included Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the MOIS chief, Ali Fallahian authorized the attack which Mughniyah and MOIS co-directed, using contacts among the Lebanese immigrants in the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. The Argentinian Ministry of Justice would later indict Nasrallah, Fallahian, Ali Akbar Parvaresh, a former speaker of the Majlis, Ali Balesh Abadi, a former spokesman in the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires, and the cultural attaché Mohsen Rabbani.<sup>40</sup>

The obsessive search for Arad convinced Hassan Nasrallah, Musawi's successor, that killing IDF soldiers was the right tactic to pursue. In June

Andrew McGregor, "Hezbollah's Rocket Strategy," *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, is. 6, Jamestown Foundation, August 11, 2006; Reuven Erlich, *Hezbollah's Use of Human Shields* Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Center for Special Studies, Jerusalem, November 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 235.

<sup>40</sup> Yehudit Barasky, "Hizballah the Party of God," *AJC*, May 2003, pp. 16–20. Farhad Rezaei, *The American Response to Pakistani And Iranian Nuclear Proliferation: A Study in Paradox*, Asian Affairs, Vol. 48, No 1, 27–50.

1993, Hezbollah fighters killed five soldiers and shelled an Israeli village across the border. On July 25, Israel responded with Operation Accountability which displaced some 300,000 Shiite residents. After a seven-day operation, which also destroyed Lebanese infrastructure, both sides reached a verbal agreement to refrain from attacking civilians. The Israeli leaders hoped that the massive relocation of the population would prompt the Lebanese government to rein in Hezbollah. At the very least, the IDF expected the extensive damage to serve as deterrence. However, the Lebanese government was too weak to rein in Hezbollah which increased its harassment of the IDF troops. So much so that in February 1995 the IDF chief of staff Lieutenant General Amnon Lipkin Shahak ordered the CO of the Northern Command Moshe Kaplinsky to create an anti-terror unit, *Anti-Guerilla ve Lohama Zeira* (Anti-Guerilla and Microwarfare), known by its Hebrew acronym Egoz. The unit went operational in July but failed to make a significant dent in the guerrilla fighting. A 1996 Aman report acknowledged that in creating Hezbollah, Iran found a perfect tool: "Iran uses terror against Israel rarely and rationally, out of an awareness of the grave diplomatic damage which it could cause itself if its role were to be exposed."<sup>41</sup>

Just as Israel was catching up with Hezbollah's guerilla-like operation in which Egoz would eventually prove its mettle, the Revolutionary Guards decided to transform it proxy into a hybrid force capable of taking down the IDF Merkava II tank, considered one of the best in the world. The Iranians send two advanced anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) to Lebanon. One was the Iranian-made Toophan 1, a reversed-engineered American BGM-71 TOW missile which was a mainstay of the Artesh. The second one was the Russian AT-4 Spigot which, in early autumn 1997, hit a Merkava tank, followed by two more hits in mid-October. Taken aback by Hezbollah's newly acquired capabilities, the Israelis were forced to introduce upgrades to the tank, leading to the subsequent development of Merkava Mark 3 and Mark 4 models. The unique challenges of the Hezbollah warfare led the Rafael Advanced Defense Systems (RADS) to introduce the Trophy Active Protection System (TAPS) which intercepts anti-tank missiles and rockets.<sup>42</sup>

Not satisfied with its success against the military, Hezbollah resumed shelling Israeli settlement across the border. Responding to one such

<sup>41</sup> Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 109–110, 311.

<sup>42</sup> Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 2555; Marsh Gelbart, *Modern Israeli Tanks and Infantry Carriers*, London: Osprey Publishing, 2004, 32.

barrage, in April 1996, Israel launched Operation Grapes of Wrath. Things went awry when the Israel Air Force (IAF) bombed a large group of civilians sheltering in UN compound in the village of Qana. One hundred and eight people were killed, and hundreds wounded. The IDF contended that the bombing of the UN compound was an operational mistake, but Hezbollah argued that the Israelis hit the civilians because its fighters took shelter among them. Whatever the truth, Hezbollah utilized the Qana incident to create a shrine and a site of pilgrimage. A large number of banners denounced in strongest possible way the “Zionist Satan” and proclaimed that Qana was the “Karbala of the twentieth century.”<sup>43</sup>

IDF’s next move to protect its forces from the incessant road bombs was to ferry troops by air. However, on February 4, 1997, two helicopters with 73 personnel on board collided, killing all. Dubbed *ason hamesokim*, the “disaster of the helicopters,” it was the deadliest air disaster in Israeli aviation history. The Four Mothers, an anti-war movement of mothers of soldiers serving in Lebanon, had seized upon the tragedy to press for a withdrawal from Lebanon. Coming on the heels of the helicopter disaster, on September 1997, a team from the famed Shayetet 13, a top commando unit equivalent to the American Seals, was dispatched to kill a senior Hezbollah commander on the southern coast of Lebanon near Ansariya. After intercepting signals from an Israeli drone, Hezbollah ambushed the commandos, killing 13 members of the group and a medical doctor who joined the rescue operation. Quick to profit from the demoralization of the Israeli public, the IRGC-QF and Mughniyah devised a program to target senior Israeli officers. Over a short period, Unit 910 killed one brigadier general, two colonels, and two lieutenant colonels. The assassination of Brigadier General Erez Gerstein, a highly regarded and charismatic officer, on February 28, 1999, was especially traumatic. In a measure of how unpopular the occupation had become, the media took to describing Lebanon as the “Israeli Vietnam.”

Ehud Barak, by then the leader of the Labor Party, campaigned on the promise of withdrawing from Lebanon. When Labor won in July 1999, Barak was prepared to make good on his pledge. However, to avoid a unilateral pullout, the prime minister tried to reach a deal with Hafez Assad in several rounds of intense negotiations under American auspices in the winter of 1999–2000. The possibility of a peace agreement with Syria shook the Iranians and Hezbollah to the core, not least because it would have

<sup>43</sup> Richard Norton, *Hezbollah A Short History*, Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 108.

stopped the weapons transfers through the Damascus airport. Hezbollah signaled its displeasure with the talks in Shepherdstown, Virginia, by intensifying attacks on Israeli troops and shelling of settlements.<sup>44</sup>

Much to the relief of the Iranians and Hezbollah, the talks collapsed, forcing Barak into a unilateral withdrawal. According to account, some Aman officials urged to assassinate Nasrallah and Mughniyah before the pullout, but Barak refused. To prevent more attacks on the troops, IDF left abruptly on May 25, followed by some 2500 SOLA members and their families amid scenes of utter chaos. Thousands of triumphant Hezbollah fighters took over the Israeli and SOLA military infrastructure. During a massive victory rally in Bint Jabal, Hassan Nasrallah described the departure of the IDF as a “divine victory” and stated that “Israel is feeble than a spider’s web.” Reports attributed to the Revolutionary Guards asserted that the hasty withdrawal fully confirmed the utility of killing Israelis.<sup>45</sup>

### THE HAZARDS OF THE PROXY STRATEGY: THE ROAD TO THE SECOND LEBANON WAR

While celebrating in public, the Iranian and Hezbollah leaders were privately worried because the end of the occupation renewed calls to lay down arms. Highly reluctant to disarm, Hezbollah sought ways to retain the title of the leader of the Axis of Resistance. A manufactured dispute over the border delineation provided a solution. The Israelis were careful to claim that the withdrawal was per a 1978 United Nations Resolutions 425 which called for complete withdrawal from Lebanon. To make its compliance with Resolution 425 clear, Israel asked the UN to delineate the border based on a cease-fire map of 1948. After studying some 80

<sup>44</sup> Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 4061–4067; 4117.

<sup>45</sup> Yossi Melman, “An Israeli Opportunity Missed to Cut Hezbollah’s Head Off,” *Haaretz*, March 15, 2016; Ronen Bergman, “The Megaterrorist Who Never Gave Up on the Good Life,” *ynet News*, May 15, 2016; Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First The Secret History Of Israel’s Targeted Assassinations*, Penguin Random House, 2018, 447; Amos Gilboa, “Decision Making: The IDF Leaving Lebanon as a Case Study,” *Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center*, February 22, 2016; Mark Lindemann, “Laboratory of Asymmetry: The 2006 War and the Evolution of Iranian Grand Tactics,” *Military Review*, May–June, 2010; TNA, *Factors Contributed to Zionist Defeat in Southern Lebanon*, Tasnim News Agency, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/03/04/1419192/عوامل-شکست-خفتبار-رژیم-صهیونیستی-در-جنوب-لبنان>; FNA, *The Eleventh Year of the Zionist Escape from Southern Lebanon*, Fars News Agency, May 25, 2011, <https://www.farsnews.com/news/9003040308%20%20%20%20/یاز-دهمین-سال-فرار-صهیونیست-از-جنوب-لبنان%E2%80%8C8C>.

maps, the UN cartographers approved the new border known as the “blue line” after Israel made small changes in some 13 positions. Shebaa Farms, a small strip of land known in Hebrew as Har Dov, which was part of Syrian territory before the 1967 war, was left outside the blue line. However, the Iranians encouraged Hezbollah to dispute the findings and use its political clout to pressure the reluctant Lebanese government to claim the territory. As one observer put it, “Hezbollah needed the grievance of Shebaa Farms to justify its stay as a resistance movement.”<sup>46</sup>

The death of Hafez Assad in July 2000, soon after his failed bid in Shepherdstown, boosted Hezbollah’s standing. Whereas the elder Assad considered Nasrallah as a subordinate, his young and untested son Bashar made Hezbollah and Iran a center of his security doctrine. Brigadier General Muhammad Suleiman, a close aide to Assad, was a long-time advocate of better relations with Iran and its Lebanese proxy, and a contact point for the IRGC-QF and Imad Mughniyah. In a radical change, Syria not only liberalized its policy of arms transshipments but became an arms supplier as well. Assad’s resolve to help Hezbollah only increased when, on July 1, 2002, the IAF hit a Syrian radar station in Lebanon, wounding two soldiers. Over a period of five years, Syria supplied Hezbollah with large quantities of the most sophisticated Russian-made weapons including the 9k115-2 Metis-m, RPG-29, 9M133 Kornet anti-tank missiles, 220-millimeter and 302-millimeter missiles, both equipped with anti-personnel warheads. According to sources, Assad “gifted” Hezbollah a Chinese-made 220 mm rocket which was sold to the Syrian Army by the Chinese. According to some accounts, Hezbollah took possession of a 1000 Russian rockets with a range of 42 km, and a 1000 Syrian and Iranian made 122 mm and 220 mm rockets with a range of 50 km, Fajr 3 and Fajr 5 with a range of 75 km, and Zalzal 1 and Zalzal 2 with a range of 125 km and 210 km, respectively.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Asher Kaufman, Who Owns the Shebaa Farms? Chronicle of a Territorial Dispute, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 576–595; Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 4718–4719; Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 2008, 378; Amos Harel, “Thirteen Israeli Border Points with Lebanon,” *Haaretz*, February 27, 2018; Dore Gold, *The Rise of Nuclear Iran. How Iran Defies the International Community*, Regnery Publishing, 2009, p. 239.

<sup>47</sup> Nicholas Blandford, “The Mystery Behind a Syrian Murder,” *Time*, August 7, 2008; Amos Harel and Alouf Benn, “No Longer a Secret,” *Haaretz*, March 21, 2018; Bergman 2008, 382; Amos Harel & Avi Issacharoff, *34 Days: Israel, Hezbollah, And The War In Lebanon*, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 82.

Iranian advisers had also reorganized Hezbollah into a military formation resembling a regular army. The line-up included several infantry brigades, artillery, anti-tank, engineering, communications, and logistic units, and even a countersignals group to crack IDF communications. Headquartered in the Beirut suburb of Dahya, the general Hezbollah command had a unit in charge of missiles, an air unit which operated drones, and a naval unit trained by the *Neyroye Daryae Sepah-e Iran* (NEDSA), the Guards naval unit.<sup>48</sup> Although the Iranians did not reveal the extent of Hezbollah's transformation, it was clear that they consider the proxy to be "southern command" against Israel.

Reading Hezbollah to assume the mantle of the "southern command" could not have come too soon for Iran. In the summer of 2002, Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK), an Iran's opposition group known for its ties to Israel, revealed the existence of Tehran's nuclear program. Embraced by the disclosure, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) initiated a series of robust inspections which confirmed that Iran had a reasonably advanced project run by Mohsen Fakhrizade Mahabadi, the head of the Field of Expansion of Deployment of Advanced Technology (FEDAT). Fearing an Israeli preemptive strike, Tehran made it clear that Hezbollah would launch a devastating retaliation on Israeli territory.<sup>49</sup>

While Iran restructured Hezbollah to act as a deterrent against an Israeli anti-nuclear attack, Nasrallah had his private agenda to push. Having faced pressure from families whose sons were imprisoned in Israel, the Hezbollah leader wanted to abduct IDF personnel to trade for the militants. Hezbollah also hoped to force Israel out of the Shebaa Farms, adding another feather to its cap as an Axis of Resistance warrior. Having determined that the Israeli society transited into the so-called post-military stage, a reluctance to fight wars, Nasrallah judged his new strategy to be a low risk. In the words of Nasrallah, "Israel's Achilles hill is Israel society itself ... a brittle post-military society that cannot endure wars anymore and that under pressure it can succumb to Arab aggression." As one commentator put it, in Nasrallah's view, "Israel had no appetite for war and the butcher bill which came with it."<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*; Con Coughlin, *Khomeini's Ghost: The Iranian Revolution and the Rise of Militant Islam*, Harper Collins, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Israel, and the United States: The Politics of Counter-Proliferation Intelligence*, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Scott C. Farquhar, ed. *Back to Basics, A Study of the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead*, Progressive Management, 2014, 18.

Mughniyah translated this philosophy into a string of provocations centered around the Shebaa Farms. Just months after the withdrawal, on October 7, 2000, Hezbollah abducted three Israeli soldiers on patrol near the Farms. Although the soldiers died during or shortly after the attack, Hezbollah refused to divulge any information to the Red Cross. Ehud Barak's Labor government responded with a limited December 2000 bombing which left parts of Lebanon without electricity. Emboldened by the feeble response, Hezbollah took to publicly mocking its "weakling" adversary. Moshe Kaplinsky, the commander of the Galilee Division, urged the prime minister to retaliate with power, telling him that "we have to create new rules on the ground." Barak was reluctant to confront Hezbollah's violations because of his reluctance to admit that his precipitous pullout triggered an "escalatory" development.<sup>51</sup>

Despite his hawkish reputation, Ariel Sharon, who came to power in February 2001 as the head of a Likud government, was not keen on confronting Hezbollah either. As described in the next chapter, Israel found itself in the grip of a ferocious Intifada, requiring maximum attention from the IDF. More crucially, in 2004, Israel exchanged 435 prisoners, including two top-level Hezbollah officials, Mustafa Dirani and Sheikh Abdel Karim Obeid, for the bodies of the three Shebaa Farms soldiers.<sup>52</sup> Convinced more than ever that kidnapping was a successful strategy, on November 21, 2005, five Hezbollah fighters tried to abduct soldiers from an outpost in Ghajar. The attempt failed, but IAF targeted a modest number of Hezbollah positions. On May 27, 2006, Hezbollah shelled Israeli communities, apparently in revenge for an assassination of one of its commanders. The IAF responded with more bombing raids. According to Yaakov Amidror, a former head of Research Division of Aman, the military hoped that the punishing aerial warfare would deter Hezbollah from further mischief.<sup>53</sup>

However, the Israelis were bound to be disappointed because, according to a 2016 Hezbollah account, Imad Mughniyah started planning a new kidnapping operation immediately after the Ghajar fiasco. The seven-month preparation included an analysis of previous abduction attempts

<sup>51</sup> Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc 4975.

<sup>52</sup> Bergman, *The Thirty Year War*, 2008, 388.

<sup>53</sup> Zeev Schiff, "Israel's War with Iran," *New York Times* December 4, 2006; Yaakov Amidror, "Strategic Lessons of the Winograd Commission Report," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, May 7, 2007.



and a mockup of the area of the intended attack near the Israeli village of Zarit. On July 13, 2006, a Hezbollah cell attacked a convoy patrolling the Israeli side of the border, killing three soldiers, and seizing two, Eldad Regev and Udi Goldwasser.<sup>54</sup>

As Hezbollah predicted, the kidnapping touched a raw nerve in Israel. During the six years since the IDF left Lebanon, Hezbollah carried out 64 attacks in which 11 soldiers and civilians had died, mostly as a result of anti-tank missile attacks, roadside bombings, and shelling of Israeli settlements near the border. Ehud Olmert, who replaced the ailing Sharon and formed a new government in April 2006, came under extreme pressure to respond. Acting together with his Defense Minister Amir Peretz and Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, a former Air Force commander, Olmert ordered massive artillery and air campaign in Lebanon. In addition to the country's infrastructure, the air campaign devastated the suburb of Dahiya, a Hezbollah stronghold, and the Shiite-controlled areas in the south and the Beqaa Valley. However, the IDF had little success in silencing the Katyusha rockets and some longer-range missiles which reached Haifa and beyond, paralyzing the north of the country. One million civilians were ordered to stay near shelters and 250,000 were evacuated from the most vulnerable stretch of territory along the border.

To liquidate the Katyusha and missile sites, the IDF launched a limited ground invasion which failed to accomplish its goals. Hezbollah militants operating from tunnels, bunkers, and dugouts managed to damage 48 Merkava tanks and destroy 5. Israel was also on the losing end of a public relation campaign based on the disparities in casualties. Whereas Israel lost 120 soldiers and 45 civilians, some 1200 Lebanese died. Since the Lebanese authorities refused to list combatants separately, the actual number of civilian deaths was hard to determine. The IAF estimated that between 100–400 civilians had probably died in attacks that were aimed to take out the Fajr rockets hidden in private homes and public buildings. Still, as the IRGC-QF playbook envisaged, the international community roundly criticized Israel.<sup>55</sup>

The official commission investigating the performance of the IDF, known as the Winograd Commission, named after its chair, the retired

<sup>54</sup> Jack Khoury, "Hezbollah Reveals New Details on Kidnaping that Sparked the Second Lebanon War," *Haareatz*, July 31, 2016; Yaakov Amidror, "Strategic Lessons of the Winograd Commission Report," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, May 7, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *36 Days*, 127.

judge Eliyahu Winograd, issued a scathing assessment. The Commission concluded that “A semi-military organization of a few thousand men resisted, for a few weeks, the strongest army in the Middle East, which enjoyed full air superiority and size and technology advantages.” The Commission found that Olmert and Peretz were highly inexperienced in security matters and followed a poorly thought-out plan.<sup>56</sup>

Much blame was ascribed to the military, which one prominent journalist accused of “blatant nonvigilance.” The Commission and other analysts blamed the IDF for poor training, failure of preparedness, lack of updated intelligence on the Hezbollah positions, and absence of adequate leadership at the level of the chief of staff and the divisional level. A team of US Army researchers also found much wrong with the new doctrine which the IDF adopted in April 2006. The document was authored by the highly controversial Brigadier General Shimon Naveh, head of the Operational Theory Research Institute or Maltam, the Hebrew acronym of *Machon Leheker Torat Hamaaracha*, and signed by Halutz. Known as the “Systemic Operational Design,” the doctrine was drawn from “post-modern French philosophy, literary theory, architecture, and psychology,” according to its author. Full of postmodern jargon, the doctrine was difficult to understand and was filled with ambiguity. Never to shy from controversy, Naveh noted that the doctrine “was not for mere mortals” and called Halutz an “idiot” who did not read or understand the document he had signed.<sup>57</sup>

The new doctrine generated confusion among the officers who failed to grasp the meaning of the outlandish terminology with titles like “Political Directive, Strategic Purpose, System Boundaries, Operational Boundaries, Campaign Organizing Theme, and Opposite System Rational,” among others. Many of the officers who were required to read the 170-page document confessed to not understanding half of it. As one Israeli military analyst summed it up, “the terminology used was too complicated, vain, and could not be understood by the thousands that needed to carry it out.” Gadi Eisenkot, the future chief of staff, called the manual a “hostile virus.” Following a scathing report of the Comptroller General, Maltam

<sup>56</sup> Final Report of the Commission to Investigate the Lebanon Campaign of 2006, <http://www.vaadatwino.gov.il/pdf/סדף20%ממך.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Blanford, *Warriors of God*, 4980; Scott C. Farquhar, ed. *Back to Basics. The Study of the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead*. Progressive Management, 2014, 27–29. Yotam Feldman, “Dr. Naveh, or How I Stopped Worrying and Walked through Walls,” *Haaretz*, October 25, 2007.

was disbanded in 2005, but the IDF never explained how Naveh, whom critics compared to the purveyor of the Emperor's new clothes, could shape its doctrine. In a post-note to the affair, Brigadier General Gal Hirsh, a leading student of Naveh and the commander of the 86 Division, was forced to resign. Hirsch was held responsible for the kidnapping of Regev and Goldwasser and for "the poor performance of his troops during the incursion."<sup>58</sup>

Fear of sustaining casualties which the IDF command harbored was a less tangible but equally debilitating reason for the problematic incursion. Ironically, like Nasrallah, Halutz believed that Israel is a "post-heroic society," highly sensitive to loss of life of both its citizens and soldiers. Avi Kober, a former member of the IDF Planning Staff and expert on military doctrine, noted that "the no casualty approach" affected the chief of staff who demanded personal updates on every fallen soldier. In one case, an entire battalion fighting near Eytā a-Shaab was ordered out after one of its men died. Allegedly, this was not the only "tactical retreat," as the army named it, which occurred during the operation.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the loss of life and the extensive damage to property in the 36-day conflict, Nasrallah proclaimed the war to be a success. However, faced with withering public criticism, a rare phenomenon in the tightly controlled discourse which Hezbollah permitted, Nasrallah admitted in an August 27, 2006 TV interview to having made a mistake. "I certainly would not have done it, for moral, humane, military, and political reasons." Foreign diplomats stationed in Beirut explained that "not even in his worst nightmares" had Nasrallah counted on a full-scale war. At most, the Hezbollah leader and his security chief Mughniyah envisioned a medium-range encounter lasting a few days, a prediction based on Israel's past behavior.<sup>60</sup>

Hezbollah's IRGC-QF masters were furious with the recklessness of Nasrallah and Mughniyah which triggered the war. Estimates indicated that the overall cost to the Lebanese economy exceeded 5 billion. Some 10,000 private homes were destroyed, 22,500 severely damaged, and 73,000 partially damaged. The civilian infrastructure of Hezbollah—that

<sup>58</sup> Farquhar, *Back to Basics*, pp. 25–26; Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *36 Days*, 97.

<sup>59</sup> Avi Kober, "The Israeli Defense Forces in Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 31, no. 1 February 2008, 3–40; Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *36 Days*, 369.

<sup>60</sup> Harel and Issacharoff, *36 Days*, 132, 375.

is, educational, welfare, and cultural institutions—was also heavily ravaged. The cost of rebuilding the Shiite parts of the country was staggering. With help from Iran, Hezbollah shouldered much of the reconstruction project through its construction company Jihad al Bina, in addition to disbursing \$10,000–\$12,000 vouchers for temporary housing. Iran also bore the cost of replenishing most of the military arsenal which Israel destroyed during the war. For instance, virtually the entire stock of Zelzal and Fajr rocks was wiped out along with most of the command and storage centers. Hezbollah lost nearly 700 best, Iranian-trained fighters as well.

A documented complaint from the Iranian Supreme National Security Council stated that Hezbollah “wasted” Iran’s military investment. After Mughniyah was assassinated in February 2008, Quds Force appointed an IRGC commander Hassan Mahdavi, also known as Mohammad Reza Zahedi, to replace him. According to analysts, sending Mahdavi signaled the Guards’ intention to keep a tight rein on its model proxy. Mahdavi ordered a broad inquiry into the Hezbollah’s finances and reportedly advised Hezbollah on the drug trade as another revenue source to fill the void left by Mughniyah.<sup>61</sup>

However, money was not the only concern. The war exposed the military strategy, and elaborate defenses of Hezbollah had developed to serve as Iran’s deterrence against a possible preemptive Israeli action on its nuclear facilities. The timing could not be any worse. In 2005, much to the surprise of everyone, the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the election on a Principalist platform which called for unfettered nuclear development. As one analyst pointed out, “Instead of retaining the capability of using those rockets during a major confrontation, such as an attack on Iran’s nuclear program, they were squandered by Nasrallah’s reckless miscalculation.”<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps most damaging to Iran was the fact that, by blowing the cover off the hybrid strategy prematurely, Hezbollah allowed the IDF to restructure its approach radically.

<sup>61</sup> Blanford, *Warriors of God*, loc. 1444, Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *34 Days. Israel, Hezbollah and the War in Lebanon*, 374; Steven K. O’Hern, *Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. The Threat that Grows when America Sleeps*, Washington: Potomac Publishers, 2012, 95; Seth J. Franzman, “A Different Hezbollah Prepares for the Next Big War,” *The Tower*, June–July 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Seth J. Franzman, “A Different Hezbollah Prepares for the Next Big War,” *The Tower*, June–July 2007.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SECOND LEBANON WAR: THE WAR BETWEEN THE WARS

Reforming the military in light of the lessons of 2006 war fell to Major General Gadi Eisenkot who replaced Udi Adam who resigned as the head of the Northern Command following criticism of his failures. Eisenkot, a no-nonsense commander who had a little patience for the postmodern notions of war, unveiled a multilevel plan for fighting Hezbollah. At its core was the principle of degrading the capabilities of terror group rather than defeating it. Eisenkot believed that such a strategy would lengthen the periods between wars, giving Israel a breathing space to strengthen its own defenses and increase the probability of success in case of a war which required a decisive victory. Dubbed the “War Between the Wars” or, in Hebrew, *Maaracha bein Milchamot* (Campaign Between the Wars), it entailed an array of covert and overt tactics, including assassination of enemy officials, raids on storage and manufacturing facilities, and sabotage of command and control systems.<sup>63</sup>

In this view, Israel offensive deterrence needed to be backed by an improved deterrence messaging system. Reports on the failures of the 2006 war were unanimous that Israel required to broadcast in clear terms the high costs of future Hezbollah aggression. Eisenkot espoused the so-called Dahiyah Doctrine, named after the Beirut neighborhood which was heavily damaged in aerial bombings, as a model of effective deterrence messaging. He emphasized that “what happened in the Dahiya will happen in every village from which shots were fired in the direction of Israel. We will wield disproportional power against [them] and cause immense damage and destruction. From our perspective, these are military bases.”<sup>64</sup>

Along the steps to restore Israel’s traditional deterrence posture, the military establishment adopted the principles of deterrence by denial. First discussed in the 1960s, deterrence by denial was a series of specific tactics or capabilities “to make it difficult for an enemy to achieve his objective. It seeks to make aggression unprofitable by rendering the target harder to take.”<sup>65</sup> Even before 2006, Hezbollah boasted a whole range of RAMM projectile (Rockets, Artillery, Mortars, and Missiles) and used them to shell

<sup>63</sup> Yaacov Lapin, “The War between Wars,” *Fathom Journal*, October 2018.

<sup>64</sup> “Israel Warns Hezbollah Would Invite Destruction,” *Yediot Ahronot*, October 3, 2008.

<sup>65</sup> Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 14–16; A. Wess Mitchel, “The Cause for Deterrence by Denial,” *The American Interest*, August 12, 2015.

Israeli settlements periodically. In 2004, the Research and Development of the IDF conceived of an air defense system against short-range projectiles. Rafael Advanced Defense System and Israel Airspace Industries developed the Iron Dome, an all-weather mobile system capable of intercepting short-range rockets and artillery shells (up to 70 km). After finding itself on the receiving end of some of the 4000 projectiles which Hezbollah fired in 2006, the Israelis expedited the project which became operational in 2011. The high-performing Iron Dome was a classic weapon of defensive deterrence because it made it much harder on Hezbollah to inflict civilian casualties.

Finding and destroying the Hezbollah tunnels was a less orthodox defensive deterrence capability. Eisenkot was not the first high-ranking commander to worry about the Hezbollah advantage of tunnel warfare. Research on tunnel detection was already part of Rafael's file in the mid-2000. However, as analysts pointed out, the technology for tunnel detection was only in its infancy, making tunnel destruction a difficult task. After several years of trial and error, the technology was made operational in 2014.<sup>66</sup>

In December 2018, the IDF launched Operation Northern Defense which destroyed six cross-border tunnels which Hezbollah had dug for the elite Radwan unit to infiltrate Israeli settlements and kill as many civilians as possible. According to the information released by the military, the operation used Mobility Artillery Rocket System (MARS), a multi-sensor system developed by Rafael Advanced Defense System and Elbit that comprised thermal imaging, laser range-finder GPS, compass, day channel, and recording system. There were some political benefits as well. Israel charged Lebanon with responsibility for the tunnels and forced the international community to take a stand against Hezbollah's violation of laws of war.<sup>67</sup>

The MARS technology was behind yet another defensive deterrence measure, the construction of a protective barrier along the northern border. As the next chapter points out, the barrier was first built along the Green Line to deny the jihadists the opportunity to launch suicide attacks.

<sup>66</sup> Daphne Richmond-Barak, *Underground Warfare in Urban Areas*, NY, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 35–36, 105–111.

<sup>67</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Meet the IDF Unit That Is Eyes and Ears of Operation Northern Shield," *Jerusalem Post*, December 23, 2019; "A Multi-Sensory System on the Gaza Border," *Israel Defense*, June 20, 2011; Orna Mizrahi, Operation Northern Shield. An Interim Assessment," Institute for National Security Studies, January 8, 2019.

After drastically reducing bombings, the technology was extended to Gaza and the border with Lebanon.

Hezbollah's large stock of rockets and missile estimated at some 150,000, however, is less amenable to defensive deterrence. The IRGC had mounted a large-scale project to turn inventory into guided projectiles, through either retrofitting them with a GPS guidance system or manufacturing new ones. According to the IDF, this effort has failed so far because of preventing actions in Lebanon and Syria, where the facilities have been located. Still, the military admits that its anti-missile defense system would be initially overwhelmed by the sheer number of projectiles, causing an estimated 1000 civilian casualties in a full-scale conflict. The rockets and missiles are based in private houses and public sites in 250 Shiite villages, which makes it difficult to take them out. Israeli officials have repeatedly complained that the Hezbollah is using the population as a human shield, but, as noted in the preceding chapter, treating Muslims as "volunteer" martyrs has been at the core of the asymmetrical conflict espoused by Iran.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Felicia Friedson, "Defending Israel's Defense," *Jerusalem Post*, September 10, 2018; Yona Jeremy Bob, "The Rocket Man," *Jerusalem Post*, October 19, 2018.





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## Deploying Proxies Against the “Zionist Enemy” and Undermining the Oslo Peace Process

If the Israel Defense Force’s (IDF) withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was a classic victory for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) asymmetrical warfare strategy, the Iranian plan to wipe out the “Little Satan” was a more complex and infinitely more difficult project. On the positive side, according to Khomeini’s followers, the large concentration of Jews in Israel facilitated their tasks. In the words of Hasan Nasrallah, the creation of Israel saved the Islamists the task of hunting for individual Jews who were “dispersed at the end of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Yasser Arafat offered the Khomeinists easy access to the Palestinian cause. As noted in the preceding chapter, many of the revolutionary exporters had long-standing ties with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Ayatollah Khomeini’s two sons, Mustafa and Ahmed, trained with Fatah Force 17; the latter became an honorary member of the organization. Urged by the younger Khomeinists, Arafat visited Khomeini in Najaf to discuss further collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Mohammed Montazeri, son of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, and 700 of his followers trained with Fatah in 1976–1977. Upon taking power in 1979, the new regime rewarded Arafat handsomely. In a gesture which was as symbolic as it was political, the PLO was handed

<sup>1</sup> Bret Stephen, “When anti-Zionism Tunnels Under Your House,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World’s Most Dangerous Terrorist Power*, Free Press, 2008, p. 89.

the key to the Israeli compound in Tehran. Not incidentally, Hani al Hassan, PLO's first ambassador to Tehran, was one of the militants who trained the Iranians in Lebanon. A veteran commander, al Hassan was in charge of Khomeini's bodyguards and was instrumental in setting up the intelligence service of the new regime. Although Arafat would fall out with the Iranians over his support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war, the IRGC-QF maintained good relations with the more radical Palestinian groups. Iran provided financial and logistical support for the political and military wings of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and had links with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), the Abu Nidal Group, and the Syria-based Al Saiqa.<sup>3</sup>

Grooming the radical Palestinian groups generated considerable pay-offs. With a relatively modest international reach, the Quds Force relied on the hardcore terror factions to conduct operations in Europe. Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour offered Ahmad Jibril, the head of the PFLP-General Command, a considerable sum of money to attack American forces in Europe. The Abu Nidal group, by far the most violent of the terror fraternity that organized the December 1985 Rome and Vienna airport massacres, was implicated in Pan Am Flight 73 hijacking in Karachi in September 1986.<sup>4</sup>

When, in 1988, Arafat accepted Israel's right to exist as a prelude toward a possible peace deal, the Iranians could count on the extremist

<sup>3</sup> Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*, p. 57; Al-Monitor, "Iran Increases Aid to PFLP Thanks to Syria Stance." Al-Monitor. Retrieved 17 July 2015; Hazem Balousha, *Iran Increases Aid to PFLP*, Al-Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/iran-pflp-gaza-palestine-syria.html>; as quoted in Youssef Azmeh, "Iran's opposition to peace deal raises fears of violence"; September 19, 1993; Jason Burke, "Attack on Gaza army base kills three." *The Guardian*, August 26, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/aug/26/israel1>; EU-Turn. "Institut MEDEA." DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), September 28, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070928121505/http://www.medea.be/?page=2&lang=en&doc=72>; Delegation of Palestinian factions meet Larijani in Tehran, *The Palestinian Information Center*, <https://www.palinfo.com/news/2016/2/13/-/طهران-في-لاريجاني-بلتقي-الاريجانية-الفلسطينية>.

<sup>4</sup> Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*; Elaine Sciolino, *Abu Nidal Backing Is Said To Be Wide*, *The New York Times*, Jan. 19, 1986 <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/19/world/abu-nidal-backing-is-said-to-be-wide.html>; USDJ, "United States of America v. Wadoud Muhammad et al. Indictment" (PDF). [justice.gov](https://www.justice.gov). United States Department of Justice, June 11, 2001.

groups to subvert the PLO. Although using secular militias was well within the proxy doctrine according to Chap. 1, the IRGC-QF pushed for a more congenial Islamist movement to carry out its anti-Israel mission. The Third Revolutionary Conference held in Tehran in February 1988 adopted a resolution to invest in a Palestinian Jihadist network.<sup>5</sup>

### THE PALESTINIAN ISLAMISTS: FROM MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD TO IRANIAN PROXIES

In 1981, several activists established the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a small but radical offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Headed by Fathi Shikaki, a Gaza-based physician, Sheikh Abdelaziz Awda, and Ramadan Saleh, the group preached total resistance to Israel and wanted to establish a Palestinian state within the borders of Mandatory Palestine. Shikaki, whose interest in Islamic ecumenism was sparked during his studies in Egypt, saw Khomeini's “greatness to illuminate the great cultural clash between the Islamic nations.” He also often quoted Khomeini's *izala* fatwa, a call to eliminate the Zionist enemy.

In March 1979, Shikaki published a book entitled *Khomeini, The Alternative and The Islamic Solution*, which predicted that the liberation of Palestine would unite the entire Arab world. He was among the first in the Arab world that praised the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Using the pen name Izzeddin Al-Fares, he published a series of articles in *Al-Mukhtar Al-Islami* magazine, glorifying Khomeini and his revolution. In one article, he wrote: “Khomeini's revolution is the most important and latest effort in Islamic awakening for creating an alliance of Islamic nations ... Iran is the only country that is genuinely focusing on the Palestinian issue.” According to the Shikaki, the Islamic Revolution is representing the true revolutionary Islam and the manifestation of the Islamic jihad. As he put it, “the Islamic Revolution of Iran is an Islamic revolution in the broad sense of the Koran ... The commonalities between the two wings of Muslims, Sunnis, and Shiites, form the core of this revolution.” The PIJ chief called on the Palestinians to follow Khomeini's fatwa to vanquish Israel and liberate the Palestinians.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Yossef Bodansky, *Target America, Terrorism in the US Today*, 1993, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Seyed Ahmad Sadat, *Islamic Republic of Iran Relations with Islamic Resistance Movement of Palestine*, with emphasis on Islamic Jihad Movement, Islamic World Political Studies

Sheikh Abd Al Aziz Awda, the co-founder of the PIJ, also praised Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution in Iran and called on Islamic countries to learn from Iran as a model in the struggle against Israel.<sup>7</sup>

PIJ military wing, Saraya al Quds (Jerusalem Brigade), pledged to fight Israel until the liberation of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Brigade commended terror attacks in 1984, but waited five years to launch its first suicide bombing, the signature tool of asymmetrical warfare making. In 1990, the IRGC-QF facilitated the opening of a PIJ office in Tehran, and the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs financially supported the families of PIJ martyrs. Observers gave the PIJ high marks for its faithful representation of Khomeinism. In the words of one of them: “the Islamic Jihad, which was born in the densely populated and slum areas of the Gaza Strip, used violence and preparedness for martyrdom to achieve an Islamic system, based on the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini.”<sup>8</sup>

Hamas (Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-ʾIslāmiyyah or Islamic Resistance Movement), a much larger organization, had its roots in the Gaza-based *Mujama al-Islamiya* branch of the Egyptian *Muslim Brotherhood*. With a quietist ideology, the *Mujama al-Islamiya* focused on providing welfare services to the Palestinian population. Ironically, the Israelis encouraged the spread of the movement as a counterpart to the PLO in what was known as the “divide and rule” strategy devised by the Military Administration of the territories.

While less enthusiastic about Islamic ecumenism and Ayatollah Khomeini than Shikaki, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the founder of Hamas, took his orders from Abdullah Azzam, the radical head of the Muslim Brotherhood from Jordan who collaborated with Osama Bin Laden in creating al Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Azzam used his ties with wealthy Saudis to raise money for Yassin to launch a jihad against Israel. Starting in 1981, Yassin set up several military cells under the command of his close associate Saleh Shahade, a precursor to the military wing of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din

Quarterly, Vol. 4, No. 16, 2016; Fathi Shaqaghi, *Islamic Jihad, Imam Khomeini, Shiite and Sunnis and Palestinian Cause*, Tehran: Ettellaat Publishing, 1997, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup>Hrair Darakjian, *the Contemporary Islamic Movements in the Arab World*, Tehran, Entesharat Kayhan, Translated by Hamid Ahmadi, 1999, p. 354; Roghayeh Javidi, *Islamic Revolution and Palestinian Islamic Jihad*, Farhang Pajohesh Quarterly, No. 18, 2014.

<sup>8</sup>J.J. Millard Burr and Robert Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989–2000*, Brill, 2003, p. 80; Darakjian, *the Contemporary Islamic Movements in the Arab World*, p. 354; Roghayeh Javidi, *Islamic Revolution and Palestinian Islamic Jihad*, Farhang Pajohesh Quarterly, No. 18, 2014.

al-Qassam Brigades. When the first Intifada started in 1987, Yassin, then imprisoned by the Israelis, was one of the best known political-religious leaders in the territories, on par with Yasser Arafat. Militants from PIJ and Hamas received training in Sudan which, as discussed in the next chapter, became a vital center for the Iranian Revolution export. In 1991, Hamas opened an office in Khartoum which became involved in Iranian-sponsored terror network in Africa.<sup>9</sup>

### THE RISE AND FALL OF OSLO PEACE: THE IRANIANS AS PEACE SPOILERS

Networking with the Palestinian Islamists paid off when the United States brought together the Israelis and the Palestinians for a peace conference in Madrid at the end of October 1991. A peace deal would have dealt a devastating blow to revolutionary export doctrine, a fact which the regime leaders freely acknowledged. Masoud Eslami, an official in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, wrote that "If the Arabs were to get closer to Israel, Iran would become even more isolated. And then Israel would be in a position to turn itself into a major problem for Iran." They accused Arafat of having "committed treason against the Palestinian people." It was "a treacherous step that would lead to the crippling result of divisions within the Islamic nations of the world." Though calls for Israel's destruction had been made in the past, their frequency increased as Iran's policy on Israel hardened.<sup>10</sup> To overcome differences with Palestinian groups, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati accused the PLO of ignoring the wishes of the Palestinian people and declared: "We are supporting those who are struggling for their rights, regardless of whether they are from Hamas or belong to other groups."<sup>11</sup>

Desperate to avert an Israeli-Palestinian deal, the regime adopted the so-called spoiling strategy which the international relation theorist Steven J. Stedman conceptualized. Stedman described spoilers as armed political factions that strive to spoil negotiations to end a conflict. In doing so, they battle the so-called custodian of peace, that is, factions which embrace the

<sup>9</sup> J. Millard Burr and Robert Collins, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*, NY: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> Kayhan Newspaper, "Iran supports those who are struggling for their rights" *Kayhan Newspaper*, April 30, 1994; Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, p. 176.



peace process. By all measures, the Iranian leaders and their Palestinian proxies were “total spoilers” who were prepared to use extreme violence to undermine the growing peace process. Critically, the goals of such spoilers never change, and the peace custodians cannot co-opt them.<sup>12</sup>

The first step in the spoiling strategy was to create a “rejectionist front” which Shikaki and Yassin were tasked with organizing shortly before the delegates met in Madrid. On October 4, 1991, Ayatollah Abdulkarim Mousavi Ardebili, a former chief justice and a member of the Assembly of Experts, bemoaned the “great calamity of the American domination” and called for an immediate terror campaign against the American. The “Palestinians” and others “should form resistance cells and endanger American interests.” We do not know about classical warfare, but we know about this sort of thing [terrorism]. He promised “that whoever is killed in the process, he would be a martyr.” On October 16, 1991, Ali Khamenei explained that Americans rushed to Madrid because they were anxious about the rise of Islamism and wanted to stop it “before it is too late to save the west.” He went on to warn that “the struggle and jihad will remain with great vigor” and urged all Muslims to take up jihad “so that the Israelis will not feel secure in any place all over the world.”<sup>13</sup>

On October 18, 1991, Tehran convened the second International Conference in Support of the Islamic Revolution of the People of Palestine (ICSIRPP) in which 400 delegates from 45 countries participated. Sheikh Khalil Qawqa, Al-Alami, and Musa Abu Marzook represented Hamas. Numerous regime speakers offered variations on the theme of peace spoiling. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, by then the president, announced “Iran’s readiness to join the jihad for the liberation of Palestine” to the point of dispatching troops “to fight Israel along with the Palestinians.” Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, serving in his new post as the head of the Defense and Revolutionary Guards Committee in the Majlis, reminded the audience that hindering the peace process is a part of a larger battle against the “global alliance of arrogance,” a reference to the United States, Israel, and the West. Mehdi Kharubbi, the Majlis speaker, added that Iran would

<sup>12</sup> Steven J. Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” in Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman, eds. *International Conflict Resolution after the End of the Cold War*. Washington, DC: National Academic Press, 2000; Kelly M. Greenhill and Solomon Major, “The Perils of Profiling,” *International Security*, 31 (Winter 2006–7, no. 3), 7–40; Benjamin Walter and Mehran Gadhiri, “Recognizing the Problem with Spoiler Theory in Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20 (2009, issues 3–4), pp. 659–680.

<sup>13</sup> Bodansky, *Target America*, pp. 125, 128–129.

provide extensive help to the Muslim mujahedin. Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari, a future Minister of Interior, was named the chair of a new organization to give “aid in terms of finance, arms, training Muslim Palestinian resistance fighters.” The Iranian parliament voted a \$20 million annuity for the Palestinian jihadists.<sup>14</sup>

ICSIRPP was only the beginning of a process of fully incorporating Hamas in the peace-spoiling scheme. On the advice of Velayati, the Revolutionary Guards helped Hamas to open an office in Tehran in early 1992. Imad al-Alami (Abu Hamam) served as the chief liaison with the Quds Force, declaring that “Iran and Hamas share an identical view in the strategic outlook toward the Palestinian cause in its Islamic dimension.” Osama Hamdan, another Hamas operative, served as his assistance from 1992 to 1994 when he was promoted to head the office. Less publicly, the Quds Force was said to have developed a plan to offer intelligence and terror training to Hamas operatives, through either Hezbollah or its camps in Iran and Sudan.<sup>15</sup>

In 1992, Hamas published a pamphlet titled *The Holiness of Palestine*, which replicated Khomeini’s contention that Palestine was holy to all Muslims. Part of the pamphlet read: “In Islam, the sacredness of the Qods is emphasized repeatedly. Ten years after Mohammad became Prophet of Islam, he moved from Mecca (Masjid al-Haram) to Jerusalem (al-Aqsa Mosque), and there he went to Ascension in the night of the *Asra*. Jerusalem was the first *qiblah* of Muslims, and all of these represent a great deal of sacredness of *Beyt Almughadas* (Jerusalem) for Muslims.” The argument went on, “the existence of sacred places of Islam, including the graves of the Prophets, the elders of the Companions and the followers, the mosques, etc., also added to the sanctity aspect of the mosque.” Not surprisingly, the Hamas pamphlet bore more than a passing resemblance to Khomeini’s frequent proclamations that liberation of Jerusalem was critical to the success of the Islamist revolution and to his equally frequent assertion that the revolution would not be completed until Jerusalem was back in Muslim hands.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 125, 128–129.

<sup>15</sup> Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure?* p. 40; MN, *How Hamas Movement Formed*, Mashregh News, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/333116/جنش-حماس-چگونه-شکل-گرفت-تصاویر>; Ups and Downs of Hamas-Islamic Republic Relations, Radio Farda, [https://www.radio-farda.com/a/f35\\_iran\\_hamas/27166377.html](https://www.radio-farda.com/a/f35_iran_hamas/27166377.html).

<sup>16</sup> TPIC, *The Holiness of Jerusalem from the perspective of Islam and Jews*, The Palestinian Information Center, <https://farsi.palinfo.com/news/2017/12/11/>

More consequentially, both the PIJ and Hamas which created its own military wing, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade, launched numerous attacks on Israeli civilians and soldiers. Following the abduction and killing of a soldier and a border police guard, the Labor government ordered the expulsion of some 400 Islamists to Lebanon on December 1992. Denied entry by Lebanon, the deportees set up camp in a no man's land in Marj al Zuhur. The IRGC-QF, in collaboration with Hassan Nasrallah, reached out to the stranded activists. Wafiq Safa, the head of Hezbollah's internal security and a deputy to Brigadier General Hossein Mahdavi, the top Quds Force coordinator in Lebanon, liaised with the deported. Imad Mughniyah set up a training facility which offered the activists classes in terror-related activities including bomb making as well as courses in communication and encryption. Yahya Ayyash, an electrical engineer, was made a commander in the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade in charge of fabricating explosive devices. Ayyash, code-named the "Engineer," proved to be indispensable, especially after Sheik Yassin issued a fatwa permitting suicide bombing. Like Fadlallah, Yassin argued that, as opposed to suicide, self-sacrifice in battle is the ultimate religious act of martyrdom. In what was a sign of things to come, the PIJ and Izz ad-Din al-Qassam launched two suicide attacks on July 6, 1989, and April 16, 1991, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

The signing of the Oslo Accord 1, officially known as Declaration of Principles (DOP) in Washington on September 13, 1993, stunned Hamas which compared it to an "earthquake," according to one analyst. Islamist scholars representing Hamas declared it "an-Islamic," a theme which the Iranians had also adopted. Political commentators predicted its failure. For instance, a Hamas publication of October 1993, titled "The Gaza/Jericho Agreement: Scope and Consequences," listed numerous reasons for why the accord was not viable. Ironically, the publication credited Hamas for Israel decision to accept the PLO. In the view of the authors, Prime Minister Rabin wanted to strike a deal before "it was too late," a reference to the fact that the Islamists were poised to take control of the Palestinians. Both Hamas and the PIJ organized numerous demonstration, protests, and strikes against the DOP.<sup>18</sup>

تقدس-بيت-المقدس-از-منظر-اسلام-و-يهود Tabyan, Palestine from Imam Khomeini's point of view Imam Khomeini (RA) publishing and publishing institute Tehran, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*, p. 415.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Yehezkel Shabat, "Hamas and the Oslo Process," *Nativ*, vol. 12, September 1999.



onstration outside a mosque in Gaza City on November 18 deteriorated into a bloody confrontation which resulted in the killing of 14 people and the wounding of more than 100. To staunch the decline of his popularity, Arafat signed a secret agreement with Hamas which allowed for the continuation of the terror attacks. Shimon Peres, who had a good relationship with the PA chief, commented that the latter failed to understand how badly suicide bombings affected the peace prospect and his own rule. Arafat would subsequently admit, according to Peres, that “the terror ruined me, finished me off, removed me from power.”<sup>21</sup>

By mid-1995, the security situation became so dire that Rabin and some of his cabinet colleagues were ready to consider a separation fence to block the jihadist from crossing into Israel. Amnon Soffer, a geography professor at Haifa University with links to the security establishment, submitted a preliminary proposal titled “Unilateral Separation of Israel from the Palestinian Authority by Means of a Separation Fence.” Under pressure from the dovish Shimon Peres, however, the cabinet rejected the proposal, a decision which left plenty of opportunities for further attacks.<sup>22</sup>

For the Iranians, the political dividends of the suicide bombings increased dramatically after Rabin’s assassination on November 5, 1995. Peres decided to call an early election in May of 1996 in which Labor was predicted to win because of the “sympathy vote” for the murdered prime minister. However, the IRGC-QF determined that Likud’s Benjamin Netanyahu who had grave misgiving about Oslo would be more beneficial to the goal sabotaging the peace process. To “terror out” Labor, as one analyst put it, Tehran ordered the Palestinian jihadists to intensify their action. In a series of spectacular attacks, 69 civilians were killed, and hundreds wounded. To add to the trauma, in March, Hezbollah unleashed a barrage of rockets on Northern Galilee dubbed in Israel “the Hezbollah rain.” Peres responded with Operation “Grapes of Wrath” during which the Israel Air Force (IAF) flew some 1500 sorties. As noted in the preceding chapter, the operation turned into a public relations debacle because of the Qana compound disaster. Angered by the incident, the Israeli Arabs, a vital Labor constituency, boycotted the election, giving the Likud a razor-thin edge.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Levitt and Dennis Ross, *Negotiating Under Fire: Preserving Peace Talks in the Face of Terror Attacks*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 95; Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*, p. 447.

<sup>22</sup> Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure*, p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

Despite Netanyahu's pledge to improve the security situation, suicide bombings had continued and even intensified during the second part of 1996 and 1997. Part of the reason pertained to a domestic dispute in Hamas. Opinion polls in the PA indicated that despite setbacks, most Palestinians supported the agreement, a statistic which prompted some of the more moderate domestic Hamas leaders—Mahmud Zahar, Sheikh Sid Abu Mesameh, and Sheikh Ahmed Abu Bater—to urge reconciling with the PLO. However, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam commanders, backed by Abu Marzook and Khaled Mashal, Hamas external leaders, as well as the PIJ vehemently opposed such a policy. Using the new round of bombings as spoilers, they effectively upended the process of reconciliation with Arafat.<sup>24</sup>

To stiffen the resolve of the hardliners, Iran's Supreme Council for Intelligence Affairs organized a “terrorist summit” in Tehran on June 21–23, 1996. In addition to Imad Mughniyah who represented Hezbollah, the conference boasted Ramadan Sallah who took the helm of PIJ after the assassination of Shikaki, Imad al Alami, and Mustafa al Liddaw from Hamas. In July, a large Hamas delegation traveled to Tehran to receive their “marching orders.” Local activists vowed not to listen to “those who live in five star hotels” (a reference to the allegedly opulent lifestyle of the external leaders), but dependent on Iran's support, they quickly fell in line.<sup>25</sup>

Major General Moshe Yaalon, the head of Aman, and Amos Gilad, the chief of the Research Division, concluded that Arafat was unlikely to finalize Oslo even though the pressure from the Islamist abated somewhat as the peace process became bogged down in 1998. The officials speculated that in the absence of momentum, the Islamist proxies and their masters in Iran felt no need to employ their weapon of choice, the suicide attack. Yaalon and Gilad warned that Arafat's collusion with the jihadist had the potential to turn the territories into a “violent Hamastan.”<sup>26</sup>

By 1998, there were new indications of the Iranian resolve to sabotage Oslo. Osama Hamdan was ordered to Lebanon to serve as a liaison between Hamas and Hezbollah. In 1999, Ehud Barak, who had just assumed office at the head of a Labor-led coalition, received intelligence that senior Hamas officials based in Jordan, Khalid Mashal, Marzook, and Ibrahim Gosheh, traveled to Tehran to discuss ways to disrupt the Oslo negotiations. George Tenet, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief,

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*, p. 125.

persuaded King Abdullah to arrest them upon their return on September 24, 1999. After a brief imprisonment, in November, the three were expelled to Qatar which became the new hub for Palestinian Islamists.<sup>27</sup>

The EU, which was keenly interested in seeing the peace accord concluded, tried to help as well. Acknowledging that the suicide bombings left the Oslo peace in “critical condition,” EU leaders called for “practical steps to fight terrorism and safeguard the Middle East peace process.” In a rare step, the EU parliament protested Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism and called on the “international community to end such activities.”<sup>28</sup>

Well-intentioned as these gestures were, they were too late to save the peace process, not least because by late 1999, Arafat had begun exhibiting signs of unexpected radicalization. He took to proclaiming that Jews had no right to Jerusalem which, in his opinion, was the eternal domain of the Palestinians and Muslims. The PA chief also claimed that the ancient Jewish temple stood in Nablus, not Jerusalem. Although the Israelis considered the notion bizarre and questioned Arafat’s sanity, the theory was peddled by Hojatolislam Mohammad-Taghi Rahbar and the IRGC’s Center for Strategic Studies in Iran.<sup>29</sup>

Labor’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 made Arafat’s position vastly difficult. Unsurprisingly, the Islamists victory over the “Zionist enemy” emboldened the Palestinian Islamists. As Denis Ross, the chief American negotiator of the Oslo accord, saw it, the Hezbollah motto, “Don’t make concessions. Don’t Negotiate. Use Violence. And the Israelis Will Grow Weary and Withdraw” made Arafat look weak in the eyes of his people. Ross recalled a distraught Arafat delivering an “obscenity-laced” tirade against Barak for allegedly “screwing him.” PLO officials readily acknowledged the impact. Marwan Barghouti, the head of the Tanzim terror unit, noted that “the thinking of the entire new Palestinian generation is influenced by the experience of our brothers in Hezbollah and the Israeli retreat in Lebanon.” Ahmed Qurei, a senior Palestinian negotiator, and Mohammed Dahlan, a security chief in the Palestinian Authority, agreed that the “hasty retreat gave out to people the message that violence wins.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Levitt and Dennis Ross, *Negotiating Under Fire*. 181; Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure*, p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>29</sup> Mohammad-Taghi Rahbar, *Haj in Jewish Religion*, Mighate Haj, Article 3, Vol. 10, No. 40, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Seth J. Franzman, “A Different Hezbollah Prepares for the Next Big War.” *The Tower*, June–July, 2017; Mathew Levitt, “Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God.” In Jeanne K. Giraldo and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds. *Terrorism Finance and State*

The Iranians wasted no time on capitalizing on the Israeli retreat. On June 1, 2000, Hussein Sheikholeslam, Tehran’s ambassador to Syria, met with Ramadan Saleh to urge the PIJ to start a new round of violence. Sheikholeslam also met with representatives of the PFLP-GC, DFLP, and Hamas in Damascus and assured them of Iran’s continued military and financial support for the Intifada. In September 2000, Iran ordered Imad Mughniyah to work with Hamas and PIJ, a task which fell to Hezbollah’s Unit 1980 created to help with the Intifada.<sup>31</sup>

While it is impossible to estimate to what degree the spoiler actions of the IRGC-QF and its two proxies intimidated Arafat, the participants of Camp David II, which commenced on July 11, 2000, noticed a negative change in his demeanor. Despite an unexpectedly generous offer from Barak—a virtual return to the 1967 borders, a Palestinian capital in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu Dis, and a condominium in the Holy Basin—Arafat refused. To complicate the matter, the Palestinian delegation seemed to have adopted the so-called right to return, a demand that all the 1948 refugees and their descendants should be eligible to return to Israel.<sup>32</sup> For the IRGC-QF, the derailed peace process was the clearest indication yet that using proxies was a low-cost, high-yield strategy. In the words of a noted Israeli political commentator, “Israel had offered to withdraw from virtually the entire West Bank and Gaza. In return, it received the worst wave of terrorism in the world.”<sup>33</sup>

Having contributed to the collapse of Camp David II, the IRGC-QF wasted little time to sponsor move violence which turned into the Second Intifada.

### THE SECOND INTIFADA: IRAN’S NAIL IN THE OSLO PEACE COFFIN

Speaking on Iranian TV on October 20, 2000, Ayatollah Khamenei stated that “we regard Palestine as an organ of our body, and the Palestinian nation is pride for the Iranian people... The Palestinian people must continue the blessed Jihad and its standing against the enemies of Islam...”

*Response. A Comparative Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) Brian Cunningham, Islamic Revolution Corps Instability in the Middle East. Marine Corps University.

<sup>31</sup> Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure?*, pp. 145–146.

<sup>32</sup> Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure?*

<sup>33</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi, “How the Israelis See the World,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2018.



Khamenei further stated that “The Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah forces must continue the struggle in a united way... But, indeed, the only solution [to the crisis in the region] is the elimination of the root of this crisis, which is the Zionist regime imposed on the region.” In January 2001, he asserted that “the foundation of the Islamic regime is opposition to Israel, and Iran’s continuous issue is the obliteration of Israel from the region.” Speaking on behalf of the Revolutionary Guards, Brigadier General Mohammed Baqer Zolqader stated in June 2002 that “Palestine is the focus of inspiration for all Muslims, and Israel is a cancerous tumor that must be destroyed.” A statement released by the Guards in April 2002 said: “The hearts of the members of the Revolutionary Guards are today filled with hatred and animosity toward the Zionist murderers and their supporters and are ready for the leader’s order to sacrifice their fortunes and souls to defend the Palestinians.”<sup>34</sup>

A special gathering in support of the Second Intifada was held in Tehran in June 2002, and the national television aired Ayatollah Khamenei’s address to the nation: “today, the Palestinian issue is an indicator of adherence to human principles and against humanitarian principles. This Intifada is an insurrection of those people who that has been disappointed with all the compromising methods and learned that victory depends solely on their resistance.”<sup>35</sup>

The IRGC-QF, either alone or in conjunction with Hezbollah, offered a broad range of support to the Palestinians. There were several components to this effort. On June 1, 2002, in a secret meeting in the Tehran suburb of Darja, the IRGC-QF proposed a comprehensive plan for training the Islamists militants in a series of camps in the Beqaa Valley under the command of Brigadier General Ali Reza Tamzar. Members from Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP-General Command trained in fabricating large suicide devises and operating the short-range Fajr-5 missiles and the SA-7 anti-aircraft rocket. Tamzar’s outfit trained some of the operatives in an underwater suicide attack. According to Israeli intelligence, the suicide

<sup>34</sup> Ali Khamenei, Statements in support of the Palestinian Intifada, Khamenei.ir, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3061>; IMFA, “Iranian Activities in Support of the Palestinian Intifada,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 30, 2003; IMFA, “Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorists, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Ups and Downs of Hamas-Islamic Republic Relations, Radio Farda, [https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f35\\_iran\\_hamas/27166377.html](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f35_iran_hamas/27166377.html)

bombing in the Park Hotel in Netanya in 2002 was the work of Mughniyah's Unit 1800.<sup>36</sup>

Recruiting wounded Palestinians treated in Iranian military hospitals was another form of help for the Intifada. A special committee, Headquarters for the Coordination and Support of the Intifada (*Komiteye Hamahangi va Hemayat az Entefazeh*), visited the wounded and organized outings to religious sites like the grave of Khomeini. Mahdi Najafi (aka Abu Mohammed Mansour), from the IRGC-QF, headed a special unit which handled the recruits. Najafi had run its recruitment drives and managed dozens of suicide squads various in the West Bank through its Unit 1800. Hezbollah has used its geographical proximity to gather intelligence on the IDF and civilian defense. Israeli Arab drug smugglers in the Galilee served as the primary conduit, but, on occasions, some higher-level informants came forward. One of them, Azmi Bashara, a Knesset member from the Balad Party, allegedly provided intelligence which helped Hezbollah pick targets for its artillery barrage in the north. Bashara denied the charges but fled Israel to avoid a trial.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps equally important, the Iranians transferred large sums of money to the terror groups. In April 2001, Ramadan Saleh visited Ayatollah Khamenei who agreed to increase the organization's funding by some 70 percent. The funding was to cover the costs of recruiting young Palestinians for suicide attacks. The Supreme Leader praised the "heroic acts" of the suicide bombers and expressed hope that the organization would continue to do its splendid work. Amin al-Hindi, the head of the PA General Intelligence Apparatus (GIA), reported that Iran transferred more than a million dollars to the Islamists. The Iranian largess was not limited to the Islamist groups, as some funding supported PLO groups and affiliates. For example, Tehran funded the *Tala'e Al-Jayish Al-Shaabi Kataeb Al-Awdah*, The Pioneers of the Popular Army-Return Brigade. One expert described the unit as "bomb makers and a proactive spoiler of the Middle East peace process."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Mathew Levitt, "Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God." In Jeanne K. Giraldo and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds. *Terrorism Finance and State Response. A Comparative Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Brian Cunningham, *Islamic Revolutionary Corpse Instability in the Middle East*. Marine Corps University, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *36 Days*, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> "Iranian Activities in Support of the Palestinian Intifada," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 30, 2003; "Iran and Syria as Strategic Support for Palestinian Terrorists, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 2002; Mathew Levitt, "Hezbollah's West Bank

Weapon smuggling was yet another way in which the Iranians and Hezbollah helped the Intifada. In January 2001, the Israeli navy intercepted the Santorini which tried to smuggle weapons from Lebanon. To bolster his chances, Arafat worked out an agreement with the Iranians while on a visit to Moscow in May 2001 with two of his confidants, Fouad Shobaki and Fathi al Razem, deputy commander of the Palestinian navy police. In October 2000, Adel Moughrabi, the chief weapon procurement officer of the PLO, bought the Karina A, a vessel that was loaded in the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. However, in January 2002, the navy stopped the Karina A, a vessel which carried Iranian weapons for the Palestinian Authority. Slightly more than a year later, in May 2003, the navy intercepted an Egyptian fishing vessel, Abu Hassan, which carried Hezbollah explosives.<sup>39</sup>

The Iranian investment paid off quite handsomely in the spectacular increase of suicide bombings. Over five years—starting in October 2000 and continuing until 2005—the unofficial end of the Second Intifada, there were thousands of attacks. By 2007, a total of 1137 Israelis died, 78 percent of whom were civilians. The highest-profile attack took place during Passover Seder in the Park Hotel in Netanya where 30, mostly elderly people perished, followed by the death of 30 Israeli holidaymakers in the Egyptian resort town of Taba. The Israeli intelligence held that Park Hotel “massacre” was the work of Mughniyah’s Unit 1800. More commonly, suicide bombers targeted municipal buses, bus stations, restaurants, and even open markets. Jerusalem, a magnet of suicide terrorism, saw the most carnage, followed by Tel Aviv and Netanya. In one audacious attack, in March 2004, a naval cell of Hezbollah arrived by sea to attack the Ashdod port.<sup>40</sup>

Terror Network,” Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, The Washington Institute, August–September, 2003.

<sup>39</sup>Iranian Activities in Support of the Palestinian Intifada, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 30, 2003; Mathew Levitt, “Hezbollah’s West Bank Terror Network,” Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, The Washington Institute, August–September, 2003; Douglas Franz and James Risen, “A Nation Challenged: Terrorism- A Secret Iran-Arafat Connection,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2002.

<sup>40</sup>Mathew Levitt, “Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God.” In Jeanne K. Giraldo and Harold A. Trinkunas, eds. *Terrorism Finance and State Response. A Comparative Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Brian Cunningham, *Islamic Revolution Corpse Instability in the Middle East*. Marine Corps University; Ups and Downs of Hamas-Islamic Republic Relations, Radio Farda, [https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f35\\_iran\\_hamas/27166377.html](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f35_iran_hamas/27166377.html).

For those acquainted with the negotiated political order in Iran, it was no coincidence that the peak of the terror campaign coincided with the second term of President Khatami who tried to normalize the Iranian foreign policy through his Dialogue of Civilizations. Khatami also broke the regime's taboo by announcing that Iran would have no objection to the Oslo peace should the Palestinians support it. Khatami's statement unleashed speculations about a possible breakthrough in relations with Israel, a prospect which hardliners verbally savaged. Without taking credit for the wave of terror, the IRGC-QF could discredit Khatami and signal to him that he did not control the situation on the ground.<sup>41</sup>

Observers have assumed that Hamas, PIJ, and the secular terror groups linked to IRGC-Quds Force and Hezbollah used the so-called out suffering option to compel “Israel to negotiate on equal terms.” In other words, the Islamists hoped that the suffering of its civilians would bring the Israeli government to its knees. However, the primary mission of the jihadi campaign was to prevent the pro-Oslo elites from regaining traction lost with the collapse of Camp David II. Ahmed Qurei admitted as much in his book *Peace Negotiations in Palestine; From the Second Intifada*, castigating the “persistence of the separate agendas of the militant factions.” Qurei explained that as the Palestinian leaders tried to pursue negotiations, “competing voices from the militant Palestinian factions began to talk about making preparations for a battle of Jerusalem, or even a battle for the liberation and independence of the entirety of the Palestinian territory.” Mahmoud Abbas explained that Arafat felt compelled to resort to violence but could not stop it. Abbas went as far as to state that the “second Intifada was one of our worse mistakes.” Either way, the outcome was highly detrimental to the peace camp. In the words of one analyst, it led “to a near collapse of the left as a viable political force.”<sup>42</sup>

Iran lauded Arafat and other Palestinian militant groups for their resistance, saying that “the continuing resistance by the Palestinians and adherence to their causes and beliefs will annul Israeli efforts.” In 2001, Iran held a second conference, entitled “Support for the Palestinian intifada,”

<sup>41</sup> Rachel Brandenburg, “Iran and the Palestinians,” The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Nada Matta and Rene Roujus, “The Second Intifada. A Dual Strategy Arena,” *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 57, issue 1, 2016; Ahmed Qurei, *Peace Negotiations in Palestine. From the Second Intifada*, London: Taurus, 2015; Haaretz Service, “Abbas: Second Intifada Was One of Our Worst Mistakes,” *Haaretz*, May 26, 2010; Yossi Klein Halevi, “How Israelis See the World,” *New York Times*, May 4, 2018.

attended by Palestinian parliamentarians and representatives from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah. In the opening of the conference, Ayatollah Khamenei praised the Intifada for restoring Palestinian unity. Following the conference, Iran renewed support for Arafat's Palestinian Authority. The Quds Force loaded a ship with 50 tons of advanced weaponry including Katyusha rockets, rifles, mortar shells, mines, and anti-tank missiles and dispatched it to Palestinians, but it was captured by Israeli commando raid in the Red Sea.<sup>43</sup>

The Labor Party preferred to place the blame on Iran rather than on their Palestinian partners. For instance, Shimon Peres argued that Iran is seeking to topple his government in favor of the anti-Oslo Likud Party. "They are doing whatever they can to bring an end to peace and bring an end to the government that goes for peace ... we have evidence they are pressing upon [Islamic] Jihad and other subversive organizations to act against Israel before the elections." As long as the terror continued, however, Likud and its right-wing allies castigated the Labor Party and the peace camp as misguided, if not delusional, for harboring hopes for solving the conflict. The Israeli public seemed to agree, swinging its support behind Likud. As Keith Weissman of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) explained, "It's not an unreasonable assertion, really, that the Iranians understood that by electing [Binyamin "Bibi"] Netanyahu, you would slow down the peace process. And that is what happened."<sup>44</sup>

Scuttling the peace process was only the first step in the Iranian strategy. Shaping the reality on the ground was equally important given that the Sharon government revived the 1995 Shalev Plan for a separation barrier with the West Bank. By 2006, in all, 362 km of the fence was completed, dramatically reducing the number of suicide attacks. Yaakov Amidror, the former head of Research Aman, explained that the fence was part of the new IDF strategy to overcome the most debilitating factor of asymmetrical conflict, notably the steady supply of suicide volunteers who could freely cross into Israel. Physical separation, or spatial separation, was the only way to deter these martyrdom seekers, making the fence an effective tool of deterrence by denial. Ironically, Ramadan Saleh agreed with the effectiveness of deterrence by denial. The PIJ chief complained in an

<sup>43</sup> Ali Khamenei, Statements in support of the Palestinian Intifada, Khamenei.ir, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3061>; Brandenburg, "Iran and the Palestinians."

<sup>44</sup> Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, p. 193; Seliktar, *Doomed to Failure*; Quoted in Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, p. 193.

interview with Manar-TV that “if it [the barrier] were not there the situation would be entirely different.” He told *Asharq al Awsat*, a Saudi paper based in London, that the separation barrier limits Al Aqsa Brigades, Hamas, and PIJ deep within the Israeli territory carry out suicide bombing attacks.”<sup>45</sup>

Still, the decision of the Sharon government to disengage from the Gaza Strip offered a new political opportunity. In June 2004, after a heated debate about the costs and benefits of spatial separation, Knesset voted on the unilateral Disengagement Plan (*Tokhnit HaHitnatkut*). Eager to create a “mini-Hezbollah state” in the Gaza Strip, Qassem Suleimani took personal charge of guiding Hamas and the PIJ through the process. First, to minimize any Israeli opposition to leaving the Gaza Strip, the Quds Force chief made sure to keep jihadist terror attacks to a minimum before the withdrawal planned for August 2005. In late 2004, Hezbollah was told to lower its terror profile so as not to jeopardize the pullout. Nasrallah welcomed the new orders because six militants of the 1800 Unit were liquidated in ambiguous circumstances—Raleb Alawi, considered very close to Nasrallah, was a particularly heavy loss. Israel intelligence officers who monitored the Alawi’s funeral concluded that “Nasrallah smelled death in the yard.” Two years later, Mahmoud Majzoub, the PIJ liaison officer with Hezbollah, and his brother Nidal were killed while driving a car in Sidon.<sup>46</sup>

Second, the Islamists were encouraged to engage politically against the PLO which was still popular with large part of the Palestinian population. In January 2006, Hamas won the parliamentary election and, soon after, following directions from Tehran, moved violently against Fatah in Gaza. Tension reached a boiling point after Hamas militants kidnapped the IDF soldier Gilad Shalit on June 25, 2006. Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the PA, condemned the abduction but was powerless to intervene. Conflict over the control of the border crossings from Israel and other issues inflamed the violence, and, by mid-2007, Fatah was expelled from the Strip. Known as Palestinian Civil War or the *Wakseh* (self-inflicted ruin), the bloody clash between Fatah and Hamas left over 616 Palestinians

<sup>45</sup>Yaakov Amidror, “Winning Counter-Insurgency War. The Israeli Experience,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2012; quoted in Eliezer Ben Rafael and Sigal Ben Rafael Galanti, “Israel-Palestine: Concrete Fences and Fluid Borders,” in Alberto Gasparini, ed. *The Walls Between Conflict and Peace* (Brill, 2016), 228 e-edition.

<sup>46</sup>Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, Random House, 2011, loc. 6123.

killed according to the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights. Having achieved full control over the territory, Hamas proceeded to recreate a mini-Hezbollah state.<sup>47</sup>

### TUNNELS AND PROJECTILES: TAKING A PAGE FROM HEZBOLLAH

Technically, Hamas was bound by the 2005 cease fire agreement between Mahmoud Abbas and Israel which officially ended the Second Intifada. Under its terms, all the Palestinian factions committed to refraining from terrorism conditioned on Israel's cessation of attacks. The expulsion of Fatah complicated things, but Hamas promised to abide by the term of the 2005 deal.

However, friction aroused because Israel moved to control access to the Gaza Strip by land, air, and sea. To overcome the physical isolation, Hamas launched an ambitious program of tunnel building. The Gazans had a history of tunnel digging going back to the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979. At the time, the tunnels were used for smuggling goods, an economic activity which posed little security threat to Israel. In the 1990s, shortly after the DOP was signed, Gaza-based terror cells which became part of Iran's orchestrated anti-Oslo drive switched to using tunnels for smuggling weapons, abduction attempts, attacks on Israeli soldiers who were still present in Gaza, and infiltration into Israeli territory. For instance, during the Second Intifada, it was common to booby trap tunnels to lure patrols. The IDF created a special unit known as "tunnel teams," to find and seal such tunnels. On September 16, 2001, Hamas operatives dug an extension tunnel under an IDF post, detonating explosives and injuring three soldiers.<sup>48</sup>

After Israel disengaged from Gaza, smuggling of good through the cross-border tunnel in Rafah provided a considerable income for Hamas. Shin Bet which compiled statistics on Hamas' finances claimed the Rafah operations generated one-fifths of its revenue in 2007, in addition to local

<sup>47</sup> Amos Harel & Avi Issacharoff, *34 Days: Israel, Hezbollah, And the War In Lebanon*, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 84; Ynet, "Over 600 Palestinians killed in internal clashes since 2006" Ynet. June 6, 2007, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3409548,00.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Daphne Richemond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 25.

taxes. However, it was the security use of the tunnels which worried Israel the most. According to Eado Hecht, an expert in underground warfare, Hamas built a maze of tunnels with multiple entrances and exits in homes, mosques, schools, and public buildings. The design was similar to the one in Lebanon, and sporting finished walls, electricity, and other amenities for extended stays. The “underground city” enabled Hamas and PIJ commanders to stay in their command bunkers and the militants to emerge and attack IDF targets, retreat, and pop up somewhere else.

While most tunnels were located in the enclave, some were cross-border, designed to capture Israelis. Teams called “*nubba*” were specially trained to carry out abductions. On May 25, 2006, a *nubba* cell used a tunnel to infiltrate a tank position on the Israeli side of the border. The militant killed two of the soldiers, captured Gilad Shalit who was wounded, and dragged him back through the tunnel. The entire incident lasted six minutes, making it impossible for an IDF contingent to pursue the perpetrators.<sup>49</sup> Hezbollah considered the Shalit kidnapping a great victory for its own underground warfare strategy. That Hamas could implement it near the Israeli settlements pleased the IRGC-QF as well. Iranians claimed that 15,000 skilled workers built the tunnels which could be used for firing rockets and seize Israelis.<sup>50</sup>

Conversely, the IDF had virtually no resources to cope with the threat. Brigadier Shimon Daniel, head of the Engineering Corps from 2003 to 2007, admitted that at the time the military could not deal with such a complex threat. Eado Hecht, an expert in underground warfare, explained that the IDF had first to ascertain whether the tunnel was “defensive,” that is, if it was used as a bunker or command center or “offensive,” meaning dug for the purpose of cross-border terror attacks and abduction. Since international law on underground warfare was ambiguous, the international community blamed the Israelis for raiding the tunnels.<sup>51</sup>

For all its notoriety, the Shalit kidnapping was a rare success for Hamas. Using rockets and mortars, a proven Hezbollah tactic, was a more routine way to respond to Israel’s blockade. Starting in 2004, Hamas and PIJ had begun a stockpiling rocket, mostly homemade versions of Iranian ones.

<sup>49</sup> Richemond-Barak, *Underground Warfare*, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Iran Diplomacy, Drilling and constructing tunnels by Hamas, [www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1939851/از-سرگیری-حفر-و-ساخت-تونل-توسط-حماس](http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1939851/از-سرگیری-حفر-و-ساخت-تونل-توسط-حماس).

<sup>51</sup> Eado Hecht, “Hamas Underground Warfare,” BESA Center Perspective, July 27, 2014; Harriet Sherwood, “Inside the Tunnels Hamas Built,” *Guardian* August 2, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/02/tunnels-hamas-israel-struggle-gaza-war>.



The Qassam rocket family was the largest segment of the arsenal, produced from everyday-use components in Gaza workshops, which took only 15 minutes to activate. However, the Qassams had no precision guidance and were of limited range: Qassam-1 had a range of up to 5 km and carried a 5 kg warhead, Qassam-2 had a range of 10 km with a 10 kg warhead, and Qassam-3 could fire a 20 kg warhead to a distance of 16 km.

In 2006, Hamas began firing Grads, a rocket which was previously smuggled into Gaza from Iran. Hamas was also in possession of Grad-type Katyusha rockets. Grads had a range of 18–40 km and could carry an 18 kg payload. The WS-1 E, a rocket which the Iranians produced from a Chinese blueprint in a facility in Sudan, was smuggled into Gaza through tunnels from Egypt. Subsequently, the Gaza militants acquired more sophisticated rockets from the Fajr series. Fajr-4, with a range of 40 km and able to carry an 18–22 kg payload, and Fajr-5, with range of up to 75 km and with a capacity to carry a 175 kg warhead were considered very efficient. Khaibar M-302 was a Syrian-made rocket shipped from Iran to Sudan. The M-302 has a range of up to 150 km and a payload of 145 kg, which could target Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, or Israeli offshore rigs. In March 2014, a Panamanian-flagged ship off the coast of Sudan was found carrying 40 M-302 rockets picked up in Iran.<sup>52</sup>

With a large arsenal of projectiles, Hamas could respond to the punitive IDF raids, creating a cycle of violence. For instance, the Shalit abduction triggered one such cycle codenamed Operation Summer Rain, after a series of incursions into the enclave to search for the captive. The militants responded with rocket volleys in Western Negev, prompting the Air Force to launch air attacks. Summer Rain was followed by Operation “Autumn Clouds” (November 1, 2006), and Operation “Hot Winter” (February 29, 2008) which followed a massive breach of a wall near the Rafah Crossing on January 23, 2008.

As tension in Gaza rose, the IRGC stepped up its intervention on a number of levels. The regime leaders—Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the Majlis speaker Ali Larijani—offered strong rhetorical support for Hamas. Ali Jafari, the IRGC chief, implied in July 2008, that Hezbollah and Hamas were part of Iran’s line of defense against an Israeli attack. Suleimani provided tactical support. His deputy commander, Abdul Reza Shahlaei, and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) chief, Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejehei, met with Khaled Mashal, Abu

<sup>52</sup> Jeremy Bender, “These Are the Rockets Hamas has Been Shooting at Israel,” *Business Insider*, July 11, 2014.

Marzook, and Hamas’ representative in Tehran, Abu Usama Abd al Muti. In late May 2008, there were reports that Iran increased its support to Hamas to \$150 million annually. It was allegedly transferred to Gaza via the Damascus branch of Bank Melli, a bank associated with the IRGC.<sup>53</sup>

There was also an increase in weapons and munitions sent from Iran, including rockets and 120 mm mortars. New collapsible rockets, comprising four sections of 50 cm sections allegedly produced in Tehran from a Chinese design, were easier to smuggle than previous versions.

Hamas modified new shipments of the explosively formed projectile (EFP) to produce the highly lethal Shawaz 4 model which could penetrate the Merkava tanks and the IDF’s armored personnel carriers. The Quds Force invited some 150 militants to train in Iran; upon returning, they trained others in the so-called train the trainer scheme. To supervise the situation on the ground, in July 2008, ten Quds Force members entered Gaza on forged Iranian passports.<sup>54</sup>

Belying these increased preparations, on June 19, 2008, Egypt brokered a six-month pause in the hostilities which required Hamas to cease rocket attacks in return for Israel’s end to incursions into the enclave. Hamas was careful to maintain the agreement, but the construction of offensive tunnels was not suspended. On November 4, 2008, Israel launched a cross-border raid codenamed Operation Double Challenge on a newly discovered tunnel in Deir al Balah that reached within 300 feet of the border. Hamas argued that the invasion violated the terms of the agreement and responded with an intense barrage of rockets on Sderot and other nearby towns. Talks about renewing the June truce bogged down amid the demands of Hamas to relax border controls and a series of Israeli claims which included the return of Shalit. On December 18, 2008, Hamas declined to renew the temporary truce. On December 24, 2008, the IDF killed several militants in Gaza, and Hamas announced Operation Oil Stain, which commenced with a barrage of Qassam and Grad rockets along the border. Hamas leaders threatened to expand the operation and “put thousands of Israelis under fire.” Hamas also stated that the organization was much better prepared to defend itself against the “Israeli aggression.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Charlie Szrom, “Iranian-Hamas Prelateship in 2008,” Critical Threats American Enterprise Institute, February 18, 2009.

<sup>54</sup>Szrom, “Iranian-Hamas Prelateship in 2008.”

<sup>55</sup>Anthony Cordesman, “The Gaza War: A Strategic Analysis.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2009.

Despite such bold public pronouncements, Hamas was far from unified on the issue of waging war. Local Gaza leader such as Ismael Haniya urged caution, but Khaled Meshal, and the military wing commanders, Mohammed Deif, Ahamed Jabari, and Nizar Riyan, pushed for a confrontation. Known as the *Kuwaitia* (the Kuwaiti group), they were supported by IRGC-QF which, in a December 2008 meeting in Damascus, gave them a green light to go ahead. New consignments of rockets and combat equipment were sent to Gaza through the complex network of tunnels.<sup>56</sup>

With tensions running high, on December 25, 2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gave an interview to *Al Arabiya*. He warned Hamas not to proceed with the escalation “because Israel is stronger.” Hamas responded with a new round of rockets, paving the way to a full Israeli invasion.

### OPERATION CAST LEAD: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SECOND LEBANON WAR

On its face, the three-stage action which started on December 27, 2008, promised to reproduce the Second Lebanon war. Like Hezbollah in 2006, Hamas was surprised by the Israeli decision, but it was seemingly well prepared to face the invasion. In total, it could count on some 15,000–16,000 fighters, with 3000 elite members of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade. Taking a page from the Hezbollah playbook, Hamas sat up an offensive-defensive plan. Offensively, it used its array of artillery, including the new Grads, to shell across the entire length of the border. Defensively, it prepared an elaborate system to protect its leadership, thwart attacks, and exact a heavy toll on the IDF ground troops. If anything, the “operational shielding” “in the densely populated Gaza Strip was easy to implement. Embedding, also known as “shielding operation,” forced Israel to abstain from action due to fear of collateral damage on private residences, public buildings including mosques, schools and libraries, and even diplomatic posts and United Nations (UN) compounds. Hamas used civilian locations to shield its rocket launchers for maximum

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Levitt, “Political Hardball within Hamas: Hardline Militants Calling Shots in Gaza,” Policy Watch # 1450, January 6, 2009, WINEP <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/political-hardball-within-hamas-hardline-militants-calling-shots-in-gaza>; Con Coughlin, “Israel’s Gaza Offensive Also Confronts Iran,” *Telegraph*, January 11, 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/4214324/Analysis-Israels-Gaza-offensive-also-confronts-Iran.html>.

protection. The vast network of tunnels which crisscrossed the enclave enabled militants to travel underground without risking exposure while enabling it to carry out “hit and run” attacks. The heavily booby-trapped tunnels were designed to hinder the movement of the ground troops.<sup>57</sup>

In reality, however, Hamas performed quite poorly, according to virtually all professional estimates. Some of the failures were intrinsic to the Palestinian combatants. Unlike their Lebanese peers, the Gaza militants failed to use their most effective tools, namely, mortars, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM), snipers, and suicide bombers. The leaders, isolated in an underground pocket of Gaza City, had little effective communication with their combat forces. Most critically, in the land invasion stage, the fighters abandoned their position, donned civilian clothing, and escaped instead of Hezbollah signature of fighting to the end. Those who stayed, such as the “Iranian unit,” that is, fighters who trained in Iran, were killed. One observer compared the Hezbollah to the US elite Delta Force, and Hamas to the National Guard.<sup>58</sup>

Conversely, the Israelis had implemented the lessons from their 2006 failure across the board. Analysts pointed to the remarkable improvement in intelligence collection, analysis, and real-time support for air, naval, and ground operation. The troops were well trained in urban combat, tunnel warfare, and other elements of asymmetrical warfare. The IDF could considerably decrease the number of the rocket attacks, from Gaza to Western Negev in Israel, in particular, the city of Sderot at the end of the operation which ended on January 17, 2009.

There was also a significant effort to decrease the collateral damage to the civilian population which Hamas’ shielding operations had endangered. Israel used leaflets, phone calls, and the so-called knock on the roof technique, dropping off a small charge on the roof of a building before the bombing to warn the population to leave. In another innovation inspired by the Lebanon war, the IAF used precision bombs to decrease civilian casualties.

<sup>57</sup> Joshua L. Gleis, Benedetta Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Yoram Cohen and Jeffrey White, “Hamas in Combat. The Military Performance of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement,” WINEP Policy Focus #97, October, 2009; Gleis and Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas*; Amos Harel, Yanir Yagna, Avi Issacharoff, “Palestinian Source: Iran Unit of Hamas Has Been Destroyed,” *Haaretz*, January 16, 2009; Matt M. Matthews, “Hard Lessons Learned. Lesson from in Foruquart,” *Back to Basics*.

Even so, the final tally of casualties was highly disproportional. Israel lost three civilians and 110 soldiers compared to some 1300 Palestinians killed. Israel estimated that more than 700 of the victims were militants, but the Gaza authorities vehemently questioned these statistics. Given the public relations aspect of asymmetrical warfare as outlined by the Iranians and Hezbollah, the number of civilians killed was key to eliciting international sympathy. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah took the lead with constant coverage of the suffering of the population and rhetoric support for Hamas. In a show of support, several hundred Iranian students who volunteered to fight in Gaza conducted a sit-in at Mahrabad airport.<sup>59</sup>

For the Tehran hardliners, Operation Cast Lead offered additional opportunities as well. They could contrast their commitment to the Palestinians with the alleged indifference of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Indeed, students affiliated with the Basij movement held daily protests outside the Saudi embassy, accusing Riyadh and Cairo of collusion with Israel. Ayatollah Ahmed Khatami, a member of the Haqqani circle of Ayatollah Mohammed-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, claimed that Egypt permitted the IAF to fly over its territory and gave Israel intelligence to target the position of the militants. Taking maximum advantage of the situation, the hardliners had also accused the Reformers of having “pro-Zionists” sympathies.<sup>60</sup>

While the attitude of Iran and its allies was predictable, the real push to condemn Israel for failure to maintain proportionality was waged in the international arena. Richard Goldstone, a distinguished international jurist from South Africa, wrote the original UN report which essentially blamed Israel. Under a firestorm of criticism for using poor methodology, biased witnesses, and disregarding Hamas’ use of human shields, Goldstone amended his report, but the controversy has lingered. In his analysis of the Operation Cast Lead, Anthony Cordesman, a leading security expert, listed the problems with assessing proportionality in international law. He noted that there was no scientific formula for quantifying proportionality in asymmetrical conflicts where “shielding operations” that turns civilians into human shields are the rule. Cordesman noted extremist group manipulating international humanitarian laws to be a tool in its own right. Indeed, this “empowers and incentivizes extremists to use civilians as the ... human shields by embedding their forces in civil areas and using

<sup>59</sup> Sadeqh Zibakalam, “Iran and the Gaza War,” *OpenDemocracy.net*, January 26, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Zibakalam, “Iran and the Gaza War.”

sensitive building like mosque or schools.” Indeed, “the debate over proportionality is becoming an extension of war by other means.”<sup>61</sup>

While Cordesman argued that IDF acted proportionally in Cast Lead, he gave the Israeli authorities poor grades for efforts to counter the propaganda of Hamas and its allies. Winning the battle of perceptions, Hamas moved energetically to shore up its domestic position. Despite more than \$1.9 billion in losses, Hamas claimed victory and valorized the martyrdom of its fighters and the spirit of sacrifice of the population at large. Internally, however, Hamas faced fierce criticism for the failed operation. With guidance from Quds Force, Hamas launched two investigations in the performance of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades in which Ahmed al Jabari and Ahmed al Ghandour, commander of the northern brigade, were listed for particular censure. On the recommendation of Suleimani, a number of commanders were fired and the training protocols reorganized. The review process was said to have aimed at producing a new doctrine to bring Hamas closer to the fighting capabilities of Hezbollah. Also, on orders of Suleimani, Hamas was forced to accept supervisions from Hezbollah. On May 23, 2018, the Guards media confirmed that Hamas is in touch with Hezbollah “on an almost daily basis” and has received a lot of money, equipment, and expertise from Hezbollah.<sup>62</sup>

The Iranians were also anxious to replenish the arsenal lost in the conflict as well as improve the quality of weapons and munitions shipped to Gaza. In the largest operation of its kind, Iran sent 120 tons of arms and explosives through Port Sudan, a favorite smuggling route of Hamas. The cargo was unloaded into 23 trucks and transported to Gaza through the Sinai deserts where the IAF bombed it in early January. Several Iranians who traveled with the convoy were killed. Not deterred, the Iranians were eager to replenish the arsenal in the Gaza Strip, a move which led to new rounds of conflict.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Cordesman, “The Gaza War. A Strategic Analysis.”

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Spyer “Terrorism: Hamas Seeks New Doctrine after Gaza War Failure,” *Jerusalem Post*, September 10, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Time Staff, “How Hamas Foiled an Arms Convoy Bound for Hamas,” *Time*, January 25, 2009; MNA, Relationship Between Hamas and Hezbollah is Perfect, Mashregh News Agency, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/857647/حماس-روابط-ما-با-حزب-الله-عالی-است>.

## OPERATION PILLAR OF DEFENSE AND OPERATION PROTECTIVE EDGE: TESTING THE LIMITS OF THE BALANCE OF DETERRENCE

As noted in Chap. 1, proxies had a significant role in developing the Revolutionary Guards asymmetrical doctrine and testing new tactics and weapons systems. Nowhere was this task clearer than the run-up to Operation Pillar of Defense. Within the span of three years, Hamas and associated militias replenished their arsenal and acquired improved weapons. The Israelis were most concerned with the longer Fajr-5 rockets and the Russian-made Grads which were capable of reaching Beersheba, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Rishon LeZion, and even Tel Aviv. Israeli intelligence concluded that factories in Sudan were producing a new generation of rockets and that the Revolutionary Guards developed now maritime smuggling routes via Cyprus and Egypt. To interdict the weapons, Israel imposed a strict 3-mile fishing limit in Gaza, curtailing much of the fishing industry in the Strip. The Israeli navy had also searched private boats and detained fishermen suspected of smuggling contraband. The Palestinians responded with sabotage, planting of IEDs (improvised explosive device), and increasingly frequent shellings, triggering the tit-for-tat retaliation cycle.

For Israel, keen to protect its population from the increasing range of the Iranian rockets, interdiction was hardly an effective way to maintain the balance of deterrence. As described in the preceding chapter, the Iron Dome was a sophisticated passive deterrence response to rockets and missiles. With a 90 percent interception rate, the anti-missile defense system promised to reduce the cost of shelling from Gaza dramatically.

Both sides were eager to test their respective strategy. During early fall of 2012, the Palestinians countered Israeli actions with increased shelling. Intelligence reported 117 rocket and mortars attack in October alone. On October 23, a factory in Khartoum associated with rocket production and smuggling was hit and destroyed, allegedly by the IAF. Despite several attempts at mediation by Egypt, the Israeli actions and shelling by Palestinians had continued throughout mid-November. Israel, which held Ahmed Jabari, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam commander in Gaza, responsible, assassinated him on November 14, triggering Operation Pillars of Defense.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, "For Israel, Gaza is a Test for an Iran Confrontation," *New York Times*, November 12, 2012.

During the operation, the IAF struck some 1500 sites, including rocket launchers and weapon depots. Hamas responded with Operations Stones of Backed Clay, firing some 1500 rockets into Israel. Fajr-5 and advanced Grad rockets landed as far as Beersheba and Rishon LeZion, and Tel Aviv was hit once. Iron Dome intercepted 421 rockets; 875 fell into open areas, and 142 exploded over Gaza. Only 58 projectiles penetrated urban areas, killing 4 and injuring 219. Analysts agreed that the low casualty rate made it possible for Israel to conclude the operation on November 21, 2012, without involving ground troops. On the Palestinian side, 174 people died, including 107 civilians, according to Palestinian authorities. Israel contested this number, claiming that 120 of the killed were militants. Both Israel and the Palestinians engaged in a sharp public relations campaign to hash out the issue of proportionality and other points of humanitarian law.<sup>65</sup>

Iranian media covered the Gaza operation extensively, stating that the 174 victims were mostly women, children, and old people. The Guards-related sites emphasized that the Iron Dome was an utter failure. According to one outlet, “the Iron Dome was only able to shoot down half of the fired rockets, clearly far from what Israelis boast about its success rate.”<sup>66</sup>

The Iranian reaction should have come as no surprise to the Israeli government. By the end of 2012, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was concerned with Tehran's nuclear program and ready to consider a preemptive action. According to the long-standing Iranian strategy, the proxies bordering on Israel—Hezbollah, Hamas, and PIJ—were all expected to retaliate for a kinetic action against nuclear sites. Indeed, the IDF considered this scenario and was eager to test its defenses, while Hamas was equally anxious to try out its offensive tactics. As one journalist put it, the Gaza conflict was a practice run for an Iran confrontation. Without mentioning Iran, Netanyahu stated that the “good grades” in Gaza would stand the IDF in a broader conflict.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Michael Herzog, "Operation Pillar of Defense," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, January 21, 2013.

[illegible]

<sup>67</sup> David E. Sanger, and Thom Shanker, “For Israel, Gaza Conflicts is a Test for an Iran Confrontation.” *New York Times*, November 22, 2012; Amir Oren, “For Netanyahu Gaza Escalation Could Pave the Way to Iran Strike,” *Haaretz*, November 16, 2012.



Operation Pillars of Defense, however, did not interrupt the underground warfare. In October 2013, the IDF discovered a sizeable cross-border tunnel which ended 300 meters from Kibbutz Ein Hashlosa, the third tunnel found that year. Having determined that the tunnel required 500 tons of cement to construct, earmarked for private construction, the IDF banned cement imports, causing additional problems for the struggling Gazan economy. The situation was compounded by Abdel Fattah al Sisi, who replaced the more Hamas-friendly Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. Al Sisi, who reestablished close relations with Israel, ordered the Rafah smuggling tunnels sealed. Squeezed on all sides, Hamas embarked on a new round of negotiation with Mahmoud Abbas to establish a national unity government. However, the Quds Force, the PIJ, and hardliners in the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades were reluctant to accept the agreement. To the contrary, by his admission, Saleh al Arouri, a co-founder of Izz ad-Din al-Qassam who was exiled to Turkey and close to the outside leader Khaled Mashal, wanted to start a massive new Intifada in the West Bank. Al Arouri did not act on his own. In 2013, he traveled to Tehran to meet with Quds Force officials who wanted to use the new uprising to undermine Abbas and blow up the national unity deal. As a part of a campaign to besmirch the PA leader, the *Kayhan* newspaper ran an editorial describing him as a Bahai by origin and accused him of taking orders from Israel. The Quds Force encouraged Meshal and Arouri to start an Intifada to shoot down the national unity agreement with the PA.<sup>68</sup>

In March 2014, the PIJ took responsibility for firing 60 rockets after three of its fighters were killed by the IDF. It was also in March that the IDF intercepted a shipment of rockets from Iran to PIJ. It was the abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, however, that precipitated another round of violence. A Hebron-based cell of Hamas carried the actual abduction on June 12 for which al Arouri took credit.

The military conducted a large-scale action codenamed Operation Brother's Keeper, which included the arrest of some 500 Hamas activists, some who were previously exchanged for Gilad Shalit. Hamas felt compelled to answer what it called an "Israeli provocation" by firing rockets. On July 7, 2014, seven militants were killed when Israel hit a tunnel near Khan Younis, prompting a new rocket and artillery barrage from Hamas. The following day, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge with air

<sup>68</sup> *Kayhan* Newspaper, Mahmoud Abbas is Baha'i and has Iranian Origin, [www.asriran.com/fa/news/182933/کیهان-محمود-عباس-یهاییبایرانی-تبار-و-از-نوادگان-عباس-افندی-است-زمان-ناصرالدین-شاه-مهاجرت-کردند](http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/182933/کیهان-محمود-عباس-یهاییبایرانی-تبار-و-از-نوادگان-عباس-افندی-است-زمان-ناصرالدین-شاه-مهاجرت-کردند)

raids which were expended on July 17 into a ground invasion aimed at destroying the tunnels. The ground forces withdrew on August 5, and a cease-fire was announced 20 days later. The IDF reported that during the period of the fighting, Hamas and the other groups fired 4564 rockets and mortars, but Iron Dome intercepted 735 on the trajectory to hit Israeli urban areas. Only six civilians were killed, proving once again that Iron Dome was a highly effective passive deterrence system.

On the Gaza side, losses were heavy. Some 2200 Palestinians were killed (both civilians and militants) and more than 10,000 wounded. Israel attacked 5263 targets, destroyed 34 tunnels, and two-third of the rockets were either destroyed or used up. The cost of rebuilding of the civilian infrastructure and housing stock was estimated at some \$4–6 billion. Despite the devastating outcome, Hamas declared victory on the ground that it had forced the Israeli military out of Gaza. Even by the standards of Hamas propaganda, this argument sounded hollow because the IDF announced in advance that the ground incursion was of limited duration. With no real success to show, the Islamists took to glorifying the sacrifice which the Palestinians had made. One observer noted the change of tone, writing: “Hamas gains from the violence because the outside world may, as result of the grim publicity generated by the bloodshed, feel obligated to consider its grievance afresh.”<sup>69</sup>

Iran also congratulated Hamas for an overwhelming barrage of rockets and mortars unleashed on Israeli cities and belittled the Iron Dome. The Guards media noted that in one single day, Hamas fired 117 rockets onto “Zionist settlements” and Iron Dome only could intercept eight of them. According to the editorial, as a result of the Hamas action, three million Jews sought shelters, and economic activities of Jewish settlements were interrupted. Also, due to Hamas rockets, Israel had to suspend flights to and from Ben Gurion and Eilat airports, “a major victory for Hamas and resistance movement.”<sup>70</sup>

Unlike in the Second Lebanon War, however, the Iranians were not able to offer much financial assistance to the Gaza Strip. Their economy was hurt by the nuclear sanctions and expansive rescue operation of Bashar

<sup>69</sup> “Why Hamas Fires These Rockets,” *The Economist*, July 19, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Ettelaat, 117 rocket of Resistance Hit the Zionist area, <http://www.ettelaat.com/new/index.asp?fname=2014%5C07%5C07-09%5C22-24-13.htm&storytitle=%C7%D5%C7%C8%CA117%20%E3%E6%D4%DF%20%E3%DE%C7%E6%E3%CA%20%C8%E5%20%E3%E4%C7%D8%DE%20%D5%E5%ED%E6%E4%ED%D3%CA%20%E4%D4%ED%E4>.

Assad regime in Syria. Abu Marzook was quoted as saying, “all assistance had stopped both civilian aid to the Gaza Strip and military assistance to Hamas.” But he still praised Iran for helping the “resistance in Palestine,” for without the assistance, “it will be hard for us to cope.”<sup>71</sup> Although Iran was eventually able to restore some of the weapon stock, by 2014, Hamas’ balance of deterrence was to change adversely.

As detailed in the preceding chapter, Israel’s Defense Ministry’s Administration for the Development of Weapons and Technological Infrastructure (MAFAT)<sup>72</sup> developed a tunnel finding system that enabled the IAF to identify and bomb Hamas tunnels. Using the same technology, in 2017, the IDF started to build a 37-mile barrier around the border with Gaza. The above ground fence had an underground part to prevent cross-border tunneling. The \$833 million structure projected for completion in 2019 was even extended into the Mediterranean to foil attacks from the sea. In a ceremony to honor MAFAT, a senior official commented that “we have taken away from Hamas its strategic weapon, in which it has invested most of its rearmament budget, hundreds of millions of dollars.”<sup>73</sup>

The loss of its main offensive capability coupled with the economic squeeze made worse by the recurring failure to reconcile with the PA, limited Hamas options. Yahya Sinwar, the new head of Hamas in Gaza who spent 22 years in Israeli prison, understood that Israel’s superior technology required a new approach. In a move which spoke to this predicament, in April 2018, the organization announced the Great March of Return, a series of events which featured mass protest around the border fence, a low-tech but effective tactic to keep Hamas in the news. As one observer put it, “given that the Hamas responses—suicide bombers, rockets, or tunnel attacks,” did not work, “the novel option of ‘human waves’ seemed appealing.” To the media-savvy Gaza leader, the spectacle of masses of Palestinians readily chanting “our refined pure blood will enrich the land of Palestine” offered hope that the international community would pay attention. It was more than a passing irony that after two

<sup>71</sup> SAN, Why Hamas Distanced From Iran, Shahr Ara Newspaper, <http://shahraraonline.ir/final/site/news-content.php/55789?id=55789>; Jack Moore, Iran Ceases Financial Aid To Hamas In Gaza, Official Claims, July 28, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-ceases-financial-aid-hamas-gaza-official-claims-357651>.

<sup>72</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administration\\_for\\_the\\_Development\\_of\\_Weapons\\_and\\_Technological\\_Infrastructure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administration_for_the_Development_of_Weapons_and_Technological_Infrastructure)

<sup>73</sup> Judah Ari Gross, “Tunnel Busting System Wins Top Israeli Defense Prize,” *Times of Israel*, June 26, 2018.

decades of trying to establish itself as the Hezbollah of Gaza, Hamas was forced to resort to human waves, a tactic that the Revolutionary Guards pioneered during the Iran-Iraq war. In the new strategy, “the victory [over Israel] was measured in the number of Palestinian casualties.”<sup>74</sup>

Sinwar and the Hamas leadership could notch some success with the new tactic. In response to a year-long public protest along the border, the Likud government and the military, in collaboration with the Egyptians, worked out a system to relax some of the restriction on Gaza. Qatar offered cash transfers to alleviate the dire economic situation in the Strip, especially as in March 2019, Hamas faced unprecedented public protest. There have been persisted rumors that the Egyptians were working on a long-term cease-fire between Gaza and Israel. Accordingly, in return to a commitment to abandon its role as part of the Axis of Resistance, Hamas was promised a relaxation of the blockade and investment to stimulate the economy.

The prospect of losing its main Gaza Strip proxy alarmed the Revolutionary Guards which decided to sabotage the agreement. Ziyad al Nakhalah, appointed as the new head of the PIJ on September 28, 2018, was ideally suited for the task. An extreme hardliner with extensive ties to Suleimani and Nasrallah, al Nakhalah strenuously objected to the budding rapprochement with Israel. Because the PIJ owned a separate arsenal of projectiles, including longer ranges missiles, and commanded its network of tunnels, it could defy the low-profile policy of Hamas. Indeed, it has been widely assumed that the missile which destroyed a house near Tel Aviv in March 2019 was fired by PIJ on Suleimani’s order. Israel’s decisive response included hits on more than 100 targets in the Strip, including the building that housed the office of Ismael Haniyeh. Reservists from a variety of units were also called up and massed outside Gaza, but after further Egyptian mediation, the ground offensive was suspended.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup>Eran Lerner, “Understanding the Hamas March of Return,” American Jewish Committee, Global Voice, April 9, 2018; Jonathan D. Levi, “Why Is Hamas Interested in Palestinian Deaths,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* May 16, 2018; Jonathan D. Levi, “Why Is Hamas Interested in Palestinian Deaths,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, May 16, 2018.

<sup>75</sup>Ilanit Chernick, Hamas Official: Iran Ordered Rocket Attack On Central Israel - Report, Jerusalem Post, March 27, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Hamas-official-iran-ordered-rocket-attack-on-central-Israel-584712>; Shoma News, Ghasem Suleimani Ordered the Attack, <https://shomanews.com/fa/news/886602/دستور-حملة-داد-قاسم-سليماني>.

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## Al-Qaeda: Islamist Ecumenism Against the United States and the West

If the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) relations with Hezbollah were high-order, continuous, and intense, the links to Al-Qaeda were, according to the network theory, low-order, intermittent, and patchy. The alliance was essentially opportunistic, born out of a common goal of fighting the United States in the Middle East and beyond. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and his revolutionary exporters, came to realize the potential of the Sunni Salafists during the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979. Juhayman al Otabi, a leader in the *Jamaat al Salafiyah al Muhtasiba* (The Salafi Group that Command Right and Forbids Wrong), who carried out the attack, was a harsh critic of the Saudi rulers and the Wahhabi clerical class. Like Khomeini, al Otabi denounced the Kingdom for compromising the strict principles of Islam and selling out to the West. Many of the militants who survived the violence would later join Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. In the meanwhile, the regime cashed in on the violence by spreading false rumors that American and Israeli paratroops occupied the mosque. Mobs in Pakistan burned down the American embassy in Islamabad to the ground, and there were widespread riots against the United States in other Muslim countries.<sup>1</sup>

One month later, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) spotted an opportunity to expand its revolutionary export there among the Shiite Hazara. Three

<sup>1</sup>Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine, and the Birth of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Doubleday), 2007.

IRGC commanders linked to Office of the Liberation Movement (OLM), Mohammad-Reza Hakim Javadi, Abdul Reza Rahmani, and Ali Tajalee, were sent to recruit and train Hazara volunteers. One of them, Ali Reza Tavassoli, moved to Iran and joined the Abouzar Brigade, the Afghan branch of OLM. The Revolutionary Guards hoped to mobilize the Hazaras to fight against the Taliban which took a very hostile stand against the Shiites in general, and Iran in particular.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the Guards made choices which confounded the strict Sunni-Shiite divide. One of them was to support Osama Bin Laden and the returning Al-Qaeda militants, known as “Afghan Arabs,” or “Afghan alumni.”

### IRAN IN SUDAN: THE AFRICAN “LEBANON” OF THE ISLAMIST REVOLUTION

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who took the office of the Supreme Leader in July 1989, was an enthusiastic revolutionary exporter and, more to the point, had a long-standing friendship with the Revolutionary Guards, dating to the Iran-Iraqi war. In this view, the return of the Afghan alumni was a prophetic event likely to trigger an Islamist wave not only in the Middle East but also in North Africa. In a lucky coincidence, Brigadier General Omar Bashir, who came to power in Sudan in 1989, allied with Hassan al Turabi, the head of the Islamic National Front (INF). The veteran Islamist activist and theologian was an advocate of *taqrīb*, the Shiite-Sunni collaboration movement. Married to the daughter of Abdullah Azzam, al Turabi was an admirer of Khomeinism and wanted to turn Sudan into a center of a global anti-Western jihad movement. As such, the ambitious theologian was a perfect fit for the IRGC-QF which sought an outpost in Africa. For the impoverished nation, the oil-rich Iran was a potential national savior.

In November 1989, a sizeable Sudanese delegation traveled to Tehran to discuss details of economic and security arrangement. The Iranians reciprocated on December 1991, when President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani arrived at the head of a 157-person delegation. Iran offered Sudan oil at a discounted price and committed itself to significant infrastructure projects, including the building of the so-called Peace Highway to link Kusti, Malakal, and Juba, on the White Nile. Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarter,

<sup>2</sup> Ali Alfoneh, “Four Decades in the Making,” The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 25, 2018.

the IRGC construction company, was in charge of the project, which had a significant strategic importance to the Sudanese military fighting secessionist rebellion in the South. Bashir also announced that Iran was helping to equip the Sudanese army. Both sides made no efforts to disguise their relations which culminated with a deal to let Iran use strategic Port Sudan. Observers were quick to note that by 1992, Sudan became a forward base for the export of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Wasting no time, al Turabi moved to create the jihadist infrastructure in Sudan. In April 1991, he hosted the Popular Islamic and Arab Congress (PIAC) conference attended by some 500 delegates from 45 nations. The list of participants read like the “who is who” of the word terrorist fraternity, boasting the names of Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, the chief of *Jamaat Islamiyah* (JI), Fathi Shiqaqi of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Khaled Meshal of Hamas, Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), among others. Members of the Revolutionary Guards and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) were also in attendance. As al Turabi boasted, “I am close to, known every Islamic movement in the world, secret or public.” The conference elected al Turabi, nicknamed the “Sudanese Lenin,” as its secretary general; a small executive, known as the “Islamic Comintern,” was put in charge of running its daily affairs. The Iranians supplied encryption and other tools for secret communication. To please his new patron, al Turabi declared that PIAC was opposed to the Saudi-based Islamic Conference Organization (ICO), calling it “no more than a symbol” that did little to promote the Islamist movement.<sup>4</sup>

To the Iranians eager to mobilize the Afghan Arabs, al Turabi’s grand vision for leading was highly propitious. Starting in late 1991, several high-ranking IRGC-QF commanders arrived in Sudan to scope training facilities, including the Kasala camp in Eastern Sudan. The first contingent of the Revolutionary Guards came in 1990 and was housed in the Kobar prison in Khartoum and on Sudanese military bases. They were subsequently moved to two training camps, al Shambat and al Mazraah. Ahmed Vahidi, the Quds Force chief, put Brigadier General Mohammed Bagher

<sup>3</sup> Amy Ayalon, *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, the Moshe Dayan Center, vol. 16, 1992, 201; Shaul Shay, *The Red Sea Triangle*, Transaction Publishers, 2007, 38; J. Millard Burr and Robert Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan*, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> J. Millard Burr and Robert Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan*, 74; Shay, *The Red Sea Triangle*, p. 36; Ayalon, *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, p. 200.

Zolghader in charge of the training project. The number of Iranian personnel in Sudan was subject to intense speculation. According to Egyptians and Saudi sources, they numbered in the thousands, but the American intelligence asserted that there were only a few hundred. A Congressional Task Force on Terrorism estimated the strength at 5000 by the end of 1991. The Task Force noted that up to 13 camps were set up to accommodate the influx of the forces, including Albarah and Wadi al Humar. Most camps trained militants segregated by country of origin, but al Kamiliyan, known as the “Suicide Camp,” prepared the most dedicated Islamists from all over the Middle East for suicide missions.<sup>5</sup>

The number of militants staying in the camps was not precise either. In 1990, Sudan abolished visas for Muslims, making it the favorite destination for the Afghan mujahedeen and fighters from more than a dozen countries. Islamists fleeing from Egypt and Algeria found the proximity of the camps particularly reassuring. For his part, Vahidi tried to harness this substantial revolutionary potential to create the Tide Brigade in Europe, a long-term project to destabilize Western Europe. Candidates for the first course comprised 66 militants selected from trainees in Shambat and other camps and given extensive training in espionage, sabotage, and assassinations. Preference was given to French-speaking militants from the Maghreb who would raise little suspicion in parts of Europe. Volunteers from Egypt and Morocco trained in separate camps to assassinate officials and destabilize their own countries.<sup>6</sup>

The Iranian revolutionary exporters were helped by a fortuitous development regarding Osama Bin Laden. On loggerheads with the Saudi Kingdom, in 1991, Bin Laden accepted a proposition to move his headquarter to Khartoum, a considerable success for al Turabi. The Saudi businessman known for spending his own money in Afghanistan, invested in the Sudanese economy, opening some 11 businesses and deposited 50 million dollars in the al Shamali Bank in Khartoum. In exchange, Sudan gave him a virtually free hand in opening training camps and transferring

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Leitner & Peter M. Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings: The Lost Reports of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare Volume 1: Islamic Terrorism and the West*, Peter Leitner, 2010, 133; David L. Phillips and Ahmed Hussain Adam, *Bashir's Sudan and Iran: An Alliance of Terror*, Sudan Tribune, [www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article45145](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article45145).

<sup>6</sup> Leitner and Leitner, *Unheeded Warnings*, pp. 133–134; J. Millard Burr and Robert Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan Al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989–2000* (Social, Economic And Political Studies Of The Middle East And Asia), Brill Academic Pub, 2003, p. 80.

money to Islamist entities, according to his assistant, Jamal al Fadel. By the end of 1991, there were up to 2000 Afghan Arabs in Sudan. Senior commanders arrived later—Saif al Adel in 1992, and Mohammed Atef in January 1993. Al Adel, a former member of the Egyptian special forces who distinguished himself in Afghanistan, was the self-appointed archivist of Al-Qaeda. During his stay in Khartoum, he published the *Encyclopedia of the Jihad in Afghanistan*, which was distributed on CDs as a teaching tool. Like the Iranian revolutionary exporters, Bin Laden felt strongly that the time was ripe for a significant Islamist movement against the West and the Muslim countries it supported.<sup>7</sup>

It was just a matter of time before the Al-Qaeda chief was introduced to the Iranians. The 9/11 Report section on “Assistance from Hezbollah and Iran to Al-Qaeda” provided a preliminary outline of the contacts. Several subsequent accounts of Al-Qaeda insiders and experts rounded up the picture. Al Turabi, the Sudanese scholar Ahmed Rahman Hamadabi, and Ayman al Zawahiri took the lead in creating the connection. On the Iranian side, a number of officials and theologians served as intermediaries. Al Fadhl, one of the founding members of Al-Qaeda and the business manager of Bin Laden who later defected, recalled that a certain Sheikh Nomani visited Bin Laden in his simple house in Khartoum. Ayatollah Mohamed Ali Taskhiri, Khamenei’s envoy to the Sunnis, was also involved. Because of the importance of Sudan, Supreme Leader personally picked Taskhiri to serve as an executive for cultural affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Al Zawahiri who had prior relations with Vahidi became the point man in maintaining communications between Al-Qaeda and the IRGC-QF. In April 1991, al Zawahiri met Imad Mughniyah to discuss a training program and joined the action. In July 1992, al Zawahiri arrived in Tehran for more advanced talks on future cooperation. In 1995, Al-Qaeda purchased a guest house in the Beqaa Valley for its men. Quds Force promised to transfer 800 Al-Qaeda militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan, train them, and send them to Sudan.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Shaul Shay, *Red Sea Terror Triangle* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 2007), 40–41; Ari Weisfuse, *Negotiating Oblivion. Sayf al Adel. Al-Qaeda Top Operative*, Brandeis University, 2014.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Joselyn, *Iran’s Proxy Wars Against America*, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, 2007; Mohammadreza Shakiba, *The Shine of Thought and the Buoy of Knowledge in the Works of Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Teshkiri*, Al-Huda publisher, 2014.

<sup>9</sup>Jossef Bodansky, *Target America. Terrorism in the U.S. Today*, S.P.I. Books, 1993, 156; Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (NY: Columbia University Press), 2017, 197; Shaul Shay, *The Red Sea Triangle*, 44.

## THE FAILED STATE OF SOMALIA: TESTING THE ANTI-AMERICAN STRATEGY

Somalia, a country strategically situated at the Horn of Africa, was a logical target for the Iranians involved in spreading the Islamist revolution in Africa. Its coast overlooked the waterway between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, in a sense flanking Saudi Arabia from the West. A long-standing Islamist movement—*al Jamaat al Islamiyah* and *Wahdad al Shabaab* that merged into *Al Ittihad al Islamiyah* (The Islamic Union)—declared its opposition to the United States and its support for an Islamic state in Somalia. However, like much of Muslim East Africa, through its charities and cultural institutions, Saudi Arabia exercised a considerable influence in Somalia. The brutal civil war which led to the collapse of the government of Mohamed Siad Barre in January 1991, gave the IRGC-QF, Bin Laden, and al Turabi a better shot at taking control.<sup>10</sup>

Long nourished by al Turabi, the plan to get involved in Somalia rested on an alliance with Mohamed Farah Aidid, a warlord with a strong base around Mogadishu and his tribal land in the central and north-central regions of Mudug and Galgaduud. Despite being secular, Aidid, arguably the most ruthless among the warlords, was given generous help from the Iranian-Sudanese and Al-Qaeda triumvirate. Aidid's prospects improved dramatically when, in 1992, the United Nations announced the creation of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). Codenamed "Restoring Hope," its mission was to distribute humanitarian aid to the starving Somali population. Having encountered opposition from local warlords, the UN asked President Clinton to provide military protection for the mission. Both Iran and Sudan announced their opposition to American forces and called on Islamist movement to expel them. In the words of one observer, "both countries regarded the United States ... as the main enemy impeding the realization of Islamic vision in the Horn of Africa, and therefore took joint action to the bloc and remove this threat."<sup>11</sup>

Secretly, however, the triumvirate prepared for invading Somalia since early 1992. A joint committee headed by Yahia Rahim Safavi, the then Deputy Commander of the IRGC, and Ali Othman Taha, a high-ranking Sudanese official, was set up to coordinate the Somali project. On November 28, 1992, Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi arrived in Khartoum at

<sup>10</sup> Shaul Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, 2007, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

the head of a delegation to further the revolutionary project in East Africa. Yazdi signed an agreement to bolster Sudan's military and security structure. As a way to gain control over the erratic Aidid, the IRGC-QF decided to create the Somali Revolutionary Guards (SRG) to be trained by its personnel and Hezbollah operatives. Ali Manshawi, a Guard official, was in charge of the SRG project. For his part, al Turabi consolidated several Islamist groups operating in northern Somalia into the Somali Islamic Union Party (SIUP) under the nominal leadership of Mohamed Othman who resided in London. His chief coordinator for Somalia was Colonel Mohamed Suleiman from National Islamic Front (NIF).<sup>12</sup>

Using his resources and the considerable organizational skills acquired in Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden created the financial and logistic infrastructure for the Somali operation. He purchased several farms in Somaliland and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia to serve as a cover for training camps. The SIUP fighters, in particular, were in need of necessary training, as their first engagement in June 1992 in Bosaso proved to be a debacle. Safavi and Taha, who arrived soon after, recommended an intensive course of training on updated weapons in Bin Laden's camps. According to accounts, the Iranians supplied RPG, mortars, and leftover Stinger missiles from Afghanistan. Still, not sure about the capability of the SIUP of Aidid's fighters, in 1993, Bin Laden had a few hundreds of Al-Qaeda transferred from Pakistan and Yemen in a complex operation which did not raise any flags.<sup>13</sup>

With preparation to challenge the Americans who had arrived at the end of 1992 nearing completion, in February 1993, al Turabi hosted a conference in Khartoum to create a combat strategy for the triumvirate. In the following weeks, Revolutionary Guards commanders, Aidid representatives, and Bin Laden's aides exchanged messages and visits. Bin Laden visited Somalia but was not scheduled to take part in the fighting. Instead, he charged the members of his military council with overseeing the action on the ground: Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (Abu Mohamed al Masri), the head of operations in Africa, Ali Amin al Rashidi (Abu Ubeida al Banshiri), Mohamed Atef, and Saif al Adel (Mohamed Silah al Din al Halim Zaidan), a former special force officer in Egypt with extensive knowledge of asymmetrical warfare. Al Banshiri and Atef were in charge of the Somali operation. Suleimani helped to arrange a trip for the Al-Qaeda commanders to Somalia where they opened a training camp in Ras Kamboni in the spring

<sup>12</sup> Ari Weisfuse, *Negotiating Oblivion*, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Shaul Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, pp. 76–80.



of 1993. The Al-Qaeda lamented the poor discipline and lack of training of the Somali militants, prompting Bin Laden to transfer a few hundreds of Al-Qaeda from Pakistan and Yemen in a complex operation which did not raise any flags with the American intelligence.<sup>14</sup>

By the summer of 1993, however, the forces were all assembled and ready. They included the Somali National Alliance (SNA) which had bases in Mogadishu and Galacio, the SIUP headquartered in Maraka, the SRG and its Iranian trainers, and volunteers from the Iraqi-based Vanguard of Islamic Salvation. Aidid had also drawn on his own extended clan Habar Gadir to create the Somali Islamic Salvation Movement (SISM). Al-Qaeda combatants were stationed mostly in Mogadishu.

The triumvirate conducted the anti-UN and an anti-American campaign at two levels. Acting through the local media, the triumvirate incited the population to attack the UNOSOM personnel, describing them as colonial invaders and enemies of Islam. An SIUP spokesman who broadcasted from Tehran warned the Americans that the Muslim world would fight them, a theme which the Sudanese media took up as well.<sup>15</sup>

Kinetically, the Aidid forces, a somewhat unruly band referred to as the *mooryaan*, commenced a campaign against the UN personnel. On June 5, 1993, the militants ambushed a convoy of Pakistani peacemakers, killing 26. The UN responded by declaring the SNA an illegal organization, and Admiral Jonathan Howe, the American chief of the UN forces, offered a \$25,000 prize for the capture of Aidid. On June 13–15, the American conducted raids on Aidid's house and positions, but could not find him. The Aidid-friendly media intensified its campaign against the UN presence, and his followers harassed soldiers and pelted them with stones. On August 11, militants from SISM killed four American soldiers, and on September 5, the SNA attacked a UN Nigerian contingent, killing seven. It was in early September that SISM militants began attacking Somalis identified as UN supporters, triggering riots and fighting all over the country.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ari Weisfuse, *Negotiating Oblivion*, 40; Shaul Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, 2007, pp. 76–80.

<sup>15</sup> Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> TAP, 26 U.N. Troops Reported Dead in Somalia Combat, The Associated Press/New York Times, June 6, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/06/world/26-un-troops-reported-dead-in-somalia-combat.html>; Major Roger N. Sangvic, "Battle of Mogadishu: Anatomy of Failure" (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army CGSC, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1998–99), 13–46; Robin Wright, 4 U.S. Soldiers Killed in Somalia: Africa: Clinton pledges "appropriate action." Men die when vehicle hits land mine in area

With Somalia spinning out of control, the American military determined that Aidid had to be taken out before order could be restored. In July, the highly secretive team from US Army Intelligence Support Activity, known as Activity, under the command of Michael L. Nagata, was recalled from Columbia to take part in Operation Gothic Serpent commanded by Major General William F. Garrison. Made up of Rangers, Delta Force, and Navy SEALs, it spent time rehearsing a scenario of snatching Aidid and his top lieutenants.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, in the capital which bore the brunt of chaos, the Americans and Aidid forces were engaged in heavy fighting starting on September 13. On September 15, Aidid attacked the UN headquarters with mortar fire, and the Americans retaliated by bombing his forces. In the streets, Aidid followers, including women and children, harassed UN personnel, making the situation even more chaotic. At the end of September, a Ranger task force captured Aidid's financier Othman Hassan Ali Ato. But in another round of retaliatory fighting, Aidid's forces shot down a Blackhawk helicopter. An incited crowd mutilated the bodies of the pilots and dragged them along the streets of Mogadishu. The incident seen on television around the world shocked and dismayed the American public.<sup>18</sup>

A further "Snatch and Grab" mission on October 3 to capture Aidid's two senior aides, Osama Saleh and Mohamed Hasan Awali, ended in another debacle. The Rangers task force was directed to the Olympic Hotel, but it blundered into an ambush laid out by Aidid and Islamist forces. Although Saleh and Awali were apprehended, two Black Cobra helicopters were downed. In the ensuing fight, 18 Rangers were killed and 78 wounded. One helicopter pilot was taken captive. Facing a growing public furor, President Clinton ordered the withdrawal of the troops, effectively ending Washington's participation in humanitarian missions.<sup>19</sup>

Although the losses in Somalia were minor, the debacle had a substantial impact on the United States. Congress held hearings, and a subsequent investigation found Les Aspin, the Secretary of Defense, responsible. The

dominated by supporters of warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid, Los Angeles Times, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-09-mn-22019-story.html>.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Smith, *Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America's Most Secret Special Operations Team* (NY: St. Martin's Griffin), 2011.

<sup>18</sup>Shaul Shay, *Somalia between Jihad and Restoration*, Transaction Publishers, 2012.

<sup>19</sup>Art Pine, President Clinton ordered the withdrawal of the troops, Los Angeles Times, October 20, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-10-20-mn-47764-story.html>.

Clinton administration resolved not to send the military to support humanitarian missions again. One commentator described the new policy as “involvement without intervention.” More consequentially, the Mogadishu debacle was a “show stopper” according to Professor Richard Shultz, who wrote a report on the use of Special Forces for the Pentagon. Shultz noted the operation produced the so-called Somalia syndrome, an extreme reluctance to use counterterror operations against Al-Qaeda and other terror groups until 9/11. A British observer called this reaction “the Somalization of the American armed forces.”<sup>20</sup>

Bin Laden was pleased with Clinton’s decision to pull the troops out. He noted that “only eighteen US troops were killed. Nonetheless, they fled in the heart of darkness, frustrated that they had caused a great commotion about the New World Order.” Bin Laden added that “We believe that our battle against America is much simpler than the war against the Soviet Union ... some of our mujahidin who fought in Afghanistan also participated in operations against the Americans in Somalia, and they were surprised at the collapse of American morale. This convinced us that the Americans are a paper tiger.” Bin Laden subsequently told the British journalist Robert Fisk that he would advise the Americans to withdraw their troops from Saudi Arabia, lest they meet the end.<sup>21</sup>

Iranians were even more triumphant, calling Mogadishu the worse American failure after the Vietnam War and a huge embarrassment to the American military. According to the Iranians, after spending 102 billion dollars, the US policy in Somalia resulted in losing 44 soldiers and 177 wounded. Like Bin Laden, they concluded that the Americans had no staying power and were easily roiled by losses. Not coincidentally, the Iranian commentary was a variation on the theme which Hassan Nasrallah used in describing the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, p. 85; Smith, *Killer Elite*, p. 233.

<sup>21</sup> Peter L. Bergen, *Holy Inc. Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* NY: Free Press, 2002, p. 123; Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, p. 80; *Robert Fisk, 9/11 remembered: Robert Fisk’s close encounter with Osama Bin Laden, the man who shook the world, The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/9-11-osama-bin-laden-interview-robert-fisk-world-trade-center-attack-al-qaeda-terror-a8532256.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Nozar Shafi’e, *US Policy in the Horn of Africa (Somalia as Case Study)*, *African Studies Quarterly*, 2010; TNA, 5 Great Failure of American Special Operations in the World, Tasnim News Agency, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/26/1409386/5-شکست-بزرگ-عملیات-ویژه-امریکا-در-جهان>.

Ironically, while Bin Laden was bragging about the exploits of his jihad-ists in Somalia, neither Garrison's men nor the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) knew about their presence in the battle. The initial investigation was primarily concerned with the American performance in Gothic Serpent. Subsequent disclosures and court procedures revealed that Saif al Adel and a four-man team of Al-Qaeda fighters were involved. By any measure, this was a belated realization considering that Aidid benefited from the help of "Iranian inspired militias" training in Sudan.<sup>23</sup>

The abrupt American departure gave the hardliners a boost in their struggle with President Rafsanjani who wanted to curb their revolutionary zeal. Rafsanjani went so far as to call Iran's physical presence in Somalia a wrong policy that may cost the country dearly. He even welcomed the US presence in Somalia as a stabilizer, after "the time revolutionaries brought down the government in Mogadishu, the American forces stepped in to stabilize the country and to help the poor people with foodstuffs."<sup>24</sup>

Flush with success, the IRGC ignored the president, and, in 1994, arranged for a group of top Bin Laden associates to train with Mughniyah's Unit 910, the external operations unit. Al Adel, who trained in Abdullah Azzam's Saada Camp in Lebanon in 1988–1989, was already acquainted with Mughniyah. This time around, the Al-Qaeda militants received a refresher course in target identification, counterintelligence, and multiple coordinated attacks. As would become apparent later, such training was to prepare them for the assault on the American embassies in East Africa.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Michael Gordon, "US Officers Were Divided on the Somali Raid, *New York Times*, May 13, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/13/world/us-officers-were-divided-on-somali-raid.html>; Yossi Melman, "The Secular General Meets the Religious Fanatics," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1993; Bill Roggio, "Shabaab Leader Recounts Al-Qaeda Role in Somalia in the 1990s," *Long War Journal*, December 31, 2011; Ari Weisfuse, *Negotiating Oblivion. Sayf al Adel. Al-Qaeda Top Operative*, Brandeis University, 2014; Hashemi Rafsanjani, Why the Supreme Leader was Happy with Hashemi Interview? January 30, 1993 <https://rafsanjani.ir/records/>; سومالی= q= مصاحبه مطبوعاتی-آیت-الله-هاشمی-رفسنجانی-در-جمع-خبرنگاران-داخلی-و-خارجی; Hashemi Rafsanjani, Friday Prayers in Imam's Shrine, February 4, 1993, <https://rafsanjani.ir/records/> 229= سومالی= q= نماز-جمعه-تهران-به-امامت-آیت-الله-هاشمی-رفسنجانی-229.

<sup>24</sup> Hashemi Rafsanjani, Why the Supreme Leader was Happy with Hashemi Interview? January 30, 1993, <https://rafsanjani.ir/records/> مصاحبه-مطبوعاتی-آیت-الله-هاشمی-رفسنجانی-در-جمع-خبرنگاران-داخلی-و-خارجی; Hashemi Rafsanjani, Friday Prayers in Imam's Shrine, February 4, 1993, <https://rafsanjani.ir/records/> 229= سومالی= q= نماز-جمعه-تهران-به-امامت-آیت-الله-هاشمی-رفسنجانی-229.

<sup>25</sup> Avi Weisfuse, *Negotiating Oblivion*, p. 43.

### THE LIMITS OF SUDAN AS AN “AFRICAN LEBANON”

If Israel was a theologically proscribed enemy of the Islamist regime, Egypt was a realpolitik adversary of the regime since 1979. Cairo made peace with Israel and hosted the Shah after he fled Iran, making President Anwar Sadat a target of Tehran animus. When Egypt executed Khalid Islambouli for assassinating Sadat in 1981, the municipality of Tehran named a street after him. The relations between the two countries became unusually acrimonious when, in 1987, Egypt blamed Iran for supporting an assassination attempt against a former Minister of Interior, Hassan Abu Basha. Ayman al Zawahiri's brother Hassan was convicted for his part in the plot.

Symbolism aside, as noted, the revolutionary exporters were eager to undermine the secular and pro-Western governments in the Middle East, and Egypt was a preferred target. Preparations started as early as the Iran-Iraq war when their captors indoctrinated Egyptian prisoners of war who fought with Iraq. The Quds Force monitored returning Egyptians Afghans. Some were sent for retraining in Iranian camps, others were sent, as noted, to Sudan where they were joined by EIJ and JI militants escaping the purges in Egypt. This dedicated cadre was considered ideal for undermining the government of President Hosni Mubarak who continued the pro-Western policy of his predecessor and refused to abandon the peace treaty with Israel. With the help of al Turabi and Bin Laden, the IRGC-QF hatched a plan to attack Egyptian officials, a first step in destabilizing the country. In August 1993, the Vanguard of Conquest, an offshoot of EIJ, tried but failed to assassinate the Interior Minister Hassan al Alfi who was responsible for the widespread anti-Islamists purges. Three months later, in November, the same group was unable to assassinate Prime Minister Atef Sedky.<sup>26</sup>

Desperate to increase the odds, the Iranians and their partners devised a more daring plan during several meetings in Tehran in early 1994. They decided to assassinate Mubarak as a prelude to a major Islamist uprising in the country. The Iranians covered the expenses for weapons and logistics of the complex operation. Militants from both of the Egyptian Islamist groups were tasked with implementing the plan which included, for the first time, the use of a suicide bomber. Because of the high anti-terror alert in Egypt and Europe, Mubarak's visit to Ethiopia in June of 1995 was

<sup>26</sup> Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, pp. 46–47.

chosen. A suicide bomber who graduated from one of the “suicide schools” in Afghanistan was flown to Sudan. Separately, the Egyptian jihadists and their sponsors amassed weapons in Egypt to start the popular uprising. However, because of last minute changes in the convoy of vehicles in which Mubarak traveled, the operation failed.<sup>27</sup>

If Somalia was the high point for turning Sudan into another Lebanon, the botched assassination in Ethiopia spelled the end of the vision. The investigation by the Ethiopian and Egyptian authorities revealed the role of Sudan as a hub of Iranian and Al-Qaeda terrorists. The backlash was immediate and widespread. Osama Bin Laden who operated under the radar found himself the object of unwelcome scrutiny. The CIA, which had considered him to be a “terrorist financier,” became aware of his true role in Sudan. Interestingly, the Israeli Mossad which had previously tracked Hamas and PIJ militants to camps in Sudan became alarmed to the point of creating a unit World Jihad in the early 1990s. The probe into the terrorist setup in Sudan, codenamed *Sig va Siah*, revealed Bin Laden’s far-reaching influence, promoting the Israelis to try and assassinate him. The plot failed because their collaborators—the intelligence service of a friendly Arab country—withdrew at the last moment. The dossier which the Mossad forwarded to Washington helped to designate Bin Laden as a terrorist.<sup>28</sup>

Adding Bin Laden to the State Department terror list helped the United States to pressure General Bashir to dismantle the Al-Qaeda terror infrastructure. Despite their initially close relations, Bashir came to view al Turabi as a liability, not least because the United Nations and the United States imposed sanctions on Sudan. It did not help al Turabi’s case that Sudan became an international pariah, isolated by most of the African and Arab states and excoriated by Saudi Arabia and its close allies. After al Turabi was marginalized, Bin Laden was expelled from Sudan in 1996, ending Guards’ plan to turn Sudan into a new Lebanon. Millions of dollars spent on building the terror infrastructure and support of the impoverished country were wasted, but there were broader geopolitical implications as well. With Mubarak firmly in charge, Saudi Arabia could

<sup>27</sup> Al-Qaeda in Kenia, [alwahabiyah.com/fa/Article/View/1327/القاعدة-در-کنیا](http://alwahabiyah.com/fa/Article/View/1327/القاعدة-در-کنیا): We Tried to Assassinate Mubarak More Than 12 Times, Mehr News Agency, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/1334033/بیش-از-12-بار-برای-ترور-مبارک-تلاش-کردیم-اعلام-نو-دلیل-مهم-ترور>.

<sup>28</sup> *Yediot Ahronot*, “Israel Tried to Kill Bin Laden,” *Yediot Ahronot*, January 26, 2006; Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World’s Most Dangerous Terrorist Power*, Free Press, 2011, pp. 220–224.

rely on its closest ally to stand up to Iranian hegemonic quest. Equally consequential, the ambitious project of launching an Islamic revolution in Africa fizzled out.

Still, the Revolutionary Guards counted on Bin Laden to mount attacks on the United States and Saudi Arabia as he relocated to Afghanistan. There were even reports that Guards refueled Bin Laden's plane at the Shiraz airport, although the media attacked Al-Qaeda as an anti-Shiite terror group.<sup>29</sup>

### AL-QAEDA AND IRAN IN AFGHANISTAN: THE UPS AND DOWN OF A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP

Well before Bin Laden made his mark, the IRGC-QF developed a close relation with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a brutal warlord known as the "Butcher of Kabul" because of his indiscriminate shelling of the capital which killed thousands of civilians. One of the low-intensity associations described in Chap. 1, the relations with Hekmatyar, started in the 1980s when the IRGC created small cells to penetrate the Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union. Although, as noted, the Shiite Hazara were natural allies, Hekmatyar's Hezbi-e Islami network provided important services, such as protection on the Herat-Kabul road and transfer of money to Iranian-backed cells. Hekmatyar, a favorite of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), was able to procure false travel documents for Iranian agents traveling to the West. Drug trafficking in which Hekmatyar and the Quds Force were both profitably involved, strengthened the relation. He offered protection on the Herat-Kabul road and transferred money to Iranian-backed cells. Bin Laden, who lost a significant amount of money in Sudan, received help from Iran, funneled through Hekmatyar's network. When Hekmatyar was forced to leave Afghanistan in 1996, Suleimani arranged for him to stay in Iran.<sup>30</sup>

When Bin Laden relocated to Afghanistan, Quds Force operatives trained Al-Qaeda members in planting explosives, surveillance, and other terror-related skills. Three of Bin Laden's lieutenants, Mohsen Ayed, Fazel

<sup>29</sup> Who Brought Bin Laden to Afghanistan? 8 Sobh, <https://8am.af/x8am/1395/07/18/ben-ladan-america-afghanistan/>.

<sup>30</sup> Leiter and Leiter, *Unheeded* vol. 2, 44–45: Six Years Negotiations for Peace: Why Hekmatyar Fled from Iran? Etelaat Rooz, <https://etilaatroz.com/43347/-/حکمتیار-چرا-از-ایران-فرار-کرد؟>; Simon Tisdall, "Afghanistan War Logs. Iran's Covert Operations in Afghanistan," Guardian, July 25, 2010.

al Fadil, and Seif al Adl, traveled to Iran to meet with Suleimani. Abu Mohammad al-Masri, in charge of operation planning, and Adel Radi Saqr Al-Wahabi al-Harbi, who bombed US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, also traveled to Iran. The Quds Force turned a previous war prisoner located 15 km from Ayatollah Khomeini's tomb on Qom Highway into a training camp for Al-Qaeda militants.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to training, the Iranians were determined to reconstitute al Turabi's PIAC. On June 7, 1996, Ayatollah Khamenei declared that the new movement must reach "all continents and all countries." Mehdi Chamran, the head of external intelligence of MOIS, organized a three-day conference in Tehran, starting on June 21, 1996, under the slogan of "Hezbollah International." Inaugurated in Tehran on June 21, the gathering showcased members of high-profile terror groups, including representatives of Al-Qaeda and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The attendees pledged to set ideological and sectarian divisions aside to fight Israel and the United States. The conference selected a Committee of Three—Osama Bin Laden, Imad Mughniyah, and Ahmed Saleh from the EIJ—to decide and coordinate terror operations, and streamline funding and training of terrorists. The official name of the group, World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, offered a cover for Iran.<sup>32</sup>

Even before the Committee was officially launched, Bin Laden, whose knowledge of the Saudi networks was unsurpassed, was involved in two operations. The first one, on November 13, 1995, was an attack on Office of Management of the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh, where the United States ran a training program through the Virginia-based Vinnell Corporation, a firm allegedly used by the CIA. The 220-pound bomb hidden in a car killed 4 Americans and 2 Indian nationals and wounded some 40. Two groups took credit for the assault: Tigers of the Gulf which was not previously known, and Movement for Change, a radical group which advocated severing all relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Waleed Abu al-Khair, Iran has long been a refuge for wanted al-Qaeda members, [afghanistan.asia-news.com/prs/articles/cnmi\\_st/features/2018/09/05/feature-01](http://afghanistan.asia-news.com/prs/articles/cnmi_st/features/2018/09/05/feature-01).

<sup>32</sup> Jossef Bodansky and Nadia May, Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America (NY: Blackstone Audiobooks) 2002, loc. 3700; Adam Robinson, *Bin Laden. The Man Behind the Mask* (2011), pp. 189–190.

<sup>33</sup> Ambassador: Car bomb destroyed military building, CNN, November 13, 1995, [www.cnn.com/WORLD/9511/saudi\\_blast/11am/](http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9511/saudi_blast/11am/); Elaine Sciolino, Bomb Kills 4 Americans in Saudi Arabia, *The New York Times*, November 14, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/11/14/world/bomb-kills-4-americans-in-saudi-arabia.html>.



The scope of the blast and its professionalism put the spotlight on Osama Bin Laden who, in August 1995, sent an open letter to King Fahad chastising him of allowing the deployment of American troops. Previously, the Al-Qaeda chief issued a fatwa authorizing attacks on military targets in the Arabian Peninsula. For those who followed the palace power struggle, it was no coincidence that Bin Laden chose the National Guard which was controlled by Prince Abdullah, an advocate of ties with the United States. There were rumors at the time that the operation which discredited Abdullah would have empowered the anti-American faction contending for the throne.<sup>34</sup>

Less than a year later, on June 25, 1996, a massive explosion destroyed the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, near the headquarters of Aramco housing a US Air Force unit which enforced the no-fly zone in Iraq. Nineteen airmen and one local were killed, and some 500 civilians of many nationalities were wounded. The United States declared Hezbollah al Hijaz responsible, but, in reality, the operation was carried out by Al-Qaeda with the guidance and support of the IRGC-QF, MOIS, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. Three Saudi operatives were trained by Hezbollah in the Baqaa Valley, where the 25,000-pound bomb was assembled. Brigadier General Ahmed Sharifi from the Revolutionary Guards was in charge of the operation. He and Ali Fallahian from MOIS provided \$250,000, and the Iranian embassy in Damascus furnished fake passports. Ayatollah Khamenei allegedly approved the mission, and senior Quds Force officials gathered in the Parchin military base to follow the outcome. The SNA intercepted a call from Mustafa Hadadian, an aide to Supreme Leader, informing Rafsanjani of its success.<sup>35</sup>

The large-scale terror attacks in Saudi Arabia rattled the Clinton administration, already burdened by its failure in Somalia. In January 1996, Winston P. Wiley, the head of the Counterterrorism Center (CTC), created a dedicated station Terrorism Financial Links (TFL) on the assumption that Bin Laden was a “financier.” Michael Scheurer, its first chief, broadened the scope of the investigation into Bin Laden, but there was little understanding of the role of Al-Qaeda in the anti-American and Saudi campaign. There was even less comprehension of the pivotal part of

<sup>34</sup> Bodansky, *Bin Laden*, loc. 3770–3801; Michael S. Smith, “The Qaeda-Quds Force Nexus, Scratching the Surface of a Known Unknown,” *Kronos Report*, April 29, 2011, p. 138.

<sup>35</sup> Steven O’hern, *Iran’s Revolutionary Guard: The Threat That Grows While America Sleeps* (NY: Potomac Books), 2012, pp. 75–77.

Iran in the events. Louis Freeh, the FBI director who investigated the Khobar Towers, concluded that Iran was deeply involved in the attack. Despite the detailed evidence, the Clinton administration did not accept the findings. Freeh went so far as to accuse the president of suppressing the inquiry for political reasons. He noted that the president wanted to improve relation with Iran after the reformist Mohammed Khatami was elected in August 1997.<sup>36</sup>

Additional officials confirmed that the Clinton administration underestimated Al-Qaeda and its extensive links to Iran. William Perry, Clinton's Secretary of Defense, admitted the military had contingency plans to hit Iran after the Khobar Tower bombing, but the connection between Al-Qaeda and Iran was "never clearly established." A top-secret document obtained by the National Security Archives through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) bore out Freeh's assertion. Accordingly, in June 1999, President Clinton sent a letter to President Khatami, revealing that the United States had evidence of Iranian participation in Khobar Towers. Clinton wanted Khatami to punish those viewed responsible and offered to initiate a rapprochement between the two countries. The Iranian replay was abrasive and uncompromising, leading top White House officials to conclude that Khatami had no control of the hardliners.<sup>37</sup>

Absent a White House acknowledgment that Khobar Towers were a portend of future terrorism, Al-Qaeda was virtually ignored in the public discourse. John Miller, who interviewed Bin Laden in 1998, complained that his story hardly made a ripple in the media. The notion that "the Iranians were senior partners in Bin Laden organization" was even a harder sell. Miller explained that "Bin Laden's willingness to put aside long-standing cultural and religious differences with Shiites ... to unite behind their common enemy" was "alarming." At the time, the veteran journalist seemed to be disappointed that his considerable effort to get the interview, let alone Bin Laden's declaration to lead a jihad against the United States, gained no traction.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Louis Freeh, *My FBI*, "Former FBI Director. Clinton Undermined Saudi Bombing Probe," *CNN*, October 10, 2005.

<sup>37</sup>Malcolm Byrne, "Secret Overtures to Iran in 1999 Broke Down Over Terrorism Allegations," Martin Indyk, a national security official in the White House, admitted that it was a mistake to the belief that Khatami had the power to control the government. National Security Archives, Electronic Briefing Book, no. 318, May 30, 2010.

<sup>38</sup>John Miller and Michael Stone, with Chris Mitchell, *The Cell: Inside the 9/11 Plot. And Why The FBI and CIA Failed to Stop it* (NY: Hyperion Books) 2003, p. 164.

In retrospect, the intelligence community should have been better prepared to meet a terrorist challenge from Bin Laden. Al Fadl, who defected to the United States in 1996, provided valuable evidence on the history of the organization, its modus operandi, and its connections to Hezbollah and Iran. The former Al-Qaeda business manager recalled that Saif al Adel and his team had gone to the Beqaa Valley to train in handling explosives and noted that Bin Laden was keen to emulate the bombing of the Marine Barracks in Beirut. L'Houssain Kherchtou, another defector, had also provided relevant information on the functioning of Al-Qaeda. Both men repeated Osama Bin Laden's belief that a spectacular terror attack would force Clinton to pull out of the Middle East. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the CIA which handled both defectors disseminated this information in the intelligence community.<sup>39</sup>

Unsurprisingly, thus, the bombing of the American embassies in East Africa caught Washington by total surprise. On August 7, 1998, two simulations suicide bombing hit the embassy in Dar al-Salam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, causing the death of more than 200 people, mostly locals. The FBI placed Bin Laden on its ten most wanted list, and the Clinton administration ordered Operation Infinite Reach, a series of cruise missiles on Al-Qaeda compound in Afghanistan and a factory in Khartoum thought to be connected to Bin Laden's production of chemical weapons. Even so, American intelligence could not prevent the bombing of the USS Cole in the port of Aden on October 12, 2000. As noted earlier, the Iranians and Bin Laden discussed plans to challenge the United States in Bab al Mandab waters in Sudan. His departure to Afghanistan interrupted the project, but when American ships resumed refueling in Aden in 1997, the project was revived. As one analyst wrote, "the presence of American battleships in Yemenite ports was ... perceived as an additional expression of U.S. desire to fortify its presence in the Arab Peninsula, a presence that they believed contaminated Islam's holy sites."<sup>40</sup>

Abd al Rahim al Nashiri, in charge of planning the attack, considered using RPGs but realized that the damage would be minimal. Al Nashiri and his team decided to use a suicide boat, a technique first suggested by the Naval Division of the IRGC (*Neyroye Daryaa-e Sepah-e Iran*—NEDSA). After observing the refueling routines of American vessels, the naval ter-

<sup>39</sup> 9/11 Commission Report, available at <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Shaul Shay, *The Red Sea Terror Triangle*, p. 125.

rorists settled on USS Sullivan on January 3, 2000. However, their overloaded boat sunk, and the attack was rescheduled for October. Several unknown organizations claimed responsibility, including Islamic Deterrent Forces and the Brigades of the Martyrs of the Al Aqsa Intifada. The Yemenite authorities who apprehended several of the perpetrators quickly made the connection to Al-Qaeda.

The Congressional investigation of the Cole bombing offered a critique of the policy which led to the berthing of the ship in Aden. The report noted that after a suspension of several decades, the Navy returned to refueling in Aden in April 1997 as part of the so-called engagement policy of the Clinton administration. According to an official document, it was in the American national interest to engage with countries to pull them into the peace orbit. General Anthony Zinni, a former United States Central Command (CENTCOM) chief, argued that engagement with Yemen would prevent it from “becoming another Afghanistan.” Despite terror warnings, until the attack, officials viewed engagement rather than troop protection as a prime priority. Only after the incident, these officials “realized that the terrorists are at war with United States.”<sup>41</sup>

Declassified information revealed that intelligence officials notified the White House about the Al-Qaeda connection and even urged the president to retaliate against Bin Laden. President George W. Bush received the same information when he took office in January 2001. However, neither of them acted, emboldening the Al-Qaeda chief who composed a poem about the “heroic exploit” and read it during the wedding of one of his sons in the Tarnak compound. Bin Laden was especially proud that a boat and explosives worth some \$5000, inflicted severe damage to a billion-dollar ship. The NEDSA was equally encouraged, declaring that asymmetrical naval strategy and the threat of compromising busy ship lanes were adequate answers to American maritime superiority.<sup>42</sup>

It was more than a passing irony that Bin Laden would complain about a lack of response to the Cole bombing. Frustrated by a lack of exposure despite his fatwas and interviews, the Al-Qaeda chief hoped to provoke the Americans into a conflict which would have also satisfied his promise to

<sup>41</sup> “The Investigation into the Attack on the USS Cole.” Report of the House Armed Service Committee Staff, May 2001, 5–6.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Hughes, Yemen, Iran’s strategic naval expansion, anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) Part I of III, Jerusalem Post, April 28, 2015, [www.jpost.com/Blogs/The-Iran-Threat/Yemen-Irans-Strategic-Naval-Expansion-anti-access-area-denial-A2AD-Part-I-of-III-399400](http://www.jpost.com/Blogs/The-Iran-Threat/Yemen-Irans-Strategic-Naval-Expansion-anti-access-area-denial-A2AD-Part-I-of-III-399400).

fight the United States. The 9/11 Commission, however, noted that the administration was most reluctant to retaliate because, according to the testimony of President Clinton, there was not enough firm evidence. Samuel Berger, his National Security Adviser, told the Commission that Al-Qaeda responsibility for Cole as “unproven premise.”<sup>43</sup>

As for Al-Qaeda’s relations with Iran, the Report found substantial evidence of collaboration on multiple fronts. It noted that Al-Qaeda operatives were sent to Hezbollah camps for training, including fabricating large bombs. It described the attack on Khobar Towers as a collaboration between Iran which acted through the Saudi Hezbollah cell and Al-Qaeda. In a section titled “Assistance from Iran and Hezbollah to Al-Qaeda,” the Commissioners noted other instances of collaboration, adding that “we believe that this topic requires further investigation by the US government.” While the government failed to investigate the issue, several lawsuits in American courts fill in the picture. District Judge John Bates who presided over a lawsuit involving the African embassy bombings held Iran, along with Sudan, accountable. Based on extensive data which included, among others, testimony from Jamal al Fadl, he concluded that Iran, via Hezbollah, was instrumental in providing Al-Qaeda with the knowledge to fabricate powerful bombs. The judge added that “throughout the 1990s at least- Iran regarded Al-Qaeda as a useful tool to destabilize US interests.” Royce Lamberth, the federal judge presiding over the lawsuit of the Khobar Towers victims, wrote that “the Khobar Tower bombing was planned, funded and sponsored by senior leadership in the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”<sup>44</sup>

Needless to say, the American intelligence which failed to predict the 9/11 attack, had no information on the role of Iran in facilitating the event.

### POST-9/11 AL-QAEDA IN IRAN: USEFUL HOUSEGUESTS IN A NEW CRUSADE AGAINST THE UNITED STATES

Two years before 9/11, Pakistan, under pressure from Washington, began to clamp down on Al-Qaeda militants, forcing them to travel through Iran. Saif al Adel, who wrote a biography of Abu Musab al Zarqawi

<sup>43</sup> 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 190–19, 193–194.

<sup>44</sup> Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad*, p. 200; 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 120–121, 317, 447; Iran Ordered to Pay \$254 Million in Khobar Towers Bombing,” *Reuters*, January 20, 2007.

(Ahmed Fadeel al Nazal al Khalayleh), a Jordanian jihadist, noted that “Iran became a safe passage for the brothers after the Pakistani authorities tightened the noose around our movement.” While the passage through Pakistan became perilous, “it was easy ... for the brothers to take Turkey [Iran] to Afghanistan route.” Al Adel added that “this issue prompted us to think about building good relationships with some virtuous people in Iran.” He described these “sincere people” as “hostile to Americans and the Israelis.”<sup>45</sup>

Proximity to Iran was also a significant element in al Zarqawi’s decision to establish a training camp for militants from his *al-Tawhid Wal Jihad*, previously known as *Jund al-Sham* (Soldiers of the Levant). Al Adel persuaded a somewhat reluctant Bin Laden to provide \$5000 seed money; the Iranian offered additional help. Al Adel who served as Bin Laden’s liaison to the Revolutionary Guards had good reasons to work on moving Al-Qaeda’s center of gravity to Iran. The Pakistanis considered the Egyptians as persona non grata because he blew up the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad on November 19, 1995.<sup>46</sup>

In the run-up to 9/11, Iran became the main conduit for moving the would-be hijackers and other Al-Qaeda militants. The 9/11 Commission determined that Al-Qaeda volunteers went “through Iran, on the way in and out of Afghanistan,” without having their passports stamped by Iran. The Report noted that 10 out of the 14 hijackers from 9/11 traveled through Iran between October 2000 and February 2001. In October 2000, Imad Mughniyah arrived in Saudi Arabia to assist with the travel of the would-be hijackers. Although the Report noted that “there was strong evidence that Iran facilitated the transit of the hijackers,” it also acknowledged there “was no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning that later became 9/11.”<sup>47</sup>

More recently, Mohammad Javad Larijani, the head of the Judiciary High Council for Human Rights, admitted in a TV interview that “our government agreed not to stamp passport of some transiting terrorists.” An American court ordered Iran to pay \$6 billion to families of those killed in the 9/11 attack. As with the Khobar Towers and USS Cole, the lawsuit

<sup>45</sup> Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al-Qaeda’s Leader* (NY: Free Press), 2006, p. 354.

<sup>46</sup> Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad*, p. 200; Weisfuse, p. 56; Mary Ann Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, *Atlantic*, July/August 2006.

<sup>47</sup> 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 446–447.

provided detailed information on Iranian involvement. Among the document were orders that the Iranian government issued to border guards not to stamp the passport of Al-Qaeda travelers.<sup>48</sup>

Even the Commission could not determine that the Iranians had advanced knowledge about the pending attack, but it was abundantly clear that the IRGC-QF mobilized to help Al-Qaeda militants in the wake of the American invasion of Afghanistan. The decision to admit the militants was puzzling because the government of the moderate President Mohammed Khatami had a unique opportunity to mend relations with the United States by joining the emerging White House “war on terror” coalition. Ryan Crocker, a senior State Department official, traveled to Geneva where he met with Mohammed Javad Zarif, President Khatami’s representative, who told him that Tehran wanted to “get rid of Al-Qaeda and Taliban altogether.” In early December 2001, the United Nations brokered a conference in Bonn, where Zarif took the lead in fashioning a peace plan for Afghanistan. He told James Dobbins, the US ambassador to Afghanistan, that Iran “has done it all.” Dobbins, like Ryan Crocker, believed that “behind the Iranian negotiations there is a genuine desire to normalize relations with the United States.”<sup>49</sup>

The American diplomats might have been right about the moderate faction that Khatami represented. Joining the anti-Al-Qaeda coalition, however, was an anathema to the hardliners whom the Supreme Leader tacitly supported. Ahmed Vahidi, the former Quds Force chief, and his successor Qassem Suleimani took the leading role in authorizing the clandestine escape route. The *Sepah-e Nsar* Corps (also known as the Ansar Corps or Fifth Nasr Division) responsible for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and central Asia used the Hekmatyar network to exfiltrate Bin Laden’s militants from Afghanistan. Brigadier General Gholamreza Baghban, the commander of the Sepahe Ansar headquartered in Zahedan, played a sub-

<sup>48</sup> Mary Kay Linge, “Iranian Official: We Protected Al-Qaeda Terrorists Before 9/11,” *New York Post* June 9, 2018; Salman al Dosary, Iran Escalates, Europe Defends, *Asharq al Awsat*, June 10, 2018; Fararu, The US Government Accused Iran based on Javad Larjani Statements, January 13, 2018, <https://fararu.com/fa/news/363492/-دولت-آمریکا-بر-اساس-اظهارات-جواد-لاریجانی-ایران-را-محکوم-کرد>; Kalame, Larjani’s Remarks were Caused Iran’s Condemnation, Kalame.Org, January 14, 2018, <https://www.kalame.com/1397/03/24/klm-267292/?theme=fast>.

<sup>49</sup> Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda in Flight* (Bloomsbury USA) 2017, p. 34, pp. 80–81; Dexter Filkin, “The Shadow Commander,” *New Yorker*, September 30, 2013.

stantial role in the exfiltration project. Al Adel wrote that “we began to flock to Iran one after the other. We set up a central leadership circle and subordinate circles.” He noted that the “brothers of the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar helped them with apartments and farms.”<sup>50</sup>

Over a short time, the Guards managed to settle a large number of Bin Laden family member, key commanders, and an unknown number of rank and file fighters. Two of Bin Laden’s wives, Khairiah and Seham, and seven of his children including his nominal heir Saad and their families, were held in Hekmatyar’s farm and then moved to a Revolutionary Guards complex in Tehran. Al Adel, who inherited the position of Mohamed Atef, Bin Laden’s military chief killed in action in November 2001, became the head of the military arm of Al-Qaeda. He created a management council that facilitated traffic between Al-Qaeda Central and its fragmented outposts elsewhere. Several senior advisers to Bin Laden such as Abu Hafs al Mauritanian (Mahfouz Ibn Al Waleed), who negotiated the initial approach to the Quds Force, Abu Mohamad al Masri (Abdulla Ahmed Abdullah), and Abu al Khayer al Masri served on the council. Atiyah Abd al Rahman was the go-between Al-Qaeda Central and the al Adel group, rotating between Iran and Pakistan, the new home of Al-Qaeda Central.<sup>51</sup>

Iran was also an instrument as a transit point in the shipment of Al-Qaeda gold after 9/11. Testimony before the Task Force to Investigate Terrorism Financing, of the House Committee on Financial Services, revealed that Al-Qaeda carriers transferred the gold to Karachi, Pakistan, from where it was shipped in boats to Iran and Dubai. It was then flown to Khartoum and dispersed in other places. American intelligence tracked some of these shipments, but could not disrupt the smuggling routes.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Saif al Adel, Jihadist Biography of the Slaughtering Leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi, August 17, 2009; Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad*, p. 200; FNA, General Baghbani: Sistan and Baluchistan is still the forefront of the sacred defense, Fars News Agency, <https://www.farsnews.com/news/13971003000274/> - خط - هم - هنوز - بلوچستان - سیستان - و - باغیانی - سیدان - سردار - باغیانی - سیدان - و - بلوچستان - هنوز - هم - خط - / مقدم-دفاع-مقدس-است Brigadier General Gholam Reza Baghbani, Commander of the Ansar Division of Quds Force in Drug Trafficking, Hambastegi Melli, <https://hambastegimeli.com/34576-2012-03-12-22-09-50/> دیدگاه-ها/ پشت-پرده-رژیم

<sup>51</sup> Adrien Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, “Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself -with the Help of Iran,” *Atlantic*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/al-qaeda-iran-cia/545576/>.

<sup>52</sup> Rensselaar Lee, “Terrorist Financing: The U.S. and International Response,” Report to Congress, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, December 6, 2002, p. 12; Douglas Farah, Testimony Before the Task Force to Investigate Terrorism Financing, Houses. Committee on Financial Services, June 23, 2016, Shaul Shay, *Red Sea Terror*, p. 58; Douglas Farah, “Al-Qaeda Road Paved with Gold,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2002.



Experts debated the IRGC-QF's motives in extending protection to the Al-Qaeda group despite Khatami's wishes. Some analysts argued that holding senior Al-Qaeda members and Bin Laden's family were a type of "insurance policy" against a future attack by the group. Recently released documents from the raid on Osama Bin Laden house in Abbottabad, however, revealed that the Quds Force wanted Al-Qaeda to continue targeting the United States and its allies in the Gulf. Indeed, on May 12, 2003, an Al-Qaeda cell simultaneously attacked three residential compounds in Riyadh housing Americans and other foreigners in which scores were killed and wounded. Al Adel and Saad Bin Laden, the son of Osama, were allegedly in charge of the operation. Crucially, in early May, Ryan Crocker, the then ambassador to Pakistan, provided information on the imminent attacks to his Iranian counterparts, but nothing was done to prevent the operation.<sup>53</sup>

If sheltering Al-Qaeda was an investment in the Axis of Resistance in the broader Middle East, helping al Zarqawi had a more neighborly goal. Specifically, Ahmad Vahidi, the former Quds Force chief, and Suleimani hoped to deploy al Zarqawi in Iraq, still under control of Saddam Hussein. Unlike the rather motley assembly of Al-Qaeda members and their families, al Zarqawi's group was seen as "battle ready," having shown uncommon bravery in defending Kandahar in Operation Enduring Freedom. Vahidi was so impressed with the group that he arranged for al Zarqawi to be treated for his wounds in a military hospital in Mashhad province. In December 2001, some 300 of al Zarqawi's men crossed into Iran. Al Zarqawi stayed in one of Hekmatyar properties and later joined him in operating a reception camp for Al-Qaeda fighters outside Mahshad. The Quds Force furnished al Zarqawi with nine different Iranian passports and two cellphones which he used on his recruitment trips.<sup>54</sup>

The presence of al Zarqawi in Iran attracted the attention of the American intelligence community. In March 2002, the *New York Times* reported that intelligence officials were uncertain about "how much direct support senior Iranian officials give Zarqawi." Forced to respond to this scrutiny, Khatami ordered MOIS to round up al Zarqawi's men, jailing some 80 percent of them in Evin Prison and other facilities. However, for reasons that were never revealed, they were soon released and exfiltrated

<sup>53</sup> Seth G. Jones, "Al-Qaeda in Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, Thomas Joselyn, "Analysis. Al-Qaeda's Interim Emir and Iran," *Long War Journal*, May 18, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Levy, *The Exile*, p. 201; 146; Michael Griffin, *Islamic State: Rewriting History*, Pluto Press, 2013.

to Iraq. He joined the Anṣār al-Islām (AAI), a Sunni Salafi movement in Iraq Kurdistan with links to Al-Qaeda. AAI's leaders, Asou Kurdi, Abdul Sattar, Kak Hossein Araghi, and Abu Abdullah Al-Shafei, were known to travel to the Kurdish region in Iran, keeping the relation between Quds Force and al Zarqawi current. In 2002, al Zarqawi moved to Iraq where he set up sleeper cells to act against Saddam Hussein.<sup>55</sup>

### FINDING COMMON GROUND IN AFGHANISTAN: QUDS FORCE, AL-QAEDA, AND TALIBAN

The United States, unwilling to repeat past mistakes that led to the rise of the Taliban, pledged to support the new government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul fully. In 2002, the United Nations created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), manned by NATO contingents of American, British, Canadian, and other troops. While President Khatami wanted to collaborate with ISAF to the point of handing the Americans a map of Taliban positions, the IRGC-QF was looking to undermine it. The Al-Qaeda “guests” in Iran, the Hekmatyar network, and the post-9/11 Taliban were convenient tools in this regard.

Even before crossing into Iran, Saif al Adel took preliminary steps to set up an alliance with an element of Taliban and some warlords ready to take on ISAF. After the American invasion, for instance, the Iranian Al-Qaeda was in touch with Nek Mohammed Wazir, a Pakistani jihadist, who agreed to shelter some of Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Mohammed Wazir was killed in 2004, but the network in Afghanistan sustained his passionate hatred toward the Americans.<sup>56</sup>

ISAF aside, the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan—especially in provinces that border Iran, such as Herat, Farah, and Nimruz—rattled the Iranian regime. Unlike Al-Qaeda and the more malleable Taliban, the radical anti-Shiite ISIS posed a real threat to Iran's interests in Afghanistan. Providing better training for the Taliban was thus not only a way to undermine the government of Karzai's succes-

<sup>55</sup> Nowgara, Better understanding of the Jamaat Ansar al-Islam, Nowgara, [eslahe.com/13155/جماعت-انصار-الاسلام-را-بهتر-بشناسيم/](http://eslahe.com/13155/جماعت-انصار-الاسلام-را-بهتر-بشناسيم/); Weakening the Qods Force is even More Stranger Than the Imaginative Stories [www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1897342/تضعيف-نيروي-](http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1897342/تضعيف-نيروي-) قفس-از-داستان-های-تخیلی-هم-عجیب-تر-است Douglas Frantz and James Risen, “A Nation Challenged: Terrorism, A Secret Iran-Arafat Connection,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/24/world/nation-challenged-terrorism-secret-iran-arafat-connection-seen-fueling-mideast.html>; Levy, *The Exile*, 201.

<sup>56</sup> Levy, *The Exile*, pp. 98–103.

sor Ashraf Ghani, but a barrier to a new ISIS Caliphate growing in the vicinity of the Iranian border.<sup>57</sup>

By 2018, the improvements in the Taliban's performance prompted observers to link it to Iran. As one of them put it, the "scale, quality, and length of training is unprecedented and marks not only a shift in the proxy war between the United States and Iran in Afghanistan but also a potential change in Iran's ability and will to affect the outcome of the Afghan war." Other commentators noted that the Taliban's assaults on government forces were linked to water issues.<sup>58</sup>

Iran has used the Taliban to derail energy projects under construction, namely, the Poze Lich Hydropower plant in Ghor, and the Bakhshabad and Salma dams in the neighboring province of Farah and Herat, respectively. By boosting Afghani energy and water supplies, the dams were impacting Iran's downstream use. On July 5, 2017, President Hassan Rouhani declared that Iran "cannot remain indifferent to the issue [water dams], which will damage our environment." According to Rouhani, "construction of several dams in Afghanistan would affect Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces," and Tehran "is not going to stand idly by."<sup>59</sup>

Drug smuggling from Afghanistan to Iran has been a profitable business for the Quds Force, known for its extensive ties to drug cartels in South America. In 2012, the US Department of the Treasury (DOT) designated Gholamreza Baghbani, a narcotics trafficker. The DOT document noted that in return for Iranian business, Afghan traffickers moved weapons to the Taliban.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Afghan Army chief: Iran provides military equipment to the Taliban, [www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-41174669](http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-41174669); Iran funding, equipping Taliban in Farah: Afghan police chief, [www.ltvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/34500-iran-funding-equipping-taliban-in-farah-afghan-police-chief](http://www.ltvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/34500-iran-funding-equipping-taliban-in-farah-afghan-police-chief); Mounting Afghan Ire Over Iran's Support For Taliban, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-iran-taliban-support/28651070.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Loyd, "Taliban Best Fighters being Trained by Iran," *Times of London*, July 2, 2018; Pamela Constable, "After Taliban Assault in Western Afghanistan, Allegations of an Iranian Role," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> SNA, Building Dam in Afghanistan; from Rouhani's remarks to the Reaction of Afghan Authorities, Sana News Agency, were [sana.af/](http://sana.af/) /سیاسی/سیاست-خارجی/سد-سازی-در-افغانستان-اطهارات-روحانی-وا

<sup>60</sup> David Dilegge, Iranian and Hezbollah: Hybrid Warfare Activities, *A Small War Journal Anthology*, Small Wars Foundation, 2016, p. 233; Will Fulton and Ali Alfone, "Quds Force Commander and Candidate," *Critical Threat* April 13, 2012; Stephen Hughes, "The Dirty Secrets No One Wants to Talk About. Tehran's Heroin Drug Trade," *Jerusalem Post*, March 10, 2015; Tony Duheume, "Tracing Iranian Quds Force Links to the Illegal Drugs Trade," *Al Arabiya*, June 2, 2017.

The Trump administration's decision to open negotiations with the Taliban has posed a challenge to the Iranian playing field. Responding to the president's desire to pull the American troops from Afghanistan, Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State, asked Zalmay Khalilzad, the former ambassador to Iraq, to reach a Framework Agreement with the Taliban. Critics pointed out that Khalilzad failed to include the Ghani government in the highly secretive talks and may shortchange its interests. A spokesperson for Ghani implied that Khalilzad who was born in Afghanistan wanted to delegitimize the government to run for president in the next election. At the very least, given his problematic tenure in Iraq, observers warned that Khalilzad would fall victim to the deceptive practices of Taliban negotiators.<sup>61</sup>

Iranians across the board consider the water issue to be of primary strategic importance. The assumption is that the weak central government besieged by Taliban and ISIS would be more amenable to Iranian concerns. The use of a friendly Taliban group or cells formed by fighters returning from the Fatemiyoun Afghan Brigade in Syria could be used as a bargaining tool. More significantly, a low-intensity conflict could preserve Iranian influence in Afghanistan for a long time to come.

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<sup>61</sup> Kimberly Dozier, "Is Zalmay Khalilzad, Trump's envoy to Taliban Talks, Angling to Take Over Afghanistan," *Daily Beast*, March 14, 2019; Michael Rubin, Don't Blame Afghanistan for Blowing Whistle on Zalmay Khalilzad," *Washington Examiner*, March 15, 2019.

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## From the Badr Brigade to the Popular Mobilization Forces: Fighting the Americans While Turning Iraq into a New Lebanon

The close historical ties between the Iranian and the Iraqi Shiites made them a natural ally of the regime. Many fled to Iran after Saddam Hussein increased his persecution of the Shiite clergy and political leaders in the 1970s. Some of them fought with the Revolutionary Guards during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. For the proxy-minded Office of the Liberation Movements (OLM) and the Quds Force (QF), this demographic offered a substantial pool of recruits and better still, leaders of “organic social movements” embedded within the political system of Iraq. Chapter 1 noted that these groups already possessed members, communication networks, and solidarity incentives which the Quds Force could profit.

Unlike in Iran, however, the activist ulama faced steep resistance from some of the prominent marajis in Najaf such as Abu al Qassim al Khoei and his student, Mohammed al Sistani. Al Khoei clashed with the activist Grand Ayatollah Mohammed al Shirazi who developed the theory of *Hukumat al Fuqaha* that called for a theocracy based on a group of jurists rather than a single leader. Al Khoei was so opposed to a theocracy that he sought to deprive al Shirazi of his religious title. In the ensuing struggle, and prompted by Saddam Hussein’s persecution, many of the followers of al Shirazi, known as shiraziyyin, went into exile.<sup>1</sup>

Al Shirazi, whose family had Persian roots, moved to Tehran in 1979 where he worked with OLM to found the *Harakat al Risaliyyen al*

<sup>1</sup> M. Ismail Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq: Shiite Clerics Between Quietism and Resistance* (Pustaka Nasional Pte Ltd.), 2004.

*Talaiyeen*, the Movement of Vanguard Missioners (MVM), a pan-Arabic terror group. MVM militants were part of the Guards coalition helping General Aidid in Somalia. Al Shirazi was also involved with the *Munazzamat al-‘Amal al-Islami* Islamic Action Organization (IAO), a terrorist group which functioned in Iraq under the spiritual leadership of Ayatollah al Modarresi. In 1980, the IAO militants tried to assassinate Tariq Aziz, an act which triggered the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>2</sup>

Quds Force’s proxy architecture received a significant boost when Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, the Iraqi-born cleric residing in Qom and a leader of the Dawa Party, conceived of creating the Badr Brigade in 1982. Shiite defectors from the Iraqi Army were among the first volunteers in the militia which initially boasted some 500 fighters. Their numbers grew because of recruitment among the Iraqi Shiite prisoners of war (*Ahrar*) and defectors from the Iraqi Army. One of them, Major Yossef Ghani al Amara, who defected in 1982 was put in charge of an artillery unit of the Badr Brigade and fought in the Iran-Iraq War. Brigadier General Ismail Daghayeghi, a commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’ (IRGC) division in Khuzestan, was in charge of the Badr Brigade, along with Brigadier General Shaban Nasiri, a senior commander in the secretive Nosrat Base which included intelligence and logistical units. Ayatollah Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim served as the spiritual leader. In the early 1980s, Nouri al Malaki, the veteran leader of the Dawa Party commanded a camp near Ahwaz where volunteers were trained in cross-border actions. Abu Mahdi al Muhandis (Jamal Jafaar Mohammad Ali Ebrahimi) was another promising Dawa figure working with the Revolutionary Guards. He helped to plan the 1983 bombings in Kuwait for which he was sentenced to death in absentia.<sup>3</sup>

According to the IRGC-QF “dual use” proxy blueprint, however, it was the political organization which gave the militia groups their legitimacy. In 1982, Maliki, and a Dawa Party faction joined the IAO to form the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), later the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) under the leadership of Ayatollah

<sup>2</sup> Mahdi Khalaji, Arab Shiites and the World Politics, [www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2012/11/121127\\_144\\_book\\_review\\_arab\\_shiites](http://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2012/11/121127_144_book_review_arab_shiites); Ali Alfoneh, Iran’s Support of Iraqi Shia Militias Ensures Dependency and Loyalty, <http://agsiw.org/irans-support-of-iraqi-shia-militias-ensures-dependency-and-loyalty/>; Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shiite Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2008.

<sup>3</sup> George Packer, *The Assassins Gate America in Iraq* George Packer (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2006, 568.

Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim who pledged allegiance to Khomeini's *velayat-e faqih*.<sup>4</sup>

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the Gulf War of 1991 was a dress rehearsal for spreading the Iranian brand of the revolution. President George H. W. Bush encouraged the Iraqi people to depose Saddam Hussein and mobilized the Shiites in the south. Acting on SCIRI's command, the Badr Brigade fighters launched a rebellion against Saddam Hussein, only to be brutally put down. The failed uprising left the Shiites bitter over the perceived betrayal by the United States. Muqtada al Sadr, the head of the populist Sadrist movement started by his father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al Sadr, emerged as a vociferous critic of the Americans. Because of his young age and low religious standing, however, Muqtada relied on the spiritual advisor of Grand Ayatollah Kazem al Haeri, a prominent Iraqi cleric who lived in exile in Qom since the 1970s. The younger al Sadr translated his anti-Americanism into his militia, the Mahdi Army (*Jaysh al Mahdi* or JAM).<sup>5</sup>

### AMERICA INVASION: "GOD'S GIFT TO IRAN"

Despite President Bush's refusal to depose Saddam Hussein in 1991, the Iranians were looking for new ways to undermine the dictator. Ironically, it was the Clinton administration which opened the door to a new anti-Iraqi venture. Anxious about the nuclear weapon program which was discovered in Iraq and vexed by the antics of the unpredictable tyrant, the National Security Council authorized the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to look for ways to remove Hussein. Ahmed Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), a London-based opposition group, proposed an ingenious plan to foment a military coup cum popular uprising against the regime, known as a "rolling coup." But in 1995, the coup collapsed amid recrimination among the White House, the CIA, and Chalabi. Iyad Allawi, the head of the rival Iraqi National Accord (INA),

<sup>4</sup> Amir Toumaj, "Death of a General: What Shaban Nasiri Reveals About Iran's Secretive Qods Force," *War on the Rocks*, March 23, 2018; Interview with Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, Imam Khomeini website, [www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n136631/مصاحبه\\_با\\_آیت\\_الله\\_سید\\_محمدباقر\\_حکیم](http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n136631/مصاحبه_با_آیت_الله_سید_محمدباقر_حکیم).

<sup>5</sup> Tahmineh Bakhtiyari, The role of George Bush Father in the Shaabaniya Uprising, [www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2290883/نقش\\_جورج\\_بوش\\_پدر\\_در\\_خیزش\\_شعبانیه#\\_ftn1](http://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2290883/نقش_جورج_بوش_پدر_در_خیزش_شعبانیه#_ftn1); Ayatollah Haeri and Armed operations of Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq, [www.bbc.com/persian/news/story/2004/05/printable/040504\\_ssabahaeri.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/persian/news/story/2004/05/printable/040504_ssabahaeri.shtml).

accused Chalabi of mismanaging the coup, but his own plan to enlist anti-Saddam officers failed as well.<sup>6</sup>

Chalabi, a controversial figure with a dubious financial past and murky tie to the Iranian regime, did not give up on his advocacy for a regime change in Iraq. In fact, in the years preceding 9/11, Chalabi relations with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) grew strong enough for him to meet its chief, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, who was an early advocate of overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Chalabi found a sympathetic audience among the neoconservatives in the George W. Bush administration. Richard Perle, a prominent neoconservative who served on the Defense Policy Advisory Board, freely admitted to relying on Chalabi: "I believed at the time that we didn't know enough about Iraq to go in and remake the place. We had to work with somebody and, and I thought that he was the right person." In contrast, William J. Burns, an Assistance Secretary of State at the time of the invasion, called Chalabi "an exiled charlatan preferred by the Pentagon."<sup>7</sup>

According to one of his biographers, Chalabi understood that Americans were receptive to the values of democracy and developed a few relevant themes, such that the Iraqis would be able to create a model democracy in the Middle East. As such Iran, his message was simple and consistent: "Iran was less of a threat than Iraq," and that, in any event, the Shiites of Iraq would counterbalance to the influence of Iran. David Wurmser, an advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney and a leading neoconservative, echoed Chalabi's themes in his 1999 book *Tyranny's Ally*. Wurmser wrote that the "overthrow of Saddam Hussein" would "sever Iran from its Shiite foundation [in Iraq]." The Iraqi Shiites, if liberated from tyranny, could be expected to present a challenge to Iran's influence and revolution. He explained that the "spiritual faith characteristic of these Muslims is seldom compatible with zealotry." In other words, "the good Shiites of Iraq" would vanquish the "bad Shiites" of Iran.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Ofira Seliktar, *The Politics of Intelligence and American Wars with Iraq*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 75–78.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Bonin, *Arrows of the Night. Ahmad Chalabi's Long Journey to Triumph in Iraq*. New York: Doubleday, 2011, chapter 1; William J. Burns, "How We Tried to Slow the Rush to War in Iraq," *Politico*, March 13, 2019.

<sup>8</sup>Aram Rostam, *The Man Who Pushed America to War: The Extraordinary Life, Adventures, and Obsessions of Ahmad Chalabi*, 223; Bashgah Andishe, *I Worship the God of Ayatollah Sistani*, *Bashgah Andishe*, January 27, 2004, [www.bashgah.net/fa/content/show/5637](http://www.bashgah.net/fa/content/show/5637);

Plans to depose Saddam Hussein accelerated after 9/11. Perle invited Chalabi to address the Defense Policy Advisory Board on September 19, 2001. In a well-received speech, Chalabi argued that deposing Hussein would create a democratic Iraq and extend American influence in the region. To prove this point, he offered to initiate contacts between the administration and SCIRI. In August 2002, Chalabi brought Abdel Aziz al Hakim for a meeting with Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense; Cheney, who was vacationing in Wyoming, participated by conference call. Al Hakim told the officials that SCIRI would welcome a US invasion and pledged his support. Upon his return from Washington, al Hakim briefed the IRGC officials on the American resolve to affect a regime change in Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

Even before the return of al Hakim, there was plenty of speculation in Tehran about the prospects of Saddam Hussein. Immediately after 9/11, several outlets associated with the Guards posted about a possible American invasion, a theme echoed by several think tanks. For instance, a 2002 panel discussion of the Center for Persian Gulf Studies in Tehran concluded that “US attack on Iraq despite Baghdad’s attempts to disarm is definitive.”<sup>10</sup>

Internal deliberation in Tehran indicated a mixture of apprehension and hope. In a secret meeting of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) at the end of January 2003, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stressed the “grave danger” of a direct American presence in the Middle East. He repeated the same warning in a public speech on February 17, 2003. On the other hand, once the immediate danger of an American attack passed, the prophetic-minded Supreme Leader deemed the invasion to be divine intervention. In his speech to families of the Martyrs of Holy Defense, a reference to those who died in the Iran-Iraq War, Khamenei said: “the removal of Saddam was a gift from God.”<sup>11</sup>

Aram Roston, *The Man Who Pushed America to War: The Extraordinary Life, Adventures, and Obsessions of Ahmad Chalabi*, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Cockburn, *Rumsfeld, His Rise, Fall, and Catastrophic Legacy*, p. 202; Bashgah Andishe, *I Worship the God of Ayatollah Sistani*.

<sup>10</sup> The Persian Gulf’s Strategic Future, [www.persiangulfstudies.com/fa/pages/349](http://www.persiangulfstudies.com/fa/pages/349): Hossein Masoudnia, Federalism and the triangle of power (Shiites, Kurds, and Sunnis) in the new Iraqi political structure, *The Contemporary Political Queries*, Center for Social Science and Cultural Studies, 2016, pp. 161–183.

<sup>11</sup> Yossef Bodansky, *A Secret History of the Iraqi War*, Harper Perennial, 2005, p. 218; Ofira Seliktar, *Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Speech in

Although the moderate circles of President Khatami had nourished hopes for a rapprochement with Washington, according to the preceding chapter, the hardliners took a diametrically opposite stance. The IRGC-QF rolled out a plan to undermine the American-sponsored government in Baghdad and turn Iraq into a Shiite-dominated country. To this end, the Guards expedited the infiltration program into Iraq. According to some estimates, some 100,000 Iraqis crossed the Iraqi border thrown open by the Hussein regime. As already noted, Abu Musab al Zarqawi was among the first to cross into Iraq. The Guards' Ramazan base in Kermanshah under Brigadier General Iraj Masjedi intensified the training of would-be infiltrators. Badr Brigades fighters who contained Quds Force operatives traveled on the Al Amara-Basra Road to take up positions around Basra. Among the infiltrators were also Guards' fronts like Thar Allah, the Revenge of God.<sup>12</sup>

Since most of the American intelligence before Operation Iraqi Freedom focused on Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), little was known about the Shiite-dominated political culture in Iraq. The CIA was not aware of Chalabi's ties to the Revolutionary Guards even as it received his information about the WMD program. Neither was there awareness of the IRGC plan to infiltrate Badr and other Iraqi Shiite fighters into Iraq. Even Ryan Crocker, a savvy career diplomat who had served as the head of the Iraq desk in the Bureau of Near East Affairs (NEA), among others, expressed hope of "flipping an enemy [Iran] into a friend." One neoconservative booster of Operation Iraqi Freedom conceded that "in retrospect," "the American intelligence community reading of Iran's influence and ability to obstruct operations was woefully wrong ... particularly a comprehensive social and political reading of the population." Charles (Chas) Freeman, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, aptly noted that "we invaded Iraq, but the Iraq of our dreams, a country that did not exist, that we did not understand." Colin Powell, Bush's Secretary of State, told a committee that no notions of demands of occupation, Iraq would snap together. At best, there was ignorance about the political culture of Iraq.

Friday Prayers, Khamenei.ir, April 11, 2003, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3168>; Michael Rubin, The Guldumann Memorandum: The Iranian "roadmap" wasn't a roadmap and wasn't Iranian, *Weekly Standard*, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/michael-rubin/the-guldumann-memorandum>.

<sup>12</sup> George Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, p. 576; Bodansky, *The Secret History of the Iraq War*, 41–43; Malcolm Nance, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe*, Skyhorse Publishing, 2016, p. 11;

For example, Meghan O’Sullivan, a consultant to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), urged “not to allow clerics to overrule” political decisions.<sup>13</sup>

At worst, there was no understanding of the military implications of the IRGC-QF actions in Iraq. Steven O’Hern, who directed the Strategic Counterintelligence Directorate (SCID) of the Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF) in the early years of the occupation, recalled that his superior, Major General John Defreitas, commander of US Army Intelligence and Security Command, refused to consider evidence about Iranian involvement: “We did not engage ... Iran because our senior leadership failed to recognize that a protracted insurgency was in the best interest of Iran.” Due to political sensitivity, the White House and the State Department opted for discreet admonitions to Tehran instead. In 2003, Condoleezza Rice, then Bush’s National Security Adviser, urged the Iranian Foreign Ministry to detain Abu Mousab al Zarqawi’s militants.<sup>14</sup>

The 2019 US Army Report on the war in Iraq, a two-volume 1450-page definitive study of the subject, detailed the consequence. The Combined Joint Special Operation Task Force (CJSOTF) started tracking some 10,000 Badr Brigade militants in mid-April 2003. However, the Americans did not realize yet that through their proxies the Iranians embarked on a multifaceted strategy to “bind a new more federated Iraq closer to Iran while simultaneously forcing the United States from the region.” The strategy involved creating “instability inside Iraq, placing the responsibility for the chaos on the United States and its Iraq partners, and ensuring pro-Iranian politicians dominate the Iraq government.” The Report details the many ways in which the Iranians furthered the destabilization of Iraq, including Badr Brigade death squads which hunted for Baath Party officials and Shiite collaborators, incitement to violence, and appropriation of Sunni property, among others. Badr militants broke into

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Dexter Filkin, “The Shadow Commander,” *New Yorker*, September 13, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>; Quoted in Peter Galbright, *The End of Iraq*, p. 136; Yossef Bodansky, *Secret History*, 2004, 414; Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Endgame. The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq*, 31.

<sup>14</sup>Steven K. O’Hern, *The Intelligence Wars. Lessons from Baghdad*. Potomac Books, 2008, loc. 144; 166; 209; 686; Michael R. Gordon, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, Vintage, 2013, 45; 423; Steven K. O’Hern, *The Intelligence Wars. Lessons from Baghdad*. Potomac Books, 2008, loc. 144; 166; 209; 686.

Iraqi Army depots and stole massive amounts of arms and munitions, which were then used against the Sunnis and Americans.<sup>15</sup>

By all accounts, the failure to appreciate the internal dynamics and the Iranian strategy for destabilization led to a number of questionable decisions. General Tommy Franks, the commander of the American force, refrained from intervening in the widespread looting which occurred in the aftermath of the invasion. In addition to the Baath Party property, government ministries, hospitals, police stations were stripped of equipment, supplies, and even fixtures. Looters swarmed the Iraqi National Museum, which housed priceless artifacts, and archeological sites. Rumsfeld defended the decision not to deploy troops, commenting that “stuff happens” but critics disagreed. In the words of Noah Feldman, a law professor who worked on the Iraqi constitution, “invading Iraq created in Iraq a weak state—or maybe no state at all.” Crucially, the Iranian media used the collapse of law and order to blame Washington for the chaos, narrating it with TV reports and documentaries. The Farsi news agencies close to the Revolutionary Guards noted that “Washington should be held accountable for the destruction of Iraq.”<sup>16</sup>

Of greater consequence were the highly controversial decisions of de-Baathification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army. The Army Report noted that to prevent chaos and seal the border with Iran, Colonel Paul Hughes, who worked for Walter B. Slocombe, Senior Adviser for Security and Defense at the CPA, suggested recalling some Iraqi Army troops and even paying them \$20 emergency stipend. However, Douglas Feith, the head of the Office of Special Plans (OSP), objected, echoing Chalabi’s comparison with the de-Nazification policy in Germany.<sup>17</sup>

Chalabi did not reveal that he picked up the idea in Iran, where it was promoted in numerous academic panels and articles in Tehran. The Iranians pointed out that the “the roots of Baath ideology go back to the

<sup>15</sup> Colonel Joel D. Rayburn/Colonel Frank K. Sobchak, *The US Army in Iraq War: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011*, Vol. 1, p. 187.

<sup>16</sup> Noah Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq War and the Ethics of Nation Building* (Princeton University Press), 2004, p. 23; MNA, America is responsible for the destruction of the ancient city of Babylon in Iraq, Mehr News Agency, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/909326/امریکا-مسئول-ویرانی-شهر-بایستانی-بابل-در-عراق-است>; IRNA, America is Responsible for the Destruction of Iraq, The Islamic Republic News Agency, [tnews.ir/site/256c115763172.html](https://tnews.ir/site/256c115763172.html).

<sup>17</sup> Colonel Joel D. Rayburn, Colonel Frank K. Sobchak, *The US Army in Iraq War: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011*, Vol. 1.



Fascism and Nazism ... and one can also see the symbols of Fascism and Nazism in Baath's symbols." Accordingly, like the Nazi Party, the Baath Party was "irreformable" and its vestiges needed to be purged from society. Having made a persuasive case for replacing the dictatorship, the Iranians stop short of defining the new political system. However, John A. Nagl, the Military Assistant to Wolfowitz who served a tour of duty in Iraq contended that disbanding the military was a disaster. Describing the chaotic decision making in the Pentagon and its almost "undeclared war" with the State Department, Nagl wrote that "great nations rarely make national decisions that explode so quickly and complicity in their faces."<sup>18</sup>

Neoconservative advocates believed that stamping out the Baathist influence would promote democracy in a country long brutalized by a savage dictator. Meyrav Wurmser typified this position. She wrote that "replacing the Baath Party's cult of enslavement and hate" would help to shape "Iraq's political culture with liberal democratic ideas." Paul Wolfowitz strongly supported this view. He told an interviewer that the prospects for democracy in Iraq were excellent: "Look, fifty percent of the Arab world are women, they don't want to live in a theocratic state. The other fifty percent are men. I know a lot of them. I don't think they want to live in a theocratic state."<sup>19</sup>

After agreeing on de-Baathification, the administration split over the level of its application. The State Department and the CIA felt that only the top echelon—around 1 percent of party members—would be let go. However, the OSP decided on purging four tiers of membership down to lowly *firqa*, divisional level. Over the objection of General Jay Garner, the head of Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), Paul Bremer, the newly appointed CPA chief, implemented the de-Baathification policy. In May 2003, CPA Order 1 banned the Baath Party and authorized the removal of its members from all public position, and CPA Order 2 disbanded the Iraqi Army. With Pentagon's backing, Bremer appointed Chalabi to chair the newly created Supreme National

<sup>18</sup> Saddam, Religion and Government, Paygahe Hawzah, No. 107, November 1, 2003, <https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/3814/3952/24658>; Review of the thoughts of Zaki al-Arsuzi: The spiritual father of the Arab Ba'ath Party, Iran's Sociology Association, [www.isa.org.ir/شناسی-دین-1177-بررسی-E2%80%8Cگزارش-نشست-ها/368-گزارش-نشست-گروه-جامعه](http://www.isa.org.ir/شناسی-دین-1177-بررسی-E2%80%8Cگزارش-نشست-ها/368-گزارش-نشست-گروه-جامعه); John A. Nagl, Knife Fights. *A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014, 212.

<sup>19</sup> Meyrav Wurmser, "Reading, Writing and De-Baathification, Weekly Standard, December 5, 2003; quoted in George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate*, 2005, p. 157.

De-Baathification Commission. Observers noted Chalabi had uncommon zeal for purging former Baathists, most of whom were Sunnis. Chalabi fought especially hard for the disbanding of the military, allegedly to undercut Allawi who still had good relations with many of the officers. Ryan Crocker noted that “he [Chalabi] used it as a political tool.” An expert on transitional justice concluded that “The de-Baathification process in Iraq has fallen profoundly short as a transitional justice mechanism over the past decade. Poorly conceived, badly implemented, and controlled by hardliners, the process has been so highly politicized that it has eroded the rule of law and intensified the sectarian tensions that are at the heart of the violence haunting Iraq.”<sup>20</sup>

In retrospect, the de-Baathification policy proved highly damaging to American plans to turn Iraq into a democracy. Many have blamed the program for contributing to the unprecedented chaos and violence which had gripped the country for years. The removal of a large number of civil servants and teachers left many government departments unable to deliver essential services and schools scrambling to replace teachers. Local police stations were also decimated, making it hard to control the spiraling crime, especially as Saddam Hussein released thousands of hardened criminals from jails. The disbanding of the military created a large pool of unemployed soldiers ready to join the Sunni insurgency. Given that Chalabi, a Shiite, was closely associated with Washington, Sunnis were inclined to reason that the United States colluded with the Shiites to marginalize them.<sup>21</sup>

Much as the CPA misread the Sunni reaction, it was even more ill-informed about the various currents within the Shiite community. Prompted by the belief that the moderate Shiites would collaborate with the new authority, the CPA reached out to quietists’ clergy, notably Grand Ayatollah al Sistani, and Abdul Majid al Khoei who arrived in Najaf from his exile in Great Britain on April 4, 2003. Al Khoei reestablished contact with al Sistani and convinced him to issue a fatwa banning Shiites from

<sup>20</sup> George Packer, *Assassins Gate*, 552; Beth K. Dougherty, “De-Baathification in Iraq; How Not to Pursue Transitional Justice, Middle East Institute, January 30, 2014; Alissa J. Rubin, “Ahmed Chalabi and the Legacy of De-Baathification,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2015; *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq*, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama (Vintage 2013), 79.

<sup>21</sup> AP, *Lessons in War: Iraq’s Public Education in Crisis*, Associated Press, May 14, 2007, [www.nbcnews.com/id/18662854/ns/world\\_news-mideast\\_n\\_africa/t/lessons-war-iraqs-public-education-crisis/#.XMHRhy-ZOL8](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18662854/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/lessons-war-iraqs-public-education-crisis/#.XMHRhy-ZOL8).

fighting the Americans. The fatwa raised the alarm in Tehran which prevailed upon senior Iraqi clerics in Qom to counter al Sistani. On April 8, Ayatollah Kadhimi al-husseini al-haeri issued a fatwa directing Shiite clergy to fill the vacuum power created by the collapse of the regime. Pro-Iranian clerics in Najaf organized a demonstration which demanded that al Sistani leave the city within two days but did not harm the revered marja.<sup>22</sup>

Instead, on April 10, 2003, a group attacked al Khoei who went to pray at the Imam Ali Shrine. He was savagely murdered, and his body dumped in the street. There have been conflicting reports about the culprits, but a number of investigative reports as well as British and American intelligence concluded that Muqtada al Sadr was behind the murder. Iranian sources added that Quds Force agents who penetrated the Sadr's Mahdi Army organized the melee in front of Imam Ali. There were further allegations that by getting rid of al Khoei, the Iranians were trying to weaken al Sistani and replace him with Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, an Iraqi citizen and a member of Dawa who resided in Iran. Whatever the real version, one journalist wrote that the killing of Khoei "shows the depth of the divisions within the Shiite community in Iraq, and the difficulty it will have in taking and keeping power."<sup>23</sup>

By getting rid of al Khoei and creating tension between al Sistani and Sadr, the Iranians took the first step in implementing their plan to Lebanonize Iraq. Mohsen Rezaei, the former IRGC chief and the head of the Discernment Council, told a gathering in early April that he expected Iraq to follow the pattern of Lebanon. Many in the Guards believed that Sadr could become the next "Hassan Nasrallah" with Hezbollah serving as a model for the Mahdi Army. The Iranians were particularly pleased by

<sup>22</sup> Paul Vallely, Held under house arrest by Saddam for a decade, could this cleric be a secret weapon for the Allies?, Independent, April 4, 2003, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/held-under-house-arrest-by-saddam-for-a-decade-could-this-cleric-be-a-secret-weapon-for-the-allies-113673.html>; Iraqi officials emphasized the Withdrawal of US Troops from the Country, *Resalat Newspaper*, No. 7250, p. 21; An Iraqi Shiite cleric calls for a guerrilla army to fight US troops, Radio Farda, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/355408.html>; Phillip Smyth, THE Shiite Jihad In Syria And Its Regional Effects, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Issue 138, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Cockburn, "Death in the Temple," *The Independent*, May 9, 2003; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada al Sadr. The Battle for the Future of Iran* (Scribner, 2008); Yossef Bodansky, *The Secret History of the Iraq War*, Harper Perennial, 2005, 386; Harit Hasan al Qarawee, "Iraq's Sectarian Crisis, A Legacy of Exclusion" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 23, 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/04/23/iraq-s-sectarian-crisis-legacy-of-exclusion-pub-55372>.

Sadr's slogan "the smaller devil has gone, but the bigger devil has come," an allusion to the fact that the Americans turned into successors of Saddam Hussein. On April 6, 2003, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of *Kayhan*, a mouthpiece for Ayatollah Khamenei, warned that the Americans would suffer a war of attrition which they could not win. Indeed, when Sadr arrived in Iran on June 2, 2003, the media covered his visit in great detail and praised his anti-American stand. Tellingly, he met Qassem Suleimani, in addition to Ayatollah Khamenei and Ayatollah Shahroudi and Ali Larijani, the highly influential head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).<sup>24</sup>

Sadr did not disappoint those who hoped to see the American occupation destabilized. He legitimized the widespread looting which took place in mid-April by issuing the so-called al *Hawasim* fatwa. Al Sadr ruled that looting was permissible as long as the looters offered *khums*, one-fifth of their gains, to local Sadrist organization. The fiery cleric delivered aggressive anti-American speeches, including one which praised the 9/11 attack. When Bremer ordered al Sadr's newspaper al *Hawza* closed for 60 days for inciting violence, al Sadr responded with massive demonstrations in Sadr City and elsewhere. In a series of violent attacks, the JAM tried to take over shrines in Najaf and, more ominously, turned against American soldiers and civilian personnel. In one infamous incident, five contractors for Blackwater were ambushed and killed and in a scene reminiscent of Mogadishu, their mutilated bodies were hanged from a bridge.<sup>25</sup>

Because the Mahdi Army was unpaid and poorly organized, often consisting of no more than local bands formed by the Shiite underclass in Sadr City, Quds Force operatives found it easy to penetrate it. Iranians recruited young volunteers who were paid \$300–\$400 for training in the Ramazan Division base. The Iranians offered \$800 for killing American soldiers as well as officials in the Saddam Hussein regime whose names were included in carefully curated lists distributed to the Shiite militias. Lacking disci-

<sup>24</sup>Entekhab, January 23, 2004; Karim Azghandehpour, The Hidden Secrets of Muqtada al-Sadr Trip to Iran, Sharq Newspaper, January 30, 2006; Cockburn, *Muqtada al Sadr*, p. 210; Kambiz Ghafouri, Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran; 14 years of ups and downs, [www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-40850865](http://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-40850865); Iraj Jamshidi, Secretary of Supreme National Security Met Muqtada Sadr, Sharq Newspaper, January 23, 2006; PBS, Interview with Hossein Shariatmadari, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/showdown/interviews/shariatmadari.html>.

<sup>25</sup>Cockburn, *Muqtada al Sadr*, pp. 130–138.

pline and supervisions, however, the Mahdi Army death squads murdered ordinary Sunnis, either as acts of symbolic revenge or to gain property in a mixed neighborhood. By 2005, this massive ethnic cleansing reconfigured the demographics of Baghdad and other cities to the point of eliminating mixed quarters.<sup>26</sup>

If the violent Mahdi Army posed an explicit threat to the CPA, the Badr Brigades presented a more covert but a highly insidious challenge. Renamed Badr Organization after it voluntarily disbanded, a large number of its members entered the police force under the Ministry of Interior (MOI) headed by Bayan Jaber (Baqir Jaber al Zubeidi). The MOI created the infamous Special Investigative Directorate (SID) which was accused of mass torture and murder. The secret prison in Yadriya Street in Baghdad was a case in point. After an increasing number of Sunnis disappeared in 2004, their relatives complained to the American authorities. In 2005, US soldiers raided the secret prison, one of the dozens of SID detention centers around the country, where they found emaciated and badly tortured prisoners. The Americans investigated the secret prisons but did not publish the report so as not to inflame passions even further. MOI also run a number of special counterterrorism commando units, including the Wolf Brigade which became notorious for its mobile death squads. However, regular police units, including highway patrol police, were also known to execute Sunnis. Commenting on the disastrous situation, one journalist called Bayan Jaber, the “minister of civil war.”<sup>27</sup>

As the Quds Force anticipated, al Zarqawi contributed to the chaos in Iraq. Shortly after the invasion, al Zarqawi, still the head of *Jamaat Tawhid al Jihad* (TAJ), activated the cells he set up in Baghdad and the Sunni Anbar Province to mount an insurgency against the Americans, the United Nations (UN), and the Shiites. Anbar was an ideal place of action because foreign fighters could cross from the unguarded border with Syria. In addition to attacking the military, al Zarqawi engaged in spectacular atrocities like the bombing of the UN compound in Baghdad and the beheading of American hostages such as Nicolas Berg, a civilian contractor

<sup>26</sup> Cockburn, *Muqtada al Sadr*, p. 261; MNA, A Story of the Formation of Irregular War Forces of the IRGC, Mashregh News, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/571647/>; روایتی-از تشکیل نیروی-جنگ-نامنظم در-سپاه-چراغبروهای-ویژه-سپاه; From Guerrilla Operations to Cooperation with Iraqi Opponents at the Ramadan Camp, [defapress.ir/fa/news/86415/](http://defapress.ir/fa/news/86415/) های-چریکی-تا-همکاری-با-معاصران-عراقی-در-قرارگاه-برون-مرزی-رمضان E2%80%8C از-عملیات

<sup>27</sup> Ken Silverstein, “The Minister of Civil War,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 2008.

working in Baghdad. The international community reacted with outrage when the beheadings were posted on the Internet.<sup>28</sup>

Even if Iran publicly condemned al Zarqawi, privately it was pleased with his aggressive operations against the Americans and their coalition allies. Things, however, took a darker turn when the Jordanian terrorist declared a holy war against the Shiites. Analysts noted that Abu Mohammed al Maqdisi (Essam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi), al Zarqawi's Jordanian mentor, considered the Shiites to be *takfiris*. Al Zarqawi referred to the Shiites as *rafidah*, rejectionists of true Islam, noting that "they are a lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom." On September 14, 2005, he issued an official declaration of jihad against the Shiites. Al Zarqawi explained that his decision stemmed from the brutal Shiite retribution against the Sunnis, adding that the Shiites penetrated the new Iraqi army, the police, and other institutions of power. He announced the creation of the Omar Brigade, named after the caliph who conquered Persia, to serve as a counterbalance to the Badr Organization and its Iranian patron.<sup>29</sup>

Al Zarqawi wasted little time in demonstrating his anti-Shiite animus. On August 29, 2003, a huge suicide car blast killed the head of SCIRI, Ayatollah Mohammed Baqr al Hakim, and some 100 others in front of the Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf. Further attacks on holy shrines in Karbala and Baghdad and other Shiite gatherings killed thousands more. Al Zarqawi, who eventually swore allegiance to Osama Bin Laden in 2004, renamed his organization *Tanzim Qaida al Jihad fi Bilad al Rafidyān*, Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and initially won praise from Bin Laden who proclaimed him the Emir of Iraq. The new Emir was sure that the continuous mayhem would provoke a sectarian war, undermining the American effort to bring a measure of control to Iraq.<sup>30</sup>

However, Ayman al Zawahiri, the chief of Al-Qaeda Central, worried that the massive killings of Shiite would tarnish the Al-Qaeda brand in the Muslim

<sup>28</sup> Dexter Filkins, Iraq Videotape Shows the Decapitation of an American, the *New York Times*, May 12, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/12/international/middleeast/iraq-videotape-shows-the-decapitation-of-an.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Steven K. O'Hern, *The Intelligence Wars. Lessons from Baghdad*, Pantheon Books, 2008, p. 44; Gordon, *Endgame*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> Mahan Abedin. "The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)." *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 5 No. 10, October 2003; Dexter Filkins, Wanted Rebel Vows Loyalty to bin Laden, Web Sites Say, *The New York Times*, October 14, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/18/world/middleeast/wanted-rebel-vows-loyalty-to-bin-laden-web-sites-say.html>.

worlds. He chastised al Zarqawi in an eight-page letter which the American military intercepted in September 2005 and later circulated in the media. His former mentor al Maqdisi likewise turned against him in public. But the Iranian reaction was quite muted; there was no condemnation of the al Zawahiri actions, and the media limited itself to reporting the facts. After disclosing the al Zawahiri letter, the moderate news agency ISNA noted that “Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri had a better understanding of the realities in Iran.”<sup>31</sup>

Iran’s subdued reaction to al Zarqawi was undoubtedly due to his role in creating mayhem for the Americans. Indeed, less than a year after the invasion, the commanders of the Multinational Forces in Iraq (MNF-I), the American-created military force, considered AQI to be the top threat. Steven K. O’Hern, an intelligence officer with Strategic Counterintelligence Directorate (SCID), recalled that the “level of violence against US troops began to grow in late 2003 and early 2004.” On April 29, 2004, General George Casey made AQI the number one priority of the Multi National Forces in Iraq (MNF-I). After an extensive manhunt, al Zarqawi was killed in 2006 when a 500-pound ordnance was dropped on a house he was hiding in outside Baghdad.<sup>32</sup>

However, as O’Hern noted, the AQI was only one of the many insurgency challenges facing the military. He recalled that “the shifting and hard-to-identify networks were carrying out attacks on coalition forces daily.” Fighting “this never-ending game of whack-a-mole” was made difficult because, in his opinion, the American military was unprepared for a Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW). O’Hern explained that “fourth generation warfare required special attention that has been lacking because the [army] abandoned the institutional knowledge of counterinsurgency it had acquired in Vietnam.”<sup>33</sup>

Like the performance of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the accomplishments of the Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army proved the value of the proxy doctrine. With a modest investment, the IRGC-Quds Force’s proxies humiliate the Bush administration and convinced many in the United States that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a costly failure. Diplomat Peter Galbraith spoke for many who felt that Bush handed Iraq on a plate to Tehran.<sup>34</sup> The detailed US Army Report supported this conclusion, noting that “the war produced profound consequences. An emboldened and expansionist Iran

<sup>31</sup> ISNA, Al-Zawahiri’s advice to ISIL leaders; watch out for people’s hatred, <https://www.isna.ir/print/94071912316/توصیه‌قدیمی-الطواهری-بمهربران-داعش-مراقبتنفر-مردم-باشید>.

<sup>32</sup> Steven O’Hern, *The Intelligence Wars*, loc. 294.

<sup>33</sup> O’Hern, *The Intelligence Wars*, loc. 99, 439.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Galbraith, There is one way to preserve Iraq—and give us a way out, *The Guardian*, May 17, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/17/usa.iraq2>.







the Iranians hoped that Ayatollah al Hakim would be able to popularize the *velayat-e ummah* concept, but Abdul Aziz who took over SCIRI after his brother's assassination did not rank high enough to compete with Grand Ayatollah al Sistani. The latter rejected categorically a Shiite theocracy, under whatever name. Still, Tehran tried to apply pressure by placing the book *My Leader Khamenei* (*Rahbaram Khamenei*) and other materials on *velayat-e faqih* in the Najaf seminary. Tellingly, the book started with an admonition to "always walk behind Sayyed Ali Khamenei and support *velayat -e -faqih*." On the apparent order of al Sistani, however, the books swiftly disappeared.<sup>37</sup>

With the political stakes high, the quietist al Sistani was forced into the political arena, undergoing a "metamorphosis" in the words of Feldman. The law professor disclosed that during the negotiations for a new constitution, SCIRI and Dawa made several demands. They wanted Sharia to replace the civil code, to have the leading *maraji* to be recognized in the Constitution, to let religious courts to review whether legislation comported with the principles of Islam. As Feldman put it, they wanted "a system closely based on the Iranian" one. Both al Sistani and secularists objected to many of these demands.<sup>38</sup>

In the end, the Constitution, which was ratified in 2005, was a peculiar compromise between the Iranian model and the civic democratic one. On its face, the document guarantees civil rights and other democratic principles, but it also contains the "repugnancy clause," the right of a special judicial body to overthrow laws which are "repugnant" to Islam. Feldman called this blend of Islam and democracy, or "Constitutionalization of Sharia." Even though Feldman believed that this peculiar blend would suit Iraq better than the Western democratic ideal, he expressed some anxiety that "the Iraqi Shiite scholars (*faqih*s) may overreach in the Iranian manner."<sup>39</sup>

Critics noted that the balance between democracy and Sharia was never resolved in the sense that the Constitution took two seemingly contradic-

<sup>37</sup> Hossein Masoudnia and Javad Imam-Jomezadeh, *Federalism and the Triangle of Power* (Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis) in the New Iraq's Political Structure, *The Contemporary Political Thoughts*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 161–183; Hayder Al-Khoei, Post-Sistani Iraq, Iran, and the Future of Shia Islam, September 8, 2016, <https://ir.voanews.com/a/iraq-sistani-shiite-iran/3499287.html>; Mushtaq Al Hello, Scholar at Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara, personal interview, April 18, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Noah Feldman, *The Fall, and Rise of the Islamic State*, 2008, pp. 54, 168.

<sup>39</sup> Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, pp. 54, 168.

tory positions. Article 2, paragraph A stated that “no law can be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam” and paragraph B stated that “no law can be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy.” As a result, the document offered Western-style civil rights to individuals regardless of ethnic or sectarian background, but at the same time ascertained that all legislation should comport with Islamic standards which do not adhere to the concept of individual rights. Additional contradiction emerged because of the broad regional autonomy which the Constitution allowed. Strong regional autonomy benefited the Kurds in the north who comprised about 20 percent of the population and the Shiites in the south who constituted 60 percent of the population. Conversely, it hurt the 20 percent of Sunnis.<sup>40</sup>

The Sunnis did not help their case by boycotting the CPA and refusing to join the drafting of the Constitution. Concerned American officials understood that isolating the Sunnis and empowering the Islamist-inclined Shiites was fracturing the country and deepening the sectarian strife. They tried to remedy the situation by working with Allawi who served on the Governing Council of Iraq, an interim political body created by Bremer. Allawi took several unpopular decisions to counter the Sadrist upheaval including authorizing a raid in Najaf and a counterattack against al Zarqawi in Fallujah. He also established the General Security Directorate (GSD) to fight both the Sunni and the Shiite insurgencies. Qassem Suleimani, whose Iraqi portfolio included political, as well as military affairs, was determined to undermine Allawi by launching a character assassination campaign. The ploy paid off when in the January 2005 election the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a coalition of Shiite parties, won 140 seats in the 275-seat parliament. Allawi’s Iraqi List garnered 40 seats despite considerable American investment in the campaign; the Kurds received 75 seats.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Iraqi Constitution of 2005, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en); Sharon Otterman and Lionel Beechner, “Iraq. Drafting the Constitution.” Council on Foreign Relations, April 27, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Hassan Hatam, Allawi: Allawi: reminds us of a lesson we cannot forget (Yazkorona Be Darse La Yomken Lana An Nansah) <https://www.iraqcenter.net/vb/showthread.php?t=16669>; Who is Iyad Allawi? (Man Whoa Ayad Allawi?) Sawtul Aragh, January 11, 2005; Akram Alfazli, What will Allawi give to the Iraqis again? (Malazi Sayaghdamah Thania Allawi Lelaragheen), <https://www.iraqcenter.net>, November 29, 2005.

## THE MALIKI GOVERNMENT: QASSEM SULEIMANI'S MAN IN BAGHDAD

Twenty-two parties comprised the UIA, but only a few set the tone; SCIRI, the Badr Organization, and the Dawa Party. Ahmed Chalabi, briefly arrested by the Americans in 2004 on charges of transmitting intelligence to the Iranians, remade himself into a supporter of Muqtada al Sadr and joined the Alliance as head of INC. Having established himself as a neutral player, Ayatollah al Sistani offered no endorsement, but it was known that he was behind the Alliance, dubbed the "Sistani list."<sup>42</sup>

For the Iranian patrons of SCIRI, Badr Organization, and Dawa, the victory of the democratically elected UIA was a triumph of their long-term strategy. With Ibrahim al Jaafari, a senior Dawa leader who spent years in Iran and Syria, slated to become the new prime minister, Qassem Suleimani could move to turn Iraq into another Lebanon. Al Jaafari, who was sworn as prime minister on May 3, 2005, approved Quds Force's plan to open new camps to train Sadr's Mahdi Army. As noted, having determined to turn Sadr into the "Nasrallah of Iraq," the Iranians wanted to remake the ragtag Mahdists into a new "Hezbollah." The move enraged the Sunnis and the Kurds, forcing Jaafari to retreat. Adding to Jaafari's problems was his unpopularity. Known as the "gas machine" because of his long and circuitous speeches, Jaafari had poor managerial skills and was fond of long trips abroad. American commanders were particularly incensed because the prime minister refused to impose martial law after AQI bombed the iconic Al Askari Mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006. In the ensuing Shiite reprisals, scores of Sunnis were killed and wounded.<sup>43</sup>

With all sides expressing dissatisfaction, a search for a new prime minister was launched in the beginning of 2006. As before, in addition to the Shiites and the Kurds, al Sistani, the Iranians, and the Americans were involved. Ali Khedary, an Arabic-speaking aide in the American embassy, revealed that he and his colleague, another Arab-speaking aide, Jeffrey

<sup>42</sup> George Packer, *Assassins' Gate*, 552; Ahmad Chalabi, It Proved that I was with Iraqis, Ettelaat, May 24, 2004, No. 2379, [www.ettelaat.com/etbarchive/1996-2014/2004/05/24/P5.pdf](http://www.ettelaat.com/etbarchive/1996-2014/2004/05/24/P5.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Michael Gordon, *The Endgame*, p. 191; Robert Worth, Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian>, February 22, 2006.

Beals, recommended Nouri al Maliki to Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad “as the only man we knew with a chance to win support.” The CIA vetted Maliki and two other potential candidates but did not know about his long association with Iran and his role in the bombing of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut and the attack in Kuwait. In his efforts to convince President Bush, Khalilzad called Maliki “clean with maybe the potential to be a strong leader.” Al Sistani supported Maliki’s candidacy because the number two on the Dawa list, Ali al Adib, was of Iranian origin and thus unsuitable for the position.<sup>44</sup>

In retrospect, Maliki proved to be a problematic choice for the Americans who hoped the new government would heal the sectarian divisions, end corruption, and turn Iraq into a model of democracy. To the contrary, Maliki used his considerable power to aggravate the relations between the Sunnis and the Shiites while plunging the country into a full-fledged civil war. Beholden to al Sadr, his principal supporter, Maliki appointed several Sadrist ministers to his cabinet. Most notorious was the Minister of Health Abdul Mutalib Mohammed Ali and his deputy Hakim Zamili who was implicated in murdering Sunni patients in Baghdad area hospitals and using ambulances to ferry militants to attack Sunnis. Americans had arrested Zamili in 2007 on charges of transferring millions of US dollars to the Mahdi Army. American efforts to curb sectarian vigilantism run into a brick wall because Maliki refused to authorize raids on the Mahdi Army and other Shiite militia. In 2006, the United Nations human rights observer in Iraq held MOI responsible for the massive killings of Sunnis, a report which reflected poorly on the American ability to control the increasingly violent country.<sup>45</sup>

Building a balanced force to replace the Baathist-dominated army, a major item on the American plan for national healing encountered similar resistance. Maliki created the extra-constitutional Office of the Commander in Chief (OCINC) and staffed it with prominent Sadrists. Bassima al Jaidri, in charge of personnel, was determined to block Sunni officers from joining the force. Worse, OCINC was blamed for purges of Sunni officers most effective in fighting the increasingly violent Mahdi Army militants.

<sup>44</sup> Ali Khedary, “Why We Stuck with Maliki and Lost Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 2014; David Rhode, Warren Strobel, Missy Ryan, and Ned Parker, “Our Man in Baghdad,” *Atlantic*, July 1, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Michael R. Gordon, *Endgame*, 222. Ken Silverstein, “The Minister of Civil War,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 2008.

In a secret cable released by WikiLeaks, Ambassador Ryan Crocker who replaced Khalilzad complained about the pernicious influence in Maliki's office and described the prime minister as "having a paranoid mind," a reference to his anxiety about the possible comeback of the Baathists.<sup>46</sup>

In the sectarian-oriented Maliki government, corruption was almost an afterthought. Having been given control of the Ministry of Transportation, the Sadrists penetrated the Baghdad International Airport, including the customs office. Mahdi Army operatives used the airport for large-scale operations such as shipping weapons. When he moved to the Minister of Finance, Bayan Jaber was most reluctant to allocate resources to the Sunnis, depriving their provinces of essential services. Cronyism and nepotism were so rampant that Iraq scored number one on the list of most corrupt countries in the world. Ahmed Maliki, the prime minister's son, was considered one of the most corrupt figures in Baghdad. Some \$200 billion allocated to reconstruction projects just vanished, with some of the money rumored to be shipped to Lebanon.<sup>47</sup>

Fueled by the persecution of the Sunnis, the AQI responded with a new wave of spectacular atrocities which targeted the Shiites and, increasingly, the Sunnis of Anbar Province who crossed its path. While al Zarqawi's successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, was more restrained in killing other Sunnis, the animosity between the Anbar tribes and AQI driven by local turf wars was insurmountable. Presiding over a country spinning out of control, Maliki was forced to accept the Bush administration surge of more than 20,000 troops which brought the number of American troops in Iraq to 152,000 forces. General David Petraeus, who took command of MNF-I on February 10, 2007, was able to harness this opposition by turning it into the Sunni Awakening, a loose coalition of Anbar tribes who fought alongside the Americans to significantly degrade the strength of AQI. For his part, Maliki promised to pay the Awakening fighters and integrate them into the Iraqi security force.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Michael R. Gordon, *Endgame*; Public Library of US Diplomacy, May 15, 2007, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAGHDAD1593\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAGHDAD1593_a.html). Joshua Partlow "Maliki's Office Is Seen Behind Purges in Forces," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Michael R. Gordon, *Endgame*, 221; Dexter Filkin, "What We Left Behind," *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind>.

<sup>48</sup> David Sanger, Bush Adds Troops in Bid to Secure Iraq, *The New York Times*, January 11, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/11/world/middleeast/11prexy.html>.

The Iranians considered the surge a severe threat to their highly successful terror campaign against the American and their allies. Just before the surge, they have inflicted serious harm on the coalition forces. In addition to the explosively formed projectiles (EFPs), the militants had access to an increase in sophisticated weapons such as the RPG-29 rockets. Captured explosives were stamped by the Iranians Defense Industries Organization, a match to the cargo of Karine-A which the Israeli had seized during the Second Intifada. As noted in Chap. 2, the EFPs could penetrate heavy armor and cause heavy casualties. Indeed, the EFP and IED (improvised explosive device) road bombs caused about half of the American casualties in Iraq. The British forces stationed in Basra were the first to report on the EFP and pointed the finger to Iran. By early 2005, there was substantial information that the Iranians had supplied the devices to the Shiites militias, but not much was done to stop the practice. Tehran consistently denied that it was involved in the Shiite insurgency, blaming the Americans for disinformation. The US Army Report noted that despite the overwhelming evidence of Iran's culpability, both the political and military officials in the CPA insisted that "a sweeping hostile force declaration against the IRGC-QF could result in an increase in Iranian response support for the Iraqi insurgents and lead to open confrontation with Iran."<sup>49</sup>

The dilemma of how to react to Iran was political. As one analyst put it, "for many months American officials were torn between a desire to do something and a wish to avoid confrontation." Given that the Bush administration came under harsh criticism for destabilizing Iraq, a frontal attack on Iran was rejected off hand. There was also little appetite for Rumsfeld's more modest proposal to launch a covert action inside Iran. Such an operation would have strengthened critics who accused Bush and Cheney of trying to provoke a war with Iran because of its alleged nuclear program. Splitting the difference, in November 2006, the president signed a directive authorizing of the killing of Iranian operatives in Iraq. This task fell to the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) under General Stanley A. McChrystal. The JSOC teams developed effective techniques to hunt down Shiite fighters as well as their Iranian handlers. However, anxiety about taking on the Iranians continued lingered. McChrystal admitted that, in 2007, he passed up an opportunity to kill Qassem

<sup>49</sup> Steven K. O'Hern, *The Intelligence Wars*, 2008, 166, 686; Colonel Joel D. Rayburn Colonel Frank K. Sobchak, *The US Army in Iraq War: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011*, Vol. 1, p. 499.

Suleimani whom he described as a “ghostly puppet master” of Iraq. The JSOC chief explained that the “contentious politics that would follow” acted as a constraint.<sup>50</sup>

Although General Petraeus reduced the bloodshed, the Sadrists were far from subdued. They showed their displeasure with Prime Minister Maliki by increasing the pace of sectarian killings and attacking coalition forces. They also challenged the government by engaging in skirmishes with the Iraqi Security Force (ISF). Finally, persuaded to act against his former ally, in 2008, Maliki decided to take on Basra, a Mahdi Army stronghold. In the so-called Raid of the Knights, Maliki personally directed ISF units which, with the help of the American air strikes, won a narrow victory against the militia. Sadr who retreated to Qom let Qassem Suleimani negotiate a withdrawal of his militia and subsequently announced a truce with the government. The Mahdists in Baghdad, however, defied the cease-fire and continued with the killings of Sunnis and the occasional ISF unit which ventured into their stronghold in Sadr City. To quell the persistent rebellion, Maliki reluctantly authorized Petraeus to take down the militia and bring a measure of calm to Baghdad. After a hard-fought campaign, the MNF-I commander quelled the rebellion, prompting Sadr to disband the militia on August 28, 2008. On November 28, he announced the creation of a new military organization, *the Liwa al Yum al Mawud* (Promised Day Brigade). Two sister organizations—the *Muhamidoon* and *Monasseroun*—were said to deal with welfare and “mobilization of support” respectively.

These ostensibly peaceful gestures, however, mattered little because the Iranians, dismayed by the moody and unpredictable Sadr, decided to undercut his influence. Things came to a head when, in 2008 and 2009, al Sadr gave an interview to *al Jazeera* criticizing Maliki and the “undue” Iranian influence in his country. Giving up on their “Iraqi Nasrallah,” the Quds Force propaganda machine delegitimized al Sadr by spreading rumors about his alleged mental illness. However, Tehran was not ready to give up on turning Iraq into a new Lebanon. Ryan Crocker noted that success of the surge compelled the Iranians to change their tactics, but

<sup>50</sup> Stanley A. McChrystal, “Iran Deadly Puppet Master,” *Foreign Policy*, winter 2019; Mark Ambinder and D. B. Grady, *The Command. Deep Inside the President Secret Army*, Wiley 2012, pp. 85–86; Matthew Levitt, Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of *Lebanon’s Party of God*, 293; Michael Gordon, *Endgame*, 18, 318.

“the thrust of their strategy—Lebanonization of Iraq” was unlikely to change.<sup>51</sup>

As part of the new strategy, the Quds Force “peeled off” some hardline Mahdi Army militants and put them under the command of trusted Iranian allies. Referred to by American intelligence as Special Groups (SGs), they run the gamut from fully trained militias to criminal-smuggling gangs. Leading the list was Asaib Al al Haq (AAH)—(the League of the Righteous)—under Qais al Khazali and Kataib Hezbollah (KH) which the veteran terrorist Abu Mahdi al Muhandis commanded. Led by Mustafa al Shabani, the Shabani network specialized in smuggling Iranian weapons and ammunition to the militias. Among them was the Badr Organization, which had very close ties to the Quds Force. Despite the tensions with Sadr, the Quds Force was also assisting the Promised Days Brigade. Captured by the Coalition forces, Qais al Khazali revealed during his interrogation the complex network of Iranian support for the SGs. At the asymmetrical warfare level, the Quds Force hoped to achieve the so-called Mogadishu on the Tigris scenario, a reference to the American withdrawal from Somalia.<sup>52</sup>

With the SGs taking the lead in the insurgency, the Bush administration was forced once again to deal with the role in Iran. The intelligence reports were scathing: “all the problems were aggravated by Iran’s Quds Force ... which was persecuting a proxy war.” The Ramazan Division was behind a long list of SGs actions, many documented on a one-gigabyte flash drive found in a ride on an SG hideout. Along with major operations like sabotage of oil pipes and the electricity grid, there was more score settling with former Sunni officers including pilots who bombed Iranian position during the war with Iraq. Hezbollah, whose Arabic-speaking trainers were very much in demand, was frequently embedded with the SGs. In 2007, the coalition forces captured Ali Musa Daqduq, a senior Hezbollah operative implicated in the deadly attack on American soldiers in Karbala and other offenses.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Michael Gordon, *The Endgame*, p. 534.; Profile: Muqtada al-Sadr, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2008/04/200861517227277282.html>; Anti-Iranian Remarks of Muqtada al-Sadr, <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/13085/-/اظهارات-ضد-ایرانی-13085>; Anti-Iranian Statements of Muqtada al-Sadr in Syria, [www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/5208/مقتدی-صدر-در-سوریه](http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/5208/مقتدی-صدر-در-سوریه); Kambiz Ghafouri, Muqtada Sadr and Iran: 14 Years Ups and Down, [www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-40850865](http://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-40850865).

<sup>52</sup> “Top Iraq Pol Admitted Iran Trained Militias to Attack U.S. Troops, Declassified Documents Show,” *Daily Beast*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/iran-trained-iraqi-militias-that-attacked-us-troops-say-declassified-documents>; Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, loc. 2314–2377.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Gordon, *Endgame*, pp. 133, 319, 315, 357.



The timing for taking a bold step against the regime could not have been any worse. By the end of the second term, the administration faced overwhelming public criticism for invading Iraq and wasting blood and treasure. Even those who realized that the Maliki government acted as an agent of Tehran found it hard to recommend a military action. Others urged a diplomatic engagement with Iran. For instance, the bi-partisan Iraq Study Group (ISG), nicknamed the “bible of the war critics,” mentioned briefly Iranian support for the Shiites. However, the report went on to state that “diplomatic efforts” should be taken to persuade Iran to “stem the flow of equipment, technology, and training to any group resorting to violence in Iraq.” Furthermore, “Iran ‘should make clear its support for the sovereignty of Iraq and its government’ and use its influence over the Shiite groups to encourage national reconciliation.” The ISG did not explain how to persuade Iran “to stem the flow of equipment” or clarify its support for the sovereignty of the Iraqi government or use its influence to encourage national reconsolidation.<sup>54</sup>

Quite clearly, Qassem Suleimani was not ready to follow the suggestions of the ISG. With the blessing of Ayatollah Khamenei and the beligerently anti-American Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who replaced the moderate President Khatami, the Quds Force chief came to consider himself the “viceroy of Iraq.” Using the services of Ahmed Chalabi, Suleimani conveyed a message to General Petraeus that Washington should deal with him on all matters concerning Iraq. In a gesture that was as symbolic as it was substantive, the two Iranian ambassadors to Baghdad were Quds Force commanders—Brigadier General Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, and Brigadier General Hassan Danaeifard. Also, SCID documented an extensive intelligence and operational networks of Quds Force personnel masquerading as diplomats, a tactic which the regime developed in its early days, according to Chap. 1. Thus, it came as a little surprise that Ambassador Crocker was reported to have a few “unproductive” meetings with Iranian diplomats in Baghdad. In a rare public comment on a meeting with Kazemi-Qomi, Crocker voiced his displeasure with Iran’s “meddling.”<sup>55</sup>

In making their influence in Iraq public, the Iranians were encouraged by Senator Barack Obama whose presidential campaign pledged to

<sup>54</sup> Michael Gordon, *Endgame*, 18, 318; James Addison Baker and Lee Hamilton, *Iraq Study Group*, United States Institute for Peace, 2008, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Gordon, *Endgame*, 313–314; Julia Lenarz, “Iran’s Influence Trough Powerful Militias,” *The Tower*, May 4, 2018; Mariam Karouny, “U.S. Accuses Iran Over Support for Militias in Iraq” Reuters, July 23, 2007.

bring the war to “a responsible close.” Ben Rhodes, then a speechwriter for the candidate who had previously worked on the ISG report, and Colin Kahl, a fellow in the progressive Center for a New American Security (CNAS), helped Obama to formulate the Iraqi policy. Echoing the ISG, they recommended a speedy drawn down of American troops and working with the Maliki camp. Once in office, President Obama picked Hillary Clinton to head the State Department. The new secretary raised some eyebrows when she chose Christopher Hill, a North Korea specialist with no knowledge of the Middle East, to replace Ambassador Crocker. Hill, the self-proclaimed “un-Crocker,” a reference to his disdain for micro-managing the Iraqi policy, also refused to be “an adjunct to the military.” He immediately clashed with General Ray Odierno, the then head of the MNF-I, and his civilian adviser, Emma Sky. Odierno warned that the pending withdrawal ordered by the Obama administration would encourage both Al-Qaeda and the Iranian SGs to resume attacks.<sup>56</sup>

Hill faced his first major test after the hotly contested election of March 2010. Despite Suleimani’s broad covert action against Iyad Alawi, his *al Haraka al Wataniya al Iraqiyya* (Iraqi National Movement) also known as the *al Iraqiyya* List garnered 91 seats, two seats more than Maliki’s State of Law Coalition. Constitutionally, Alawi had the right to form a government, but Maliki refused to relinquish power. Placed in a quandary, the Americans engaged in a bitter internal debate. Hill, expressing the opinion of the Obama administration, supported Maliki. General Odierno, General Petraeus, Crocker, and Ali Khedary, who had a change of heart, vehemently opposed the prime minister citing his persecution of the Sunnis, the preference given to Iranian interests, and his growing authoritarian tendencies. In the words of Khedary, “Maliki’s one-man, one-Dawa Party looks a lot like the Hussein one-man, one-Baath Party.” The embassy actually ordered a psychological profile of Maliki, but, at the end, the Maliki option prevailed.<sup>57</sup>

Ironically, Qassem Suleimani who pushed hard for Maliki ran into problems as well. Many Shiite politicians supported Adel Abdul Mahdi, a powerful member of ISCI and the vice president of Iraq. They considered Mahdi to be less sectarian and a more rational figure than Maliki

<sup>56</sup> Michael Gordon, *The Endgame*, p. 583.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Gordon, *Endgame*, pp. 560, 572; Ali Khedary, “Why We Stuck with Maliki and Lost Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 2014.

who was known for his erratic behavior and paranoid conspiracy theories. But Suleimani considered the more malleable Maliki to be more useful for the “Lebanonization” project. To expedite the formation of the new government, Suleimani summoned a number of the politicians to Tehran where they were told that the Supreme Leader Khamenei wished Maliki to head the government. He also persuaded al Sadr to throw the support of the Sadrist bloc behind Maliki, blocking both Allawi and Mahdi. Khedary commented on the Iranian-ordained arrangement: “our debates mattered little, however, because the most powerful man in Iraq and the Middle East, Gen. Qassem Suleimani” dictated that “Maliki would remain premier.” The Quds Force chief’s dictates extended to the filling of political position. Chalabi, who served on the Accountability and Justice Committee, the former de-Baathification Commission, disqualified some 500 Sunni politicians, including Saleh al Mutlaq, a prominent member of the *al Iraqiyya* List. Odierno contended that the Iranians were behind the mass disqualifications and warned that “a government assembled by Qassem Suleimani would not get the support of Iraqi Sunnis.”<sup>58</sup>

Maliki did not disappoint his patrons in Tehran. Like before, he used extra-constitutional bodies filled with loyalists to control the political and military process. OCINC protected the Sadrists and SGs militants who were caught by coalition forces; many were surreptitiously released after a short time in prison. The revolving-door policy exasperated the American military who risked lives, not to mention time and effort in apprehending the militants. On the other hand, Maliki stopped paying salaries to the Sunni Awakening fighters, breaking an agreement that General Petraeus helped to negotiate with the tribes.<sup>59</sup>

Still, it was Maliki’s restriction on the coalition forces which threatened the tenuous stability of the country the most. MNF-I intelligence concluded that the SGs were smuggling prodigious amount of military supplies, including the deadly Improvised Rockets Assisted Munitions (IRAMs), rocket-boosted mortars. To cut down on the smuggling, the Americans decided to target the smuggling networks. In one such encounter with a KH cell, several Iraqis were killed. In response, Faruk al Araj, the head of OCINC, informed the

<sup>58</sup> Ali Khedary, “Why We Stuck with Maliki and Lost Iraq,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 2014; Michael Gordon, *The Endgame*, pp. 609, 619.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Gordon, *The Endgame*, pp. 361, 364, 591, 621; Michael Griffin, *Islamic State. Rewriting History*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, p. 134.

coalition forces that further activity against the SGs would be contingent on permission from the prime minister's office. In any event, targeting the SGs was soon to become a moot point because the Obama administration had run into difficulties in negotiating the terms of the final American withdrawal. While the military urged the president to insist on a small residual force to keep the fragile peace, Maliki came under tremendous pressure from Suleimani to dispense with any American help. Reportedly, Suleimani warned Maliki that should he sign a new US-Iraq Status of Force Agreement (SOFA), he would encourage Ayatollah Sistani to drop his support from the Maliki government. Given that Ayatollah al Sistani expressed discomfort over the 2008 SOFA, the threat sounded credible.<sup>60</sup>

Bowing to the inevitable, Maliki announced in December 2010 that all American forces would leave Iraq: "The agreement is not subject to extension, not subject to alternation. It is sealed." Critics blamed Obama for not pressuring the Iraqis harder, but Maliki's dependence on the Iranians posed too high a bar for Washington. Making the best of the situation, the president chose to ignore the Iranian involvement, telling Maliki that "Some people will think that our withdrawal will bring more influence by Iran. I am confident in your independent leadership." On October 21, 2011, the White House announced that the last troops would leave Iraq at the end of the year.<sup>61</sup>

Qassem Suleimani saw the departure of the Americans as a personal triumph and an opportunity to finalize his Lebanonization of Iraq. Maliki, though reluctant to lose the MNF-Iraq effective counterterror operations, hoped that the ISF would be able to pick up the slack. Within a short period, however, a new and unprecedented wave of terror had shaken the country to its core.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Maliki called for an American retreat program, [www.bbc.com/persian/worldnews/story/2008/07/080707\\_v-iraq-maleki-us.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/persian/worldnews/story/2008/07/080707_v-iraq-maleki-us.shtml); Demonstrations in Baghdad against the US-Iraq agreement, [https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f7\\_Iraq\\_Sadr\\_protest\\_march/469408.html](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f7_Iraq_Sadr_protest_march/469408.html); Ayatollah Sistani's Advice to Maliki About the Security Agreement, Hamshahri Online, August 27, 2008, [www.hamshahronline.ir/news/61791/توصیه-آیت-الله-سیدستانی-به-مالکی-در-بار-متوافقنامه-امنیتی](http://www.hamshahronline.ir/news/61791/توصیه-آیت-الله-سیدستانی-به-مالکی-در-بار-متوافقنامه-امنیتی).

<sup>61</sup> Michael Griffin, *Islamic State. Rewriting History*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, p. 94; quoted in Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015, p. 389.

## THE ISIS DEBACLE AND THE FUTURE OF THE LEBANONIZATION OF IRAQ

With AQI virtually wiped up by the Petraeus surge and the Sunni Awakening, the Maliki government and the Obama administration were seemingly justified when declaring the virulent Salafist movement to be over. In 2010, American and Iraqi special forces killed Zarqawi's successors, Abu Ayyub al Masri, and Abu Omar al Baghdadi. However, Maliki's political and tactical missteps gave the group, renamed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)—later the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—a new lease of life under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

Even before the last Americans soldiers departed, Maliki ramped up the political persecution of the Sunnis, including many in the Sunni Awakening. OCINC drew up mass lists of former Awakening fighters who were incarcerated in appalling conditions. For their part, the SGs, dispensing with any pretext of legality, killed scores of Sunnis in Anbar Province. When emulating the Arab Spring, the Sunnis launched a peaceful protest, the government responded with violence against the "peace camps" which the protesters set up near Falluja and Ramadi. The turning point came in Hawija in the Kirkuk Province, when the authorities stormed a peace encampment on April 19, 2013, killing more than 50 people. In subsequent clashes, an additional 300 people died, prompting Gyorgy Bursztin, the UN Special Representative, to call to stop "the senseless bloodshed and to prevent those dark days from returning."<sup>62</sup>

Maliki exacerbated the tension by going after high-ranking Sunni politicians. He ordered the arrests of Vice President Tariq al Hashemi who was tried and sentenced to death in absentia. Rafi al Issawi, the popular Finance Minister and an ally of Hashemi, was also targeted and 150 of his office workers and bodyguards were arrested. Issawi accused Maliki of kidnapping his employees and Hashemi who fled Iraq declared that "the tyrant of Baghdad will not keep quiet until he targets all his opponents." In a rare public rebuke, the US embassy warned all parties to abstain from actions which would upset the stability of the country. Maliki, however, did not heed the warnings, triggering speculations in Baghdad about his puzzling behavior which some attributed to a personality change.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Michael Griffin, *Islamic State. Rewriting History*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, p. 98.

<sup>63</sup> Sinan Salaheddin, Iraq Confirms the Arrest of Ministers Bodyguards, *The Washington Post*, December 21, 2012.

Whatever the reasons for Maliki's self-defeating politics, the SGs did even more damage on the ground. Whether acting on the order of Suleimani or pursuing their own agenda, the Asaib Al al Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and the Badr Organization engaged in numerous acts of revenge killings, ethnic cleansing of Sunni neighborhoods and towns, frequently abated by the ISF and the police. Jaber al Jaberi, a prominent Sunni tribal leader and politician, accused Maliki for a "failure of foresight," his reference to the coming of a new Sunni-Shiite war. The Iranians, however, encouraged members of the State of Law Coalition to accuse the tribal chief of acting as an American agent on a mission to help Washington to secure the control of the Iraqi government.<sup>64</sup>

As al Jaberi predicted, Maliki's high-octane sectarianism revived the fortunes of ISIS. While many Sunnis joined for economic reasons, others sought to exact revenge on the Shiites. The destabilization in neighboring Syria and the Arab Spring elsewhere brought thousands of volunteers under the ISIS distinctive black flag. Maliki's amnesty in 2009 released hundreds of hardened Salafists from Camp Bucca and other detention centers previously run by Americans. Others escaped during Operation Destroying the Walls, a cycle of attacks which al Baghdadi ordered on the prison system. According to some estimates, up to 7000 hard-core jihadists were freed to rejoin the terror group. Flush with new fighters, ISIS which expanded into Syria in 2013, launched the Northern Iraq offensive to take control of the country in January 2014. After capturing a string of towns in Anbar Province, in June 2014, ISIS fighters captured Mosul, defeating the large, American-equipped Iraqi army. Initially, John Kerry, Obama's Secretary of State, ruled out an American intervention, the administration changed its mind after a nearly genocidal assault on the Yazidis. In October, Washington announced Operation Inherent Resolve, a mostly airborne campaign against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.<sup>65</sup>

The rapid expansion of the self-proclaimed ISIS Caliphate discredited Maliki and his highly sectarian rule. Under tremendous pressure, the prime minister announced his resignation on August 14, 2014, and was replaced by his Dawa Party colleague, Haider al Abadi. Suleimani, the main architect of Maliki's policy, came for his share of criticism in Tehran. President Hassan Rouhani who took office in 2013 on a platform of nor-

<sup>64</sup>The United States Wants to Impose its Allies on the government, [217.218.67.229/farsi/detail/1393/06/16/6145/iraq-cabinet-us/](http://217.218.67.229/farsi/detail/1393/06/16/6145/iraq-cabinet-us/).

<sup>65</sup>Griffin, *Islamic State*, p. 95.

malizing Iranian relations with the international community decried Suleimani as a poster boy of the revolutionary exporters. To the moderates, Suleimani was the epitome of the adventurist “Trotskyite” who turned Iran into an international pariah. Rouhani wanted to replace Suleimani with Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guards Navy and the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Ali Jafari and the Supreme Leader, however, vetoed the decision but agreed that Shamkhani, as per his official position would be in charge of the Iraqi portfolio. In a remarkable piece of editorializing, *Mashreq News*, an outlet with ties to the Revolutionary Guards, stated that “many do not pay much attention to the fact that the main mission of Suleimani is fighting against Israel. Suleimani was put in charge of Iraq’s political portfolio only because of the need to coordinate between the Iraqi and the Syrian front operations.” According to *Mashreq News*, in the new division of labor, “Shamkhani will be in charge of Iraq and Suleimani will fulfill the decisions which will be made by SNSC.”<sup>66</sup>

To his credit, Suleimani, already deeply involved in the civil war in Syria, made the best of a catastrophic situation. After Ayatollah al Sistani issued a fatwa to fight ISIS, thousands of volunteers flocked to take up arms against ISIS in an array of militias. Primary alliances divided the 63 groups which made up this irregular army known as the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF), *Hashd al Shaabi*. However, factions loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei and the principle of *velayat-e faqih* such as the Asaib Al al Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, *Saraya Khurasani*, and *Abul Fadhl al-Abbas*, and the Badr Organization under Hadi al Ameri comprised the critical mass of the PMF.<sup>67</sup>

Although ISIS was officially defeated in 2017, the PMF has shown considerable staying power. An estimated half of the 100,000 militants joined the ISF, institutionalizing the Quds Force proxy power. Equally significant, in line with the dual-use strategy, key militias geared up to compete in the 2018 election. Hadi al-Ameri, the chief of the Badr Organization and Hashd Al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) and his

<sup>66</sup> Mashreqnews, What Is Behind Suleimani Removal from Being in Charge of Iraq Portfolio, <https://www.mashregnews.ir/news/345951/پشت-پرده-شایعه-کنار-رفتن-سردار-سلیمانی-از-چرونده-عراق>.

<sup>67</sup> Farda News, Ayatollah Sistani Issued Fatwa Against ISIS, *Farda News*, June 13, 2014, <https://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/347406/آیت-الله-سیستانی-در-عراق-فتوای-جهاد-آیت-الله-سیستانی-صادر-کرد-نماینده-مرجعیت-در-کربلا-هم-مسلح-شوند-90٪D9%ک>; Ayatollah Sistani Issued Fatwa Against ISIS, *Hawzah.net*, June 13, 2014, <https://hawzah.net/fa/News/View/97209/آیت-الله-سیستانی-فتوای-جهاد-صادر-کرد>.







Given the massive Iranian influence in Iraq, it is hard to envisage Baghdad's move into the Saudi sphere of influence. However, it is equally difficult to fathom the success of Suleimani's plan to turn Iraq into a new Lebanon.

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## Rescuing the Assad Regime and Turning Syria into a Client State

During the reign of the Shah, Iranian relations with Syria were correct but not overly close. Due to several factors, the ties have improved dramatically after the 1979 revolution. The radically anti-Israeli regime of Hafez Assad was looking for a new partner after Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel. Saddam Hussein, a foe of Syria, was poised to attack Iran, making the alliance stronger. Indeed, Syria was the only Arab country to support Tehran in the war, a decision for which it was rewarded with discount oil. When the Assad regime intervened in the Lebanese civil war in 1976, Iran's dependence on Syria's goodwill had only grown, not least because Syrian troops occupied a large swath of Shiite-populated territory. However, it was Syria's geography which made Damascus indispensable to the revolutionary expert project. For Mustafa Chamran, who became the leading Iranian figure in Lebanon, according to Chap. 2, Syria was a vital part of the Hezbollah architecture. Chamran and some of his colleagues, nicknamed the "Syrian Mafia," persuaded Ayatollah Khomeini to embrace Assad, despite Khomeini's initial reservations about the secular leader. The Ayatollah was even less pleased with the fact that Musa Sader, another member of the "Syrian Mafia," issued a fatwa declaring the Alawites to be Shiites.<sup>1</sup>

With Khomeini's resistance neutralized, the Revolutionary Guards set out to transform Syria into a vital part of the "Axis of Resistance" to move

<sup>1</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Would Not Abandon Assad (ism)," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2013, pp. 79–93.



personnel and material to Hezbollah. After the United States imposed an embargo on arms to Iran in 1983, Damascus became a life-line for smuggling arms to Iran. In the words of Mohsen Rafiqdoost, the then Minister of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), “Damascus was transformed into the transit center for transportation of weapons to Iran.” It was also in this period that Ayatollah Khomeini, inspired by the ancient Royal Road linking Khorasan to China, decided that Syria should form a part of a land bridge to Lebanon.<sup>2</sup>

Despite some ups and downs in the relations between the two countries, notably in the mid-1980s, when Syria backed Amal to the detriment of Hezbollah, the Damascus-Tehran axis proved resilient. After Syria lost its Soviet patron at the end of the Cold War, the two countries created a new strategic alliance to counter the American domination in the Middle East. In October 1990, they established the Syrian-Iranian Higher Cooperation Committee (SIHCC) with Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) officials representing Iran. Topping the agenda was a program to develop ballistic missiles and Syrian help to Hezbollah. After investing heavily in this cooperation, the Iranians were frustrated when Hafez Assad agreed to peace negotiations with Israel in the winter of 2000. Despite Israel’s extensive concessions, including a retreat to the edge of the Sea of Galilees, the talks in Shepherdstown, Virginia, failed. According to sources, the then Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak wanted a Syrian pledge to terminate help to Hezbollah, a condition which the Syrians were unwilling or unable to accept. Hafez Assad died soon after in June 2000.<sup>3</sup>

When his son Bashar took over, the relations between the two countries became very close. The inexperienced young leader was forced to rely on Tehran, which became the senior partner in the alliance. Whereas his father seldom traveled to Iran, Bashar visited Tehran in 2004 and again in 2005 to congratulate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his election as president. After the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, on February 14, 2005, in which Damascus and Hezbollah were implicated,

<sup>2</sup> Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*, Lanham, Md. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, loc. 216; Milani Why Tehran Would Not Abandon Assad.

<sup>3</sup> Afkar News, A Review of Syria’s Support of Iran, Afkar News, <https://www.afkarnews.com/بخش-سیاسی-469358/3-بازخوانی-حمایت-های-سوریه-از-ایران/>; Round One at Shepherdstown, *The New York Times*, January 12, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/12/opinion/round-one-at-shepherdstown.html>.

Syria was condemned by the international community and forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Facing growing isolation, in 2006, Syria was persuaded to sign a defense agreement with Iran topped by the Supreme Defense Commission of Iran and Syria, long-term NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)-style military cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

There was nothing in the agreement that warranted Iran's intervention to save the regime from internal problems. However, the Arab Spring which Tehran seized upon to undermine Saudi Arabia and its other enemies, threatened to sweep the Assad regime from power. Given the importance of Syria to the Axis of Resistance architecture, there was little doubt that the IRGC-QF would move to rescue the dictator.

### THE SYRIAN SPRING: FROM POPULAR PROTEST TO MASS VIOLENCE

Like in other Arab Spring countries, a seemingly minor incident triggered the protest. In February 2011, the authorities arrested some high school students in Daraa, a small town near the Jordanian border, for painting anti-government graffiti. Demonstrations in support of their release had spread around the country, triggering a brutal crackdown by the authorities. Some of the mass killings, such as the massacre in the Houla region in May 2012, were perpetrated by the *Shabiha* (Ghosts), violent criminal gangs that worked for the regime. While unhappy about the brutal tactics and the negative international optics, the Iranians were convinced that the Mukhabarat (*Idarat Mukhabarat al-Amma*), the notorious intelligence service, would be able to put down the popular rebellion. By mid-2012, however, the IRGC-QF had become alarmed because the Free Syrian Army (FSA) formed by anti-Assad officers, the long-suppressed Muslim Brotherhood, and other anti-regime elements had increased their profile. The Revolutionary Guards was particularly bothered by the fact that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey were betting on their favorite groups in order to topple Assad.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>David Wallsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Summer 2013: Syrian Defense Minister's talks in Tehran, Hamshahri Online, [images.hamshahrionline.ir/hamnews/1385/850323/news/siasi.htm](http://images.hamshahrionline.ir/hamnews/1385/850323/news/siasi.htm).

<sup>5</sup>Syrian Conflagration: The Syrian Civil War, 2011–2013, Helion and Company, 2016, p. 72.

After decades of fruitful cooperation, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei considered losing the Assad dynasty, a strategic disaster for Iran. The Supreme Leader was said to be shaken when Hassan Nasrallah told him in December 2011 that the regime could be toppled. Khamenei took to emphasizing in public that Syria was “the golden link” (*Halgheye Talae*) in the chain of the Axis of Resistance while declaring that the public protest was an “an American and Zionist plot.” Mehdi Taeb, the head of the Ammar Garrison who chaired a think tank linked to Khamenei went as far as to declare that Syria was Iran’s 35th province. Qassem Suleimani summarized such concerns succinctly; he told Ahmed Chalabi that “if we lose Syria we lose Tehran.” The Guards’ chief, Ali Jafari, who occasionally traveled to Syria was likewise profoundly preoccupied with the conduct of the war. With so many senior officers either visiting or serving in Syria, the IRGC dispatched troops from the Ansar al Mahdi, a protection and security unit tasked with protecting senior officials of the regime.<sup>6</sup>

Rhetoric aside, Suleimani devised a two-step plan to save the regime. Step one was the release of 1500 hardened Islamists from the notorious Sednaya Prison in December 2011. Most of the parolees were from Jabhat al Nusra, the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda. Suleimani also pressured Nouri Maliki to release another 1000 Salafists from Iraqi jails. Codenamed Project Infiltration and Project Knapsack, the mass pardons aimed to create divisions in the ranks of the opposition and incite violence between the various groups. One observer called the maneuver “sawing dragon teeth” among the opposition. Suleimani hoped that the Salafi violence would create a “binary option,” meaning that Assad’s brutal oppression would become more palatable when compared to the Salafi savage code of *fiql al-dima* (jurisprudence of blood).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ali Akbar Velayati, Syria Is the Golden Ring of Resistance line, in Mohammad Khalilpour, *A Different Story of Logic of Being in Syria* (Tehran: Masir-e Aftab, 2017), pp. 103–109; Qassem Suleimani, Victor of Faith and Virtue over Terrorism, in Mohammad Khalilpour, *A Different Story of Logic of Being in Syria* (Tehran: Masir-e Aftab, 2017), pp. 31–42; Asriran, Chief of Amar Base, Syria is the 35th province of Iran, Asre Iran, February 14, 2013, <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/257730/>; رنيس خراگاه-عمار سوریه استان سی-و پنجم است-اگر دشمن بخواد سوریه را بخوزستان-<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/257730/>; راجگیر داولوبت-حفظ سوریه است تحریم-ها مثل قبل نیست; Adam Rawnsley, “Inside Iran’s Secret War in Syria,” *Daily Beast*, November 13, 2015; Martin Chulov, “Amid Syrian Chaos Iran’s Game Plan Emerges. A Path to the Mediterranean,” *Guardian*, October 8, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from Al-Qaeda to ISIS*, Princeton University Press, 2015, 154; NCRI, *How Iran Fuels Syria War*, loc. 97; Interview with John Kerry, Fox News, November 17, 2015, State Department Website, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249588.htm>; National

Step two entailed helping Assad to suppress the popular uprising. Within days after the first disturbances, a small cadre of Quds Force arrived in Damascus to assess the situation. On May 18, 2012, US intelligence reported that Mohsen Chizari, once detained in Iraq, was among them. He was joined by Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani, the head of the Rassoulollah Corps overseeing Greater Tehran. In 2009, Rassoulollah Corps and the Basij put down the Green Movement protest against the fraudulent election which gave Ahmadinejad a second term. Basij operatives traveled to Damascus with equipment for crowd control. The Iranians also trained Syrian operatives in methods of disrupting social networks and the Internet. In August 2012, opposition forces captured a group of 48 Iranians pretending to be pilgrims. Assad agreed to release 2000 rebel prisoners in exchange for the group, signifying their importance to the regime.<sup>8</sup>

While the amnesty worked as anticipated, the mass violence overwhelmed the regime. In addition to the radical Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood stepped up their engagement. By one account, the Islamists dominated the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), a large coalition that represented some 70 percent of local revolutionary councils. With the Syrian army crumbling, Suleimani sought an alternative in a mixed regular-guerrilla force. The Quds Force chief brought up the issue on his visit to Damascus on February 9, 2012, his second trip since the beginning of the unrest. The massive explosion in July 2012 which killed the Syrian Defense Minister and other senior officials expedited the project. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was said to support the decision of the Supreme Leader to dispatch Quds Force officers and hundreds of tons of military equipment including, guns, rockets, and shells that were transferred through Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

Put on an accelerated schedule, the project to augment the Syrian army known as the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) took shape in 2012. The

Council of Iran Resistance *How Iran Fuels Syria War*, loc. 98. Michael Griffith, *Islamic State. Rewriting History*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, p. 77; Mark Townsend, "The Core Isis Manuel That Twisted Islam to Legitimize Barbarity," *Guardian*, May 12, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad"; Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, loc. 1826; Rawnsley, "Inside Iran's Secret War in Syria."

<sup>9</sup> William van Wagenen, "Did Assad Deliberately Release Islamic Prisoners to Militarize and Radicalize the Syrian Uprising," *The Libertarian Institute*, February 22, 2018; Con Coughlin, "Iran Send Elite Troops to Aid Bashar al Assad Regime," *Telegraph*, September 6, 2012.

National Defense Force (NDF) was made up of the former Popular Committees and the *Shabiha* elements. By the summer, the Iranian and Hezbollah personnel trained the NDF volunteers who also received a salary. The command structure was semi-hierarchical: units operated mostly in local areas supervised by a provisional commander. Brigadier General Ghassan Nasour based in Damascus was appointed as the coordinator of the force. By opting for this rather non-orthodox structure, Suleimani hoped to mobilize local fighters with excellent local knowledge of the terrain as well as tap into local grievances. Indeed, many of the NDF members stated that they were ready to die in defense of their towns or that joined up to avenge the death of loved ones killed by the anti-regime militias.<sup>10</sup>

An auxiliary Local Defense Force (LDF), *Quwat al Difa al Mahali*, provided a second layer of defense. Unlike the NDF, which lost favor with the IRGC-QF over issues of control, the militias which formed the LDF sprung up from local groups with no national affiliation. *Katibat al Nayrab al Mahsam al Kasa* (the Nayrab Battalion-Special Operations), *Liwa al Baqir* (the Baqir Brigade), *Fawj al Safira* (the Safira Regiment), and the *Nable and Zahara Fawj* (the Nable and Zahara Regiment, *Saraya al Waad* (Brigades of the Promise), *Liwa al Saayda Ruqayya* were among them.<sup>11</sup>

Given the time framework, Suleimani's accomplishment was quite impressive. The NDF and the LDF reached some 150,000 fighters, in addition to the SAA which shrank by half from its prewar number of 220,000. The regime could also count on several unaffiliated militias which declared themselves for Assad. However, the quality of militias varied widely. For instance, the Baqir Brigade evolved into a premier fighting force, posting to its Facebook names of numerous "martyrs," killed in action. Brigades of the Promise deployed to the Aleppo front was also

<sup>10</sup>William van Wagenen, "Did Assad Deliberately Release Islamic Prisoners to Militarize and Radicalize the Syrian Uprising," *The Libertarian Institute*, February 22, 2018.

Alex Spillius, "Syria: Iran's Elite Quds Force Advising Assad's Regime," *Telegraph*, February 9, 2012; Aron Lund, "Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?, Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2, 2015; Syria has Trained Guerrilla Forces with the Help of Iran, <https://ir.voanews.com/a/syria-army-paramilitary/1588396.html>.

<sup>11</sup>Aymenn Jawad al Tamimi, "The Local Defense Forces," May 23, 2016; <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/10/saraya-al-waad-damascus-local-defence-forces>; Aymenn Jawad al Tamimi "The Think Tanks Bark and the IRGC Moves On," July 13, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21387/the-think-tanks-bark-and-the-irgc-moves-on>.

known for its resolve. Most of the groups, however, were small family or clan affairs that could not match the array of opposition forces.

Indeed, by 2013, the initially fluid military picture crystalized enough to indicate that the Assad regime faced considerable odds from three directions. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) formed by defecting officers of the SAA under the command of Colonel Riad al Asaad in July 2011 formed the first group. In September 2011, the FSA merged with the Free Officers Movement, and in January 2012, it attracted the highest-ranking defector, General Mustafa al-Sheikh. By mid-2012, the FSA mounted challenges to the Assad loyalists across the entire county—Idlib and Aleppo in the North West, Homs and Hama governorates in the center, the coastal area around Latakia, and the Daraa governorate in the south. The FSA which was represented in the umbrella opposition Syrian National Council boasted of some 25,000 fighters.

The second camp consisted of assorted Islamist militias. Some like Ahrar al Sham (*Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiyya*) were initially loosely allied with the FSA. But in November 2013, Ahrar al Sham joined six other Islamist groups—Jaysh al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Sham, and the Kurdish Islamic Front—to form the largest Islamist alliance with some 45,000 fighters. It was also around the same time that Al-Qaeda (Central) spanned *Jabhat al Nusra* (Nusrat Front), renamed later *Jabhat Fatah al Sham*. The Syrian Al-Qaeda swore allegiance to Ayman al Zawahiri and quickly became the most aggressive and successful of the Islamist groups, according to observers. *Al Nusra*'s bitter competitor, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), was also growing in strength, bolstered by foreign volunteers, notably the Iraqi contingent which began crossing into Syria in early 2013, and some local Salafists such as the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade which pledged allegiance to al Baghdadi.<sup>12</sup>

Syrian Kurds presented a third front that challenged Assad. Unlike the other anti-regime fighters, the Kurds were localized and focused on creating an autonomous region named Rojava. People Protection Units (*Yekineien Parastiana Gel*—YPG) was formed in 2004 as the military arm of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (KDUP). The YPG had proliferated after the civil war started and was bolstered by the YPG International Battalion. Branching out, the YPG joined Arab and

<sup>12</sup>David Ignatius, "Al-Qaeda Affiliate Playing Larger Role in Syria Rebellion," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2012.

Assyrian/Syriac militias to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The YPG was by far the most effective military force, proving itself in crucial battles against ISIS.

Even a perfunctory review of the positions of the various militias indicates the complexity of the situation. Only the YPG was relatively self-contained in a stretch of territory in the north. The ISIS which infiltrated from a sector of the border with Iraq made significant but narrow incursions along two axes; north-south and northwest. From the perspective of the regime, the most problematic was the FSA and the Islamist militias which dominated swaths of the countryside in virtually all regions of the country—the northern Idlib and Aleppo governorate, the central Homs and Hama governorates, coastal region around Latakia, and the Daraa governorate in the south. The anti-Assad forces gained a toehold in many cities, including Damascus and Aleppo.

The wide geographical dispersion of the opposition forces required a large number of fighters which could not be recruited in Syria. Mobilizing extant Shiite militias and creating new ones was the next logical step.

### THE SHIITE LIBERATION ARMY: QUDS FORCE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

Chapter 1 indicated that the IRGC-QF conceived of the proxy project as a pan-Shiite irregular, but fully coordinated force based in different countries. Hezbollah, the proxy prototype, provided services in the Gaza Strip, Iraq, and Yemen, as explained in the preceding chapters. However, the dire situation in Syria called for a more robust and coordinated approach, initiating a drive to create *Artesh-e Azadibakhsh*, the Shiite Liberation Army (SLA). A brainchild of Qassem Suleimani, the plan called for a large force from several Middle Eastern countries and beyond. In mid-April 2013, Nasrallah arrived in Tehran for a secret meeting with the Quds Force chief and the Supreme Leader to discuss ways to implement the project. Brigadier General Mohammed Ali Falaki explained that “we are working on sending men who can train, supervise, and organize the non-Iranian forces in Syria so that Iranian forces would be leading there.” An expert on the Shiite groups in Syria noted that the IRGC-QF created “for

the first time an international Shiite jihad modeled on Sunni jihadist in Afghanistan.”<sup>13</sup>

At the center of the marketing strategy was the call to defend the shrine of Sayyidah Zeinab in a mosque located in a southern suburb of Damascus. Zeinab, the daughter of Ali and Fatima and granddaughter of Mohammed, has been revered by the Twelver Shiites and given particular prominence by Ayatollah Khomeini who turned the shrine into a major pilgrimage and study center in the 1980s. Attacks by Sunni militants on Shiite shrines in Iraq served as an excellent mobilization tool for what became the “Syrian Shiite jihad.” Signaling the desire to provide a religious cover for helping the Assad regime the Iranians named the project “The Defenders of the Shrine.” Using slogan on social media to attract recruits was easy but legitimizing the Shiite jihadists proved more difficult.<sup>14</sup>

Because Ayatollah Khamenei had limited influence on Arab Shiites, he could not issue the appropriate fatwa. Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, whose relations with the Iranian regime were uneasy at best, as outlined in the Chap. 5, resisted all effort to bless the would-be Shrine defenders. Indeed, al Sistani’s circles in Najaf contended that traveling to fight in Syria was considered “disobedient.” Reaching out to activist clerics, however, paid off. One of them was Sheikh Jalal al-Din al Saghir, a politician representing Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the imam of the Buratha Mosque in Baghdad. On April 7, 2006, Musab al Zarqawi’s AQI targeted al Sahghir in a triple suicide attack that killed 85 worshippers but missed the Imam. Recalling the violence, in May 2013, al Saghir delivered several sermons lauding the defenders of Sayyidah Zaynab and later visited Shiites wounded in Syria. Ayatollah Kadhimi al Hussein Haeri, the one-time spiritual adviser of Muqtada al Sadr, issued an official fatwa on November 5, 2013.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> ONA, “Iranian General: Suleimani is Forming Shia Liberation Army,” *Orient Net*, August 8, 2016, [https://www.orient-news.net/en/news\\_show/120751/0/Iranian-general-Suleimani-is-forming-Shia-Liberation-Army](https://www.orient-news.net/en/news_show/120751/0/Iranian-general-Suleimani-is-forming-Shia-Liberation-Army); Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects*, Washington Institute, February 25, 2015; Shimon Shapira, “Iran’s Plans to Take Over Syria,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, May 2, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> MNA, Signing up for Dispatching Volunteers to Syria, Mashregh News Agency, May 5, 2013, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/212358/نام-نویسی-اعزام-نیروی-داوطلب-به-سوریه>; Namnak, Conditions and Methods of Registration of Shrine Defenders, January 26, 2016, [namnak.com/ثبت-نام-مدافعان-حرم-p26059](http://namnak.com/ثبت-نام-مدافعان-حرم-p26059).

<sup>15</sup> Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effect*, Washington Institute, 2015, pp. 13–15.



With the religious legitimacy in hand, in December 2013 the IRGC-QF created the *Lajna al-Tabia al-Shabiyah an al-Sayyeda Zainab*, the Popular Committee for the Mobilization to Defend Sayyidah Zaynab (PCMDSZ), an umbrella recruitment organization. The PCMDSZ operated an intricate web of militias, some with links to extant Iranian-backed groups in Iraq or the Lebanese Hezbollah. Best known in this respect was the free-standing *Fateymiyoun* Division made up of the Shiite Hazara Afghans was estimated to have some 10,000 fighters. The *Liwa Khadum Al Aqila*, a separate group, included Afghans who obtained Syrian citizenship before the conflict erupted. The much smaller *Zenebiyoun Brigade* featured about 2000 Pakistani Shiites. According to Falaki, the fighters received a minimum of US\$100 a month, but there were additional inducements. For instance, the families of the Hazara refugees in Iran qualified for a residence permit and were compensated for relatives killed in action. Some SLA members killed in action were buried in the holy city of Qom in a specially designated cemetery for “martyrs.”<sup>16</sup>

By and large, militants were recruited from members of Asaib Al al Haq (AAH)—(the League of the Righteous)—under Qais al Khazali, the Badr Organization, the Kataib Hezbollah (KH) or other less known pro-Iranian groups in Iraq. Even though Moqtada al Sadr did not approve the Syrian jihad, some militias used him or his martyred father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al Sader, as their symbol. *Liwa Abu Al Fadl al-Abbas* (LAFA), was created in 2012 and widely celebrated in the Iranian media as a pioneering Shrine Defender. In due time, LAFA established a network of satellite group which, in turn, split or changed their identities. Phillip Smyth, a researcher on the Syrian jihad, explained that the IRGC-QF encouraged this so-called cell replication practice to give the Syrian jihad

<sup>16</sup>TNA, Funeral of the Afghan martyrs’ protector of Hazrat Zainab’s Shrine in Qom, Tasnim News Agency, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1392/09/05/203730/تشییع-پیگر-شهدای-افغان-مدافع-حرم-حضرت-زینب-س-در-قم-عکس>; MNA, Narrated by a Witness: The Burial of the Martyrs Defender of the Shrine, Tasnim News Agency, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/398211/روایت-یک-شاهد-از-دفن-غریبان-شهید-مدافع-حرم-عکس>; Bultan News, Afghan Shrine Defenders Receive 100 Dollars Gift Monthly, Bultan News, <https://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/385539/هم-مثال-۸۰٪-قراول-نبرد-سوری-بودند-حماسه-افغان-۸۰٪-۸۰٪-فاطمیون-پیش-۸۰٪-۸۰٪-دنی-است-ار-تش-چندین-لشکر-داوطلب-شهداد-دو-الله-بیم-مدافعان-حرم-مهاجران-مداکثر-۱۰۰-دلار-هیدمی-۸۰٪-۸۰٪-دهند>.

project a massive public appearance and manage the internal tensions in the groups by letting them reconfigure.<sup>17</sup>

LAFa's outposts included *Liwa Assad Allah al Ghalib* (LAAG), *Liwa Dhulfiqar*, and *Saraya Talia Abu-Khurasani* among others. The nominal leader of LAFa, Abu Ajeeb, was also involved with the other groups. For instance, the head of *Liwa Dhulfiqar*, Ammar al Tamimi, was occasionally mentioned among the LAFa fighters. Officials previously associated with the Sadrist movement launched private initiatives to bolster the Iraqi Shrine Defenders movement. Sheikh Aws al Khafaji, a former ally of Muqtada al Sadr, founded the Qaeda Quwet Abu Fadl al-Abbas (QQAFA) in July 2014. Ahram al Kaabi, the co-founder of AAH, established the Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba (HHN)—Movement of the Party of God's Nobles, the largest Shiite militia in Syria. HHN mustered four brigades in Syria: the Liwa Ammar Ibn Yasser (Ibn Yasser Brigade), Liwa al Hamad (Praise Brigade), Liwa al Imam al Hassan al Mujtaba (Brigade of Imam Hassan the Chosen), and the Golan Liberation Brigade. Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada (KSS) —Battalion of Sayyid Martyrs and Kataib al-Imam Ali (The Imam Ali Battalions) were spawned by Harakat al Iraq al Islamiyah (Movement of the Iraq Party of Islam) led by Secretary-General Shibil al Zayidi and Abu Mahdi al Muhandis. Al Saghir established his militia, Saraya Ansar al Aqeedah, led by Mohammad Jaafar Shaker al Mousawi, a security official in the Buratha compound. Wathiq al Battat, a former member of the Badr Organization and KH, launched the Jaish al-Mukhtar.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the officials SLA militias, an unknown number of Shiite volunteers from as far as Canada, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Gulf arrived in Syria. Individual Houthis joined the fight as well as Shiites from the Far East. More intriguing, elements of the Iraqi security apparatus made their way to Syria. Iraq Special Operation Forces Team were spotted in Damascus and Aleppo, the site of some of the most ferrous battles against the insurgency. It was not entirely clear whether al Maliki personally authorized what amounted to semi-official state intervention or officials in the Ministry of Defense. Suleimani also pushed for an elite force, ordering the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) drawn from top fighters from the best performing SLA militias such as HHN and

<sup>17</sup> Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Implications*, Washington Institute, 2015, 37; N. Moses, "Iran Tightens Grip on Syria Using Syrian and Foreign Forces," MEMRI, May 4, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria*.

Lafa. The RDF was to be equipped with an aviation unit, the Combat Helicopter Directorate featuring assault and freight choppers.<sup>19</sup>

The Quds Force chief devised a sophisticated system blending all pro-Assad forces—Iranian, Syrian, and SLA. At the top where Iranian forces made up IRGC, Quds Force, and Artesh (Iran's regular army) personnel in specialized units such as artillery and logistics. For instance, Brigadier General Ali Arasteh, deputy chief liaison of Artesh ground forces revealed that up to 200 commandos from Brigade 65 (the Nohed Brigade) were dispatched to Syria. The local Shiite militias and the SLA fighters were attached to regular Syrians army units or fought with the large Hezbollah contingent, estimated at 8000 fighters, and an auxiliary, *Saraya al Muqawama al Lubnaniya* (Lebanese Resistance Brigade). Danny Danon, the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations (UN), asserted that SLA boasted some 8000 fighters, but others estimated the forces to be closer to 70,000. Whatever the real number, the Iranian success was undeniable. In the words of one expert, the anti-ISIS campaign [and the war in Syria] “have given Iran the opportunity to formalize and expand networks of Shiite foreign fighters.”<sup>20</sup>

An analysis of the military geography of the battlefield indicated that Suleimani deployed the militias in virtually all of the five fronts that he had created—Central Command, the Southern Command, the Middle Command, the Northern Command, and the Eastern Command.

The Lebanese Hezbollah surged toward al Qusayr and helped in Homs whereas the Lafa network featured prominently around Aleppo. Ansar al-Haq (aka Quwet al-Haydariyya) deployed in Idlib, Liwa Kafeel Zaynab deployed near Damascus Airport, KH based in Iraq had an ancillary operation in Aleppo, Deir al-Zor and Albukamal. Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada fought in several areas, particularly in Aleppo and near Damascus.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Debka File, “The Next Iranian-Israeli Engagement in Syria Is Due in Late April, Early May,” *Debka File*, February 12, 2018.

<sup>20</sup>Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, loc. 1544–1553; Seth Franzman, “Who Are the 80,000 Shiite Fighters in Syria? *Jerusalem Post*, April 28, 2018; NCRI, How Iran Fuels Syria War, loc. 157; Abbas Qaidaari, “Who Sent Iranian Green Berets to Syria?” *Al Monitor*, April 28, 2016; Colin Clarke, Phillip Smyth, “The Implications of Iran’s Expanding Shia Foreign Fighters Network.” *CTC Sentential*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2017.

<sup>21</sup>NCRI, *How Iran Fuels the Syria War*, loc. 183; Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria And Its Regional Effects*, Policy Focus 138, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015.

In what was the first victory for the pro-government forces, al Qusayr and the villages of Burhaniya, Saqrāja, and al Radwaniyha near the Lebanese borders were captured in April 2013. However, in other locations a standstill developed between the regime and the opposition and, in some cases, such as the Menagh Military Base, ISIS won the battle after a ten-month siege. The much-heralded government winter offensive of 2015 aimed at retaking the Daraa governorate failed despite a surge of Hezbollah, and SLA militias. It did not help that most of the Iraqi SLA units were called back home to fight ISIS which opened a major offensive there in 2014. The “back and forth deployment shuffle,” as one analyst put it, made planning for the Syrian theater difficult. Suleimani and the Iranian commanders were also taken aback by the ferocity of the ISIS fighters, for which even the seasoned Hezbollah was no match. Especially alarming was the fact that the pro-regime forces were losing their grip on the regime power bastions—Damascus and the Alawite Strip region along the Mediterranean.<sup>22</sup>

Critics in Tehran, however, blamed Suleimani for “poor planning and amateurish leadership” and the failure to establish a clear chain of command. The reliance on “volunteers for martyrdom,” many of them young and inexperienced, and aging veteran of the Iran-Iraq War created a poor match for skills needed. At one point, there was pressure to replace Suleimani with a more seasoned military leader, the former IRGC chief, Major General Mohsen Rezaei. The Supreme Leader vetoed the suggestion but, in a compromise gesture, named Rezaei as his “personal emissary” to Syria. It was also understood that Brigadier General Mohammad Jafar Assadi, a highly respected IRGC commander and a close ally of Ali Jafari who took over after the death of Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani in 2015, was expected to back up Suleimani.<sup>23</sup>

By the spring of 2015, the Assad regime whose control extended to about one-fifth of its original territory was in real danger of collapsing. Facing a grim situation, the IRGC-QF prepared “Plan B,” a grinding resistance by the Syrian militia and the SLA against a new government

<sup>22</sup> Phillip Smyth, “How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah,” Policy Watch, 2580, The Washington Institute, March 8, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Amir Taheri, “Why Iran’s Intervention in Syria Proved So Costly,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 14, 2018; “Iran Appoints New Commander in Syria,” NCRI, <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncri-statements/terrorism-fundamentalism/19701-iran-irgc-appoints-new-commander-in-syria>.

even if democratically elected. However, before this worst-case scenario could play out, the Iranians decided to seek help from Russia.<sup>24</sup>

### TURNING THE TIDE: RUSSIAN INTERVENTION AND THE RUSSIAN-IRANIAN ALLIANCE

While not directly involved, the Russians were keeping a close eye on the military developments. Syria, a staunch Soviet ally during the Cold War, was home to a naval facility in Tartus, leased by Moscow since 1971. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had continued to retain the Tartus installation which served as a repair and resupply base for Russian ships in the Mediterranean. Losing the Tartus base would have been a considerable setback for Vladimir Putin whose relations with the United States and the EU became strained because of the seizure of the Crimea Peninsula in March 2014. Supporting Assad in the Syrian civil war was a low-cost pay-back for Western sanctions imposed on Moscow and a demonstration of the new assertiveness of the Russian foreign policy.

As part of the new approach, Putin ordered a review of the traditionally chilly Russian relations with Iran. For their parts, the Iranians were highly interested in deepening relations with Moscow, part of the so-called Pivot to the East which President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad first envisaged in order to fight the nuclear-related sanctions. The first step in the budding relationship pertained to intelligence cooperation. In October 2014, the *Fars News Agency* reported that the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on fighting terrorism. Nikolai Patrushev, the head of National Security Council and a close aide of Putin, stated that “Iran has been one of Russia’s key partners in the region, and it will remain so in future” after meeting with his counterpart Ali Shamkhani.<sup>25</sup>

More diplomatic traffic followed the MoU. In January 2015, Ali Akbar Velyati, Ayatollah Khamenei’s senior adviser met Putin. Velyati, accompanied by the Iranian ambassador to Moscow, Mahdi Sanai, and the Deputy Foreign Minister Ebrahim Rahimpour, appraised the Soviet leader of

<sup>24</sup> Karen DeYoung and Joby Warrick, “Iran and Hezbollah Build a Militia Network in Syria in the Event that Assad Falls, Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> FNA, Iran, Russia Discuss Bilateral Ties, Regional Developments, Fars News Agency, [en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930801000523](http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930801000523); TIC, “New Intelligence Cooperation Between Moscow and Tehran,” XX Committee, October 24, 2014, <https://20committee.com/2014/10/24/new-intelligence-cooperation-between-moscow-and-tehran/>.

Assad's poor prospects. However, it was only during a visit by Qassem Suleimani in July 2015 that a more detailed plan for Russian involvement emerged. According to sources, the Quds Force chief brought maps to show the position of insurgent forces and urged Putin to order a bombing campaign. Suleimani followed up with several more visits to Moscow. On his visit to Tehran on November 23, 2015, Putin met with Khamenei sealing the intervention deal.<sup>26</sup>

The Obama administration which finalized the nuclear agreement with Iran just days before Suleimani's trip was taken by surprise but kept a low profile so as not to cast doubts on a regime it had vouched. Some analysts, however, argued that having taken a minimalist approach to the civil war, President Obama approved the Moscow intervention on condition that it would be limited to fight ISIS. The Russian leader seemed to have played the part which Washington wanted him to project. In a TV interview on October 11, 2015, Putin declared that Russian presence aimed at "stabilizing the legitimate power of Syria and creating the condition for political compromise." Beginning in August, Russian airplanes, T-90 tanks, and artillery combat troops began arriving in Khmeimim airbase to commence operations. Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces noted that his "aviators flew 19,160 combat missions and delivered 71,000 strikes on the infrastructure of terrorists." The Russian defense minister subsequently revealed that some 48,000 servicemen "gained experience" during the action. There were also some 2000 civilian contractors on the ground, some of whom had trained at the Molmino base of the Russian 10th Brigade Special Forces.<sup>27</sup>

Russian deployment was a game changer in Syria, something that Vincent R. Stewart, the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, acknowledged as early as February 2016. The Iranians who were de facto in charge

<sup>26</sup> Leila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow," *Reuter*, October 6, 2015; Ali Akbar Velayati, Why Velayati Met Putin? [velayati.ir/fa/news/1356/چرا-اولایتی-با-پوتین-دیدار-کرد](http://velayati.ir/fa/news/1356/چرا-اولایتی-با-پوتین-دیدار-کرد); TNA, Velayati Meeting with Putin, Tasnim News Agency, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1393/11/08/636498/ملاقات-1-5-ساعته-اولایتی-با-پوتین-ابلاغ-پیام-روحانی-به-رئیس-جمهور-روس-به-عکس>.

<sup>27</sup> Enlarged meeting of the board of the Ministry of Defense, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56472>; RG, More than 48,000 Russian military have experience in Syria, RGRU, <https://rg.ru/2017/12/23/bolec-48-tysiach-rossijskikh-voennyh-poluchili-opyt-v-sirii.html>; Leith Aboufadel, Russian Air Force paralyzes ISIS in southeast Homs, AMN, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-air-force-paralyzes/>; Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverov, "Russian Civilians Helping Assad Use Military Back Home," *Reuter*, April 25, 2018.

coordinated their land operations with Russian air strikes. The new tactic broke the stalemate in several cities seized by rebels including Aleppo, Homs and, East Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. To demoralize the opposition, the Russians bombed civilian facilities, namely, mosques, hospitals, and schools, in areas occupied by Assad rivals. Ruthlessly efficient, the policy caused thousands of casualties and triggered a massive exodus of civilians. Human Rights Watch and other organizations reported that Russian strikes killed some 6000 civilians adding to the thousands more killed by the Syrian army. The Russians were reported to use cluster bombs, incendiary bombs similar to the white phosphor, and thermo-baric bombs.<sup>28</sup>

In yet another tactic designed to help the regime, the Russians bombed mostly the moderate opposition which was supported by the United States. A report by the US State Department which used open sources and social media intelligence (OSSMINT) indicated that the vast majority of Russian aerial and ground attacks in Syria targeted anti-Assad forces, such as the US-backed Free Syria Army (FSA) and only 10 percent of the strikes were directed against ISIS. Indeed, the initial raids on Rastan, Talbiseh, Tatoul, Hamr, and Aideoun designed to clear out legitimate opposition groups to preserve Suleimani's "binary option" strategy. The Russian maneuver was transparent enough to trigger condemnation from several countries. A Saudi official in the UN demanded that Russia cease intervention because it targeted the moderate militias while ignoring ISIS. The British Prime Minister David Cameron stated that "its absolutely clear that Russia does not discriminate between ISIS and the legitimate Syrian opposition." US Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, noted that the Russians were propping up Assad whom Obama repeatedly called to resign.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *The Guardian*, 'More than 90%' of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, U.S. says, *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targeting-isis>.

<sup>29</sup> Ryan Browne and Jamie Crawford, Russia's most advanced fighter arrives in Syria, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/23/politics/russia-su-57-advanced-fighter-jet-syria/index.html>; *Reuters*, Russia, Jordan agree on military coordination on Syria, October 23, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-jordan/russia-jordan-agree-on-military-coordination-on-syria-idUSKCN0SH1ER20151023>; Down but not yet out: What Russian intervention means for the opposition, *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/10/10/down-but-not-yet-out>; Tatev M. Antonyan, "Russia and Iran in the Syrian Conflict. Similar Aspirations, Different Approaches," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* Vol. 11, No. 3, 2017.

Those who decried the Russian policy and its Iranian masterminds could do little to change the situation because the Obama administration took only the most tepid steps to help the moderate anti-Assad forces. The administration's \$500 million plan to train a rebel force to fight ISIS was proclaimed to be a failure and discontinued on October 9, 2015. The American-led coalition averaged 7 strikes a day compared to some 60 Russian sorties daily. Most indicative of the reluctance of the White House to get involved, however, was the response to Assad's chemical weapon attacks. After declaring the use of such weapons to constitute a "red line," on October 29, Obama accepted Putin's offer to remove the chemical stockpile from Syria. In the end, the president was reduced to warning Russia about the allegedly heavy price the Russians would pay for their Syrian adventure. Addressing a meeting of NATO defense ministers on October 8, 2015, Obama stated that "Russia would soon start paying the price for its military intervention in Syria in the form of reprisal attacks and casualties. He added that he expected "in the next few days the Russians will begin to lose in Syria."<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately for the United States, the president's prediction was wrong. With little restraint from the international community, Qassem Suleimani planned a ruthless offensive on Aleppo, a critical strategic goal of the regime since its fall in 2012. In addition to SAA's Tiger force, the theater featured a large number of Iranian elements from the IRGC—artillery, armor, field ballistic missiles, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) units. A unit of the Saber-in Takavar Battalion was also deployed. Reflecting the importance of the battle, Suleimani ordered a number of SLA militias—the Zenaybioun, the Fetamiyoun, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Harakat al Nujaba to join the fight. According to estimates, some 25,000 foreign fighters were posted to Aleppo.<sup>31</sup>

Under the cover of Russian airstrikes on the forward positions of the rebels, the combined ground forces launched an offensive in the fall of 2015. The ferocity of the assault turned Aleppo into the "Syrian

<sup>30</sup> Phil Stewart, As Russia escalates, U.S. rules out military cooperation in Syria, Reuters, October 7, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-cooperation-idUSKCN0S11EH20151007>; RT, Proof please? CNN claims Russian missiles crashed in Iran, Moscow refutes, US can't confirm, October 8, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/318059-russia-syria-cnn-iran-missiles/>; Barbara Starr, Obama authorizes resupply of Syrian opposition, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/05/politics/russia-ground-campaign-syria-isis/>.

<sup>31</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, loc. 559.



Stalingrad.” The regime used the “starve and surrender” tactics on top of heavy bombardment of civilian targets, prompting the International Red Cross to call the fighting as one of the most devastating conflicts in modern times. Both the Assad forces and the Russians were charged with severe humanitarian violations such as chemical attacks, use of barrel bombs, cluster bombs, and shelling of residential areas and hospitals. As one seasoned journalist put it, “the savagery became primordial.”<sup>32</sup>

The liberation of Aleppo in December 2017 was a turning point in the war, a development that elevated the stature of Suleimani. After several years of criticism by those who described the Syrian involvement as “reckless” and “costly,” the Supreme Leader, along with a long list of senior officials, praised the Iranian fighters. He compared Syria to Karbala and reiterated that “door to martyrdom which was closed by the end of the Iran-Iraq war is now open in Syria.” As befitting the new narrative, funerals of Iranians killed in action turned into public events, especially when high-ranking officers were involved. While initially shy about the losses, the new openness revealed that the numbers were staggering. By one count, more than 32 officers holding the rank of brigadier general and some 25 colonels died in Syria. A highly emotional Suleimani was seen participating in some of the funerals.<sup>33</sup>

Equally celebrated in Tehran was the view that the battle for Aleppo cemented the Russian-Iranian alliance and strengthened Iran’s position concerning the United States. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the former head of the IRGC and an adviser on Syria, declared that “Aleppo was liberated thanks to a coalition between Iran, Syria, Russia, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah ... Iran is on one side of this coalition which is approaching victory.” He

<sup>32</sup> ICRC, “Syria: Aleppo One of the most devastating urban conflicts in modern times,” The International Committee of the Red Cross, 15 August 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-news-cities-aleppo-one-most-devastating-urban-conflicts>; Robin Wright, “The Battle for Aleppo, Syria’s Stalingrad, Ends,” *New Yorker*, December 13, 2016; Martin Chulov, Saeed Kamali Deghan, and Patrick Wintour, “Iran Hails Victory in Aleppo as Shiite Militias Boost Syria’s Bashar al Assad,” *Guardian*, December 14, 2016; Zack Beauchamp, “The Fall of Aleppo,” *Vox*, December 16, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Funeral of the Defenders of the Shrine in Islamshahr, September 8, 2017, <https://tamasha.com/v/LLy4x/مراسم-تشییع-پیگر-شهیدای-مدافع-حرم-ذر-اسلامشهر>; Javan, Funeral of the Defenders of the Shrine in Mashhad, Javan Online, April 23, 2015, [www.javanonline.ir/fa/news/714936/مراسم-تشییع-پیگر-شهیدای-مدافع-حرم-مشهد](http://www.javanonline.ir/fa/news/714936/مراسم-تشییع-پیگر-شهیدای-مدافع-حرم-مشهد); Ghaidaa Hetou, *The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran, and the US in a Global Crisis*, Routledge, 2018, p. 89; *How Iran Fuels Syria War*. National Council of Resistance of Iran. US Representative Office, 2016, loc. 442–472.

advised the president of the United States “to take heed of the power of Iran.” Suleimani sent a message to the commander of American forces in Syria to pull his forces or “the doors of hell will open up.” When Mike Pompeo, then CIA chief, responded with a letter, Suleimani refused to read it.<sup>34</sup>

The Russian diplomatic “umbrella particularly emboldened the Iranians.” During the Aleppo crisis, John Kerry, Obama’s Secretary of State, tried to negotiate a settlement which would have involved the moderate opposition. However, Sergei Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, strongly rejected a compromise, siding with Tehran which vehemently rejected any dealing with the opposition. One analyst described these efforts as “wishful thinking in Washington D.C. that it could drive a wedge between Russia and Iran.” With Aleppo in Assad’s hands, the administration could do little more than chastise the Russians and the Iranians. Samantha Powers, Obama’s ambassador to the UN, accused Russia and Iran of “acts of barbarism” against the civilian population, prompting the Russian envoy to retort that the American “track record” did not allow Washington to speak from a position of “moral superiority.”<sup>35</sup>

### AFTER ALEPPO: SHAPING SYRIA INTO AN IRANIAN DEPENDENCY

Although the Assad regime had ways to go to restore full control, on November 21, 2017, Ayatollah Khamenei congratulated Suleimani and declared victory over “takfiri terrorism” and the “American-Zionists sponsored groups.” For his part, the Quds Force chief hailed the leadership of Khamenei for “defeating the black and dangerous plot” and thanked the thousands of Shiite fighters who formed the “ax of resistance.” These congratulatory exchanges followed a highly telling statement by the

<sup>34</sup> Martin Chulov, Saeed Kamali Deghan, and Patrick Wintour, “Iran Hails Victory in Aleppo as Shiite Militias Boost Syria’s Bashar al Assad,” *Guardian*, December 14, 2016; Elijah J. Magnier, “Qassem Suleimani’s Letter to the US,” <https://ejmagnier.com/2017/12/09/qassem-soleimanis-letter-to-the-us-leave-syria-or-else-could-al-hasaka-2018-become-beirut-1983/>.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Chulov, Saeed Kamali Deghan, and Patrick Wintour, “Iran Hails Victory in Aleppo as Shiite Militias Boost Syria’s Bashar al Assad,” *Guardian*, December 14, 2016; Ghaidaa Hetou, *The Syrian Conflict: The Role of Russia, Iran and the U.S. in a Global Crisis*, p. 89; Robin Wright, “The Battle for Aleppo, Syria’s Stalingrad, Ends,” *New Yorker*, December 13, 2016.

Supreme Leader made in March. Speaking about the prospects in Syria, Khamenei asserted that the “far-reaching depth of the Islamic Republic is the most significant progress in the last four decades.”<sup>36</sup>

In short order, the IRGC-QF launched a series of military infrastructure projects to bolster the newly acquired strategic depth in four of the battle zones. The Central Command featured the Glass Building (*Maghar Shishe’i*) located near the Damascus Airport which housed Brigadier General Razi Mousavi, commander of logistics in Syria and up to 1000 Revolutionary Guards. The Imam Hussein Garrison, the former Shibani Garrison, housed some 3000 Revolutionary Guards, as well as Fatemyoun and Hezbollah fighters. The Middle Command boasted three dedicated bases. Shairat Airbase housed three battalions of the Revolutionary Guards. The T-4 military base located 50 kilometers from Palmyra was used by the Syrian Army, the Russians, and the IRGC.<sup>37</sup>

Reflecting Iran’s geopolitical interest, the Northern Command had seven bases. Mojanzarat near Tibat Tarki village was a secure military installation for troops dispatched to the vicinity of southeast Aleppo. Abu Darda near Sehin village housed several Guards battalions. The IRGC had a dedicated base at the Aleppo Airport for the use of its airplanes and helicopters and another one at the Hama Airport which contained airlift facilities for weapon dispatches. The Guards took over the Assad Academy Garrison northeast of Aleppo, and the Bouhout Garrison base renamed Ruqiyah where an SLA unit was housed and where chemical weapons and fuel for missile were produced. After the Guards took the towns of Shiite towns of Nubel and Al Zahraa, they build the Mayer City base. They evicted the citizen from the town and located the command and control in the base along with a contingent of Fatemyioun fighters.

In the much smaller Coastal Command, the Iranians secured Camp Talaeh (Shabibeh) near Latakia. The base served 2000 IRGC personnel but a capacity to handle 6000. The Guards used the camp to dispatch forces to fight the Kurds in Jabal al Akrad. The IRGC shared the strategic Khmeimim Airport with the Syrian Army, turning it into a logistic point to move forces and materiel north.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Yossef Bodansky, “Is the Iranian Empire Finally Re-emerging?” *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, Vol. 45, 11/12, November 1, 2017; Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, loc. 590.

<sup>37</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, loc. 2033.

<sup>38</sup> NCRI, *How Iran Fuels the Syria War*.

In the Southern Command, the IRGC took over Base 1800, renamed the Zeinab Garrison, where some of Guards armor units and logistic units were stationed, in addition to Fatemyoun forces. A short distance from Base 1800, the Yarmouk Base housed some IRGC and Hezbollah units. Izra Base, near the city of Izra, air defense units equipped with SAM-1 air to air missiles were stationed. Another Southern Front base, Al Dumayer Military Base, served as a staging facility for units operating at the Middle Front, and Naba al Fawar Garrison in Qunetra, 15 kilometers from the Golan Height housed Hezbollah units.<sup>39</sup>

With the Americans and their allies shrinking the ISIS footprint, the IRGC seized additional bases. Iranian forces and Hezbollah occupied the airport at Deir ez-Zur where some SLA units were also stationed. The Air Academy L-9 housed Iranian helicopters, and there was a helicopter landing pad in Al Safra south of Aleppo which served to transport equipment, explosives, and ammunition. Another landing pad near Raqqa was turned into an intelligence center and a drone command and control center.<sup>40</sup>

While initially all the bases were considered to be temporary, by 2018 there were strong indications that some would be converted into permanent Iranian facilities. In a June 2018 interview, Assad asserted that he was “open” to establishing Iranian compounds in Syria. For instance, the IRGC had renovated a former Syrian base in al Kiswa, some 15 kilometers south of Damascus. Analysts have struggled to identify which of the facilities were slated for evacuation or closing, but, according to some estimates, the IRGC-QF was committed to holding at least ten bases as well as land strips for intelligence, command and control, and drone facilities.<sup>41</sup>

Discourse in the IRGC-related media hinted that the network of territorial holdings was part of an evolving policy of embedding which had both military and political goals.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> MEMRI, “Studies of Arab Researchers of Distribution of Foreign Bases Across Syria,” MEMRI, December 2, 2018, <https://www.memri.org/reports/studies-arab-researchers-distribution-foreign-bases-across-syria>.

<sup>41</sup> Al Monitor Staff, “Assad Say He Is Open to Establishing Iranian Bases in Syria,” *Al Monitor*, June 14, 2018; Michael Bachner, “Iran Has 10 Military Bases in Syria, Two Near Israel Border,” *Times of Israel*, February 19, 2018; Sue Surkes, “Alleged Iranian Base Near Syria Border Caught on Camera,” *Times of Israel*, November 16, 2017.

## LAND BRIDGE AND BEYOND: TURNING SYRIA INTO A STRATEGIC PLATFORM AGAINST ISRAEL

The use of far-flung proxies in several countries was the core of IRGC's strategy, according to Chapter 1. However, Ayatollah Khomeini did not abandon the more traditional notion of geopolitical continuity, as noted above. After creating Hezbollah, the Guards used the airport in Damascus and boats off the coast of Latakia and Tartus to transfer materials and troops to Lebanon. However, IRGC's enemies could have relatively easily monitored air or maritime routes, and in a case of a regional war, an air and sea blockade could not be ruled out. A land bridge between Iran to the Mediterranean was a preferable option on several levels. The more than a thousand-kilometer-long land corridor winding from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon would have been more difficult to monitor, giving the IRGC's extra security. In the worst-case scenario of a war with the United States, the corridor could turn into a supply route away from the Gulf waters heavily patrolled by American and allied warships. As one European official put it, "they will be able to move people and supplies between the Mediterranean and Tehran whenever they want, and they will do so along safe routes that are secured by their people, or their proxies."<sup>42</sup>

The American invasion of Iraq and the subsequent proliferation of the Shiite militias pushed the project into high gear. Starting in 2014, a team of officials in Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus accountable to Suleimani coordinated the plan. The original path envisaged a shorter northern route passing through the city of Somar and Naftshahr, on Iran's border with Iraq, traversing through Baquba, the capital of Diyala Province, a mixed Sunni/Shiite area north of Baghdad. In the next leg, the corridor was planned to progress toward the town of Shirqat in Salaheddin province, followed by a line embracing the western edge of Mosul. The last leg in Iraq pivoted around 50 miles southeast of Sinjar, and then on to Rabia, a border crossing with Syria. In the Syrian leg, the proposed route aimed at the towns of Qamishli and Kobani, going on to Irfin, and Aleppo. From

<sup>42</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, loc. 216; Fabrice Balanche "The Iranian Land Bridge in the Levant: The Return of Territory in Geopolitics," *Telos, Scope*, September 14, 2018; Martin Chulov, "Amid Syrian Chaos Iran's Game Plan Emerges a Path to the Mediterranean," *Guardian*, October 8, 2016; Martin Chulov, "Iran Changes Course of Road to Mediterranean Coast to Avoid US Forces," *Guardian*, May 16, 2017.

Aleppo, the route was expected to traverse to Homs, then move north through the Alawite heartland of Syria, and ends at the port of Latakia.<sup>43</sup>

But the Iranians had to scrap the northern route because they found the Kurds who would have been in charge of the northern Syrian leg of the corridor less than reliable. The alternative southern course was much longer but had the advantage of having all its legs secured by friendly Shiite militias. Having also accounted for the American presence in al Tanf, southern route was moved 140 miles further. The new iteration would have pivoted toward the town of Mayadin, an Iranian hub in eastern Syria, then Deir ez-Zur, Damascus, Homs, ending at the port of Latakia.<sup>44</sup>

Shortly after retaking Aleppo, the Iranians began withdrawing SLA fighters from frontline battles vital to the regime such as Idlib in order to secure the territory for the corridor. For instance, Suleimani mounted an offensive on the M20 Highway connecting Palmyra to Deir ez-Zur and the T2 pumping station in the desert, one of the four stations that transported Iraqi oil to Syrian coastline. In a symbolic gesture, Suleimani was videotaped stepping across the Iraqi-Syrian border near Abu Kamal. Likewise, pictures emerged showing the SLA fighters holding Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian flags.<sup>45</sup>

Ambitious as the land bridge was, it was just part of a broader project to turn Syria into an extension of the Hezbollah-Lebanon front. In 2013, the son of Imad Mughniyah, Jihad, and Samir Kuntar, a notorious terrorist released in a 2008 prisoners exchange, were put in charge of the operation. Both were killed by Israel in 2015, postponing the plan by two years. In March 2017, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba (HHN) established the Golan Liberation Brigade (Harakat al Tahrir al Julian—HTJ) under Nasr al Shami who was also the deputy of HHN. The Brigade's spokesperson

<sup>43</sup> Martin Chulov, Amid Syrian chaos, Iran's game plan emerges: A path to the Mediterranean, *The Guardian*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/08/iran-iraq-syria-isis-land-corridor>.

<sup>44</sup> Martin Chulo, Iran changes course of road to Mediterranean coast to avoid US forces, *The Guardian*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/iran-changes-course-of-road-to-mediterranean-coast-to-avoid-us-forces>; An Iranian Project to Access Mediterranean Shores, Iran Diplomacy, December 3, 2018, [irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1980376/هنارتی‌دم‌ل‌ح‌اوس‌ه‌ب‌ن‌ار‌ای‌س‌رت‌سد‌ای‌ارب‌ای‌ا‌ژورپ](http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1980376/هنارتی‌دم‌ل‌ح‌اوس‌ه‌ب‌ن‌ار‌ای‌س‌رت‌سد‌ای‌ارب‌ای‌ا‌ژورپ).

<sup>45</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, loc. 216, 2025, Jackson Doering, "Washington Militia Problem is Iran's Militia Problem," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Analysis, February 19, 2018; Fabrice Balanche, "The Iranian Land Bridge in the Levant: The Return of Territory in Geopolitics." *Telos Scope*, September 14, 2018.

Seyed Hashem Mousavi stated that should the Syrian government require “we are ready to take action and free the Golan.” Others explained that the HTJ was a highly trained group special forces combining the experience of Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. The group’s slogans were belligerently anti-Israeli, and the uniform patch read “Israel Will Burn.”<sup>46</sup>

Two highly publicized visits added to the public attention lavished on the HTJ. In December 2017, Qais al Khazali, the head of the AAH, toured the Lebanese-Israeli border with Hezbollah commanders to observe the Golan Height. The AAH chief declared that he was standing “with his brothers” to fight Israel. In the same month, Al Haj Hamza, the operational commander of *Liwa al Baqir* also toured the border. His brother Ali Haj Khalid, the founder of the Liwa al Baqir, had a long history of anti-Israeli rhetoric. In 2018, the hardline Ebrahim Raisi visited Syria and traveled to the Israeli border with Lebanon in the company of Iranian and Hezbollah commanders. Raisi who had run for president against Hassan Rouhani declared “Liberation of Jerusalem Soon.” Analysts noted that such public manifestations were aimed at shaming Arab countries for allegedly reaching out to Israel and abandoning the Palestinians.<sup>47</sup>

While the HTJ was something of a publicity stunt, Suleimani and Hassan Nasrallah directed a highly secret project to create a terrorist infrastructure in the Golan. Codenamed the Golan File by the Israel Defense Force (IDF) intelligence, it was directed by Abu Hussein Sajid (Ali Mousa Daqduq), a senior Hezbollah commander who spent time in prison in Iraq, as indicated in Chap. 5. Daqduq and other Hezbollah operatives, Bashar and Ismail Mustafa, Talal Hassoun, and Fahim Abu Qais, have enticed local villagers with cash payments to form terror cells.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Amir Toumaj, “IRGC-Controlled Iraqi Militia Forms Golan Liberation Brigade,” *Long War Journal*, March 12, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Ghaidaa Hetou, *The Syrian Conflict: The Role Russia, Iran, and the US in a Global Crisis*, Shimon Shapira “Iran Dispatches a Senior Commander of the Shite Foreign Legion to Southern Lebanon, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs,” December 11, 2017; Tamar Ben Ozer, “Iran’s Prospective Supreme Leader Visited the Israeli Lebanon Border,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 6, 2018; BKJ, Hojjatoleslam Ebrahim Raisi Visits Occupied Palestine Borders, Bashgahe Khabarnegarane Javan, January 31, 2018, <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6420037/حضور-حجت-الاسلام-سید-ابراهیم-رئیسی-در-نقطه-صفر-مرزی-فلسطین-اشغالی-عکس>; Anna Ahronheim, “Second Senior Shite Militia Commander Visits Israeli-Lebanese Border,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 29, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Anna Ahronheim, “IDF: Hezbollah Head of Golan Operations Murdered U.S. Troops in Iraq,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 13, 2019; Israel Announced the Discovery of a Hezbollah-Affiliated Network in the Golan Heights, [www.bbc.com/persian/world-47563998](http://www.bbc.com/persian/world-47563998).

To support Hezbollah and a possible future confrontation with Israel, the IRGC created a network of storage facilities and factories for upgrading and manufacturing weapons. The Guards had also cooperated with the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) under Dr. Aziz Asber who specialized in missile and rocket technology. Asber who was allegedly killed by the Mossad in 2018 helped the Iranians with Project Precision, a large-scale scheme to upgrade the Hezbollah missiles. Intelligence identified several Iranian facilities including one in Safita, in the northwest of Syria near the border with Lebanon. To bypass international sanctions, Iran created several dummy companies associated with the SSRC, a Syrian government agency, which could procure parts in the international market.<sup>49</sup>

Facing a prospect of a new front, Israel responded with considerable force. General Gadi Eisenkot, the chief of staff, picked Major General Nitzan Alon to head a new Iran task force in the IDF in 2018. A year earlier, in January 2017, the government permitted the Israel Air Force (IAF) to carry out attacks on Iranian targets in Syria. At first, the raids were restricted to transshipment of weapons, but later came to include storage facilities, factories, and bases. Before his retirement, the chief of staff revealed that the IAF launched thousands of attacks and destroyed or heavily damaged hundreds of sites. The Glass House, the command and control facility at the Damascus International Airport, was among the targets, forcing the Iranians to abandon it. Suleimani retaliated with a drone attack and missile attacks which had all failed. Eisenkot noted that “Suleimani erred in choosing a playground where he is relatively weak.”<sup>50</sup>

Eisenkot’s successor, Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi was equally forceful in targeting Iran’s holdings in Syria. Since taking office in

<sup>49</sup> Katherine Bauer, Hanin Ghaddar, and Asaf Orion, “Iran’s Precision Missile Project Moves to Lebanon,” Washington Institute, December 2018; “Iran Send Hezbollah Rocket Part to Turn Rockets Into Precision Missiles,” *Times of Israel*, October 19, 2018; Introducing the scientific achievements of the high technology center in the exhibition of advanced achievements of Iran in Syria, [prjdscharif.blogfa.com/category/1](http://prjdscharif.blogfa.com/category/1); David M. Halbfinger and Ronen Bergman, “A Top Syrian Scientist Is Killed, and Fingers Point at Israel,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> “New US-Israeli Project Iran Is Headed by IDF’s Major General Nitzan Alon,” *Debka File*, July 3, 2018; Anna Ahronheim, “Before and After Images Show Israeli Strike on Iranian Base,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 13, 2018; *NCRI, How Iran Fuels the Syria War*, loc. 200; TOI staff, “Outgoing Chief of Staff: Israel Has Struck ‘Thousands of Iranian Targets in Syria,” *Times of Israel*, January 12, 2019.



January 2019, the Air Force hit dozens of targets, including munition depots, intelligence hubs, and missile fabrication facilities.<sup>51</sup>

### THE POLITICAL PROJECT: TURNING SYRIA INTO A CLIENT STATE

Preceding chapters demonstrated how the Iranians tried to emulate Hezbollah “dual use” protocol in Iraq, the Gulf, and Yemen. On its face, Syria, with a vast majority of Sunnis, promised little in the way of dominating the political system via the pro-Iranian militias. However, the IRGC-QF used a number of tactics to embed itself in the political system. At the top of the list was ethnic engineering which started well before 2012. In 1983, the outreach arm of the Guards established the Society of Imam al Murtadha to proselytize Sunnis. Because the Baggara tribe, the largest in Syria, considered itself to be the descent of Imam Ali ibn Hussein Zain al Abaidin, it was targeted for conversion. Baggara tribesmen of the Deir ez-Zur governorate were behind the creation, in 2014, of the Liwa al Baqir militia, among the strongest of the pro-Iranian groups. The Baggara and other tribal confederations in eastern Syria have also offered a convenient platform for political embedding. Reports indicated that the Iranians had distributed food, cash, enhanced public services, and provide free education to the population dwelling along the Iraqi border.<sup>52</sup>

The civil war offered new opportunities for demographic engineering. Shiites from Lebanon and Iraq were settled on land abandoned by fleeing Sunni residents. To make reclaiming Sunni property more complicated, the Land Registry in many locations was destroyed or tampered. Ethnic swaps were another popular method for creating a solid Shiite bloc, especially along the routes of the land corridor leading toward Lebanon. As one observer noted, “Iran ... wanted a geographical continuation into Lebanon.” A report on patterns of ethnic cleansing noted that the Iranians wanted “a corridor linking Qalamun Mountain to Damascus, and Homes, and the Alawite enclaves” to be Sunni free. For the IRGC, the presence of Shiite population along strategic routes was critical because, in the words

<sup>51</sup> Anna Ahronheim, “It IDF heats Syria, Are Daytime Strikes Army Chief of Staff Kochavi’s New Strategy?” *Jerusalem Post*, January 20, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Northern Syrian Observer, “Iran Has the Stronger Influence in Eastern Syria,” NSO Special Report, February 27, 2018; Raja Abdulrahim and Benoit Faucon, “Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2019.

of one analyst, the Iranians “must be able to relay a loyal population because of the solidarity it provides at the sectarian level.”<sup>53</sup>

One way to achieve ethnic cleansing was the so-called starve or surrender tactic. Regime and Shiite militias would surrender Sunni neighborhoods or towns and prevent food delivery. When faced with the prospect of starvation, the Sunni residence normally agreed to repatriation. Another effective method was the “population swap” between two localities. In the best-known incident of this kind, Suleimani orchestrated the so-called four town deal between the Sunni towns of Madaya and Zabadani under the siege by Hezbollah the Shiite villages of al Fua and Kafriya besieged by a Qatari-sponsored militia. In September 2015, during a secret meeting presided over by the UN, Quds Force suggested a “symmetrical population exchange,” but was rebuffed. Shortly after, in November, KH kidnapped a group of Qatari falconers related to the royal family hunting in Iraq. After prolonged negotiations in which the Lebanese Hezbollah served as an intermediary, the Qatari government agreed to a large ransom payment and pressure on its militia to agree to a population exchange. The displaced Sunnis felt particularly bitter, telling a Hezbollah commander that his organization came to “displace us, to dominate our land.”<sup>54</sup>

Assuring a Shiite majority in specific location was only a partial answer to the Iranian penetration of the Syrian state. Creating political parties out of the militias was another way to assure political domination. Reports have indicated that the new political entities were preparing to challenge the Assad-run dominant Baath Party when necessary. Whether the new military-political infrastructure could create an Iranian-run “parallel state,” as some analysts suggested, is not clear. However, Tehran’s economic investments, mainly through the IRGC’s construction company Khatam al Anbiya Construction Headquarters and its telecommunication arm has the potential to put Syria in a chokehold. One Syrian expert commented that “the emergent reality is one in which is difficult to discern where precisely the Syrian state end and Iran and its allies begin.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Robert Fisk, “Syria’s New Housing Law,” *Independent* May 31, 2018; Hanin Ghaaddar, “The Iranian Empire Is Almost Complete,” *Tower*, December 2016.; Fabrice Balanche, “From the Iranian Corridor to the Shiite Crescent,” Hoover Institution, August 17, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Robert F. Worth, “Kidnapped Royalty Became Pawns in Iran’s Deadly Plot,” *New York Times*, AW Staff, “The Tangled Web of Qatar’s Missing Falconers,” *The Arab Weekly*, March 22, 2018; *New York Times*, March 14, 2018; Martin Chulov, “Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime’s Control,” *Guardian*, January 13, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Spyer, “A New Order Emerges in Southern Syria as Assad Regions Control,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 30, 2018.

The IRGC-affiliated companies were slated to operate Syria's telecommunication network, which, according to some observers, will provide the IRGC with a platform for surveillance activities. The two countries also signed agreements to repair and build several power plants in Syria. Cultural and educational programs have also been afoot. Tehran unveiled plans to establish a branch of the Islamic Azad University, Al Mustafa Farabi Islamic Religious College, and Tarbiat Modarres located in Damascus, Latakia, Deir ez-Zur, and Al Bukamal.<sup>56</sup>

The extensive military-political infrastructure erected by the Iranians has raised questions about the ability of the Syrian regime to pursue independent policies. Developments after the civil war did not bode well for the Syrian leader. For instance, the Golan File intelligence indicated that Damascus was not aware of the secret cells run by Hezbollah. It was also revealed that Assad's secret meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei in Tehran on February 25, 2019, was organized by Suleimani and did not comport with a state visit. Neither President Hassan Rouhani nor his Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was informed ahead of time; the former was invited to join in for a brief time, the latter resigned but subsequently changed his mind. Deputy Quds Force commander Ismail Ghani explained that this was a "sensitive operation ... those who needed to know about it were aware about it, and those who didn't need to know, did not hear about it." The circumstances of the visit led some to speculate that Assad was essentially ordered by Suleimani to Tehran to pay homage to the Supreme Leader.<sup>57</sup>

The IRGC has a plan to create a rail link between the Shalamche, the border crossing with Iraq and Latakia. According to the IRGC's RAJA News website, the railroad is part of a more ambitious plan to create a "superhighway" reaching all the way to Afghanistan as a way to integrate

<sup>56</sup> Ilan Berman, "New Report: Iran's Influence in Syria Far Broader Than Commonly Understand," *Tablet* May 31, 2018; Seth J. Franzman, "Northern Exposure: Israel's Stability in Juln Question Amid Russian Offer," *Jerusalem Post*, July 28, 2018; IRNA, We are negotiating with Iranian Mobile Operators, [www.ghatreh.com/news/nn46342091/](http://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn46342091/); رییس-مجلس-سوریه-اپراتورهای-تلفن-همراه-ایران-مذاکره-مداریم/ <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6239969/>; YJC, Iran's contribution to the reconstruction of Syria's power plants, <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6239969/>; های-برق-سوریه-80%E2%80%8Cمشارکت-ایران-در-بازسازی-و-ایجاد-نیروگاه.

<sup>57</sup> Meir Javednagar, "Rouhani's Iraqi Visit Raises Important Questions for Israel." *Al-Monitor*, March 18, 2019; Soleimani's Deputy: Asad was brought to Tehran by the Quds Force; Those who should know, were Aware about it, Radio Farda, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-irgc-commander-says-brought-assad-to-tehran/29806344.html>.

with China's Belt and Road Initiative. RAJA News stated that the Guards enjoy full control of many of the roads which would form the superhighway in Iraq and Syria, and that Khatam al Anbiya Construction Headquarters received a contract to manage the container port of Latakia.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Raja News, The railways connect Iran, Iraq and Syria, April 13, 2019, [www.rajanews.com/news/313979/شود%80%80E2%80%A2-عراق-و-سوری-به-هم-وصل-می-شود](http://www.rajanews.com/news/313979/شود%80%80E2%80%A2-عراق-و-سوری-به-هم-وصل-می-شود); Hamid Azizi, "What Rouhani's Visit to Iraq Tells Us about Iran's Implications of Rouhani's Visit to Iraq on Syrian Policy," *Al-Monitor*, March 18, 2019; Amir Taheri, "Mullahs and the English-Opium Eater," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 22, 2019; MNA, Tehran will be Connected to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon Through a Highway, Mashregh News Agency, <https://www.mashregh-news.ir/news/845373/تهران-از-طریق-بزرگراه-به-عراق-سوری-و-لبنان-وصل-می-شود>.



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## Proxies in the Gulf and Beyond: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Principalities, and Yemen

While the Islamist revolution's most publicized goal was the elimination of Israel, Ayatollah Khomeini made little secret of his profound enmity toward Saudi Arabia. His disdain should have come as no surprise since the Wahhabi domination of the religious discourse made it a center of "doctrinal anti-Shiism." However, as noted in Chap. 1, Khomeini personally loathed the Saudi royals whom he considered corrupt and unfit to serve as custodians of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Mixing the theological and the personal was easy because of the extreme wealth of the House of Saud, which the austere Supreme Leader frequently reviled. Since the Shiites, mostly confined to the Eastern Province, were the poorest segment of the Saudi population, Khomeini fused underclass sentiments with the vocabulary of the Islamist revolution.<sup>1</sup>

With the Quds Force (QF) still in the future, Office of the Liberation Movements (OLM) activists spearheaded the export of the revolution to Saudi Arabia and the string of oil wealthy principalities in the Gulf. To recall the previous chapter, Ayatollah Mohammed al Shirazi, the scion of an activist family based in Najaf, who shared Khomeini's vision of *velayat-e faqih*, founded the Movement of Vanguard's Missionaries (*Harakat al-Risaliyin al-Tala'i*' or MVM) organization in 1968. Fleeing persecution in Iraq, al Shirazi and his core followers settled in Kuwait where, in 1971,

<sup>1</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *The Sectarian Gulf. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*, Stanford University Press, 2013, loc. 20; Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 21.

he opened the *Hawza al Rasool al-Azan*, described as a “breeding ground for Saudi activists” as well as students from around the Gulf. The sons of the prominent al Sayef family, they joined early, along with Hassan al Saffar Al Shirazi’s nephew and Mohammed Taqi al Mudarissi who presided over the political section of the *hawza* which schooled students in underground political activities. Over time, al Shirazi attracted thousands of followers to his cause, who became known as the *shiraziyyin*.

Khomeini’s revolution energized al Shirazi who moved to Iran in 1979 and opened the *Hawza al-Imam al-Qa’im* in Tehran. Mohammed Taqi followed his uncle to supervise the new *Hawza* and propagate the MVM. In December 1979, Saudi activists created the Organization for Islamist Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIRAP) (*Enghelab-e Eslami dar Shebhe Jazireye Arab* or *Munathamat al-Thawra al-Islamiyya fi al-Jazira al-Arabiyya*) under the leadership of Hassan al Saffar, a promising Shiite scholar. Mohammed Montazeri, the son of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, and Mehdi Hashemi, who led the Saudi/Gulf section in the OLM, gave the MVM substantial help. Montazeri was the main force behind the MVM/OIRAP media network, including Radio Tehran and Radio Ahwaz which broadcasted to Eastern Province.<sup>2</sup>

The Shiite activists echoed Khomeini’s claims that the House of Saud lost its legitimacy because of corruption and links to the infidels in the West. Ironically, as Chap. 4 indicated, local Salafists who belonged to the *Al Jamma al Salafiyha al Muhtashiba* (The Salafi Groups Which Commands Rights and Forbids Wrong), the forerunners of Al-Qaeda, leveled the same charges against the Saudi monarchy. The Islamic Revolution inspired Juhayman Al-Otaibi, a member of the group, and some of his followers to launch a rebellion. On November 20, 1979, some 400 members of the al-Otaibi group, many of whom were former members of the Saudi National Guard, attacked the Grand Mosque in Mecca. It took the Saudi authorities, helped by the Pakistani and French commandos, two weeks to put down the rebellion which left hundreds of pilgrims and Saudi soldiers dead. Although the initial rumors that the Shiites were behind the attack proved wrong, Iran contributed to the chaos by claiming that it was the work of “criminal American imperialism and international Zionism.” A few months later, after OIRAP approved al-Otaibi’s action, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) invited member of the group to

<sup>2</sup> Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 116–117.

attend a conference titled *Jonbesh'ha va Nehzathaye Azadibakhsh* (Liberator Movements).<sup>3</sup>

If Khomeini took a free ride on the Grand Mosque attack, he featured front and center in the Muharram Intifada which broke out in the Eastern Province on November 24. Agitation in Qatif and Al Hassa, the two large governorates in the East Province and the home of the large installations of Aramco, started before Muharram, the holy month in which the Shiites observed the Ashura, the ritual mourning of Hossein. Al Saffar, the leader of the soon-to-be announced OIRAP was determined to challenge the government which outlawed the public celebration of Shiite holidays. Protestors carrying portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini chanted slogans in favor of the Iranian revolution and called for the death to the House of Saud. Demonstrators clashed with police and the National Guard amidst widespread looting and burning of government buildings, leading to several deaths.<sup>4</sup>

After a short pause, protest resumed on January 12, 1980—that is, 40 days after the death of the first “martyr” in Qatif. On February 1, demonstrators took to the streets to commemorate the first anniversary of the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Tehran. The Iranian media which followed the upheaval closely published an OIRAP statement vowing to continue with the protest until the creation of the Islamic Republic in Saudi Arabia. In the end, the government crushed the rebellion, in which 10 soldiers and more than 20 Shiites were killed, hundreds wounded, and thousands arrested.<sup>5</sup>

While focused on local concerns, the Eastern Province Intifada was also driven by the deterrence by proxy doctrine of the IRGC detailed in Chap. 1.

<sup>3</sup>FNA, Seizing of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a Group of 100 persons, *Fars News Agency*, October 24, 2012, <https://www.farsnews.com/news/13910830000151/>; *تصريف كعبه توسط بيگ گروه صد نفره*; The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Reaction of the Shi'ites of Saudi Arabia and Al Saud to it, <https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/5658/6887/82911>; *انقلاب اسلامي ايران و واكنش شيعيان عربستان و آل سعود بدين*; Reflection of the Islamic Revolution of Iran on Saudi Arabia, *Navide Shahed*, [navideshahed.com/fa/news/204950/](http://navideshahed.com/fa/news/204950/); *بازتاب انقلاب اسلامي ايران بر عربستان سعودي*.

<sup>4</sup>Toby Matthiesen, Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 64, no. 2 (Spring 2010), pp. 179–197.

<sup>5</sup>Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, pp. 104–105; The Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Reaction of the Shi'ites of Saudi Arabia and Al Saud to it, <https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/5658/6887/82911>; *انقلاب اسلامي ايران و واكنش شيعيان عربستان و آل سعود بدين*; Reflection of the Islamic Revolution of Iran on Saudi Arabia, *Navide Shahed*, [navideshahed.com/fa/news/204950/](http://navideshahed.com/fa/news/204950/); *بازتاب انقلاب اسلامي ايران بر عربستان سعودي*.

Following the seizure of American diplomats in Tehran, the Carter administration dispatched a squadron of F-16, to Saudi Arabia, ostensibly to reassure the Kingdom of American support. However, the intense speculations in Tehran indicated that the new regime expected a kinetic attack in retaliation for the hostage-taking. It was not surprising thus that in December, OIRAP revealed that the Islamic Group of Aramco Workers (*Al Tajammu al Islami Li-umm al Aramco*) sent a letter to Aramco warning that “they would be targeted especially if the United States attacked Iran from Saudi soil.” Although Carter did not plan a punitive bombing of Iran, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) actually took the threat seriously enough to order a contingency for pulling out the American employees of Aramco.<sup>6</sup>

Much as OIRAP was well suited for addressing sectarian grievances, Khomeini’s plan to challenge the institution of the hajj required a more multifaceted approach. When studying Ali Shariati’s writings in Najaf, Khomeini picked up on the idea of turning the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina into a political as well as a spiritual event. His supporters distributed anti-Shah and anti-American pamphlets, a politicization which the Supreme Leader encouraged after the revolution. So much so that he appointed Mohammad Mousavi Khoieniha, the head of the Students Following the Line of Imam (SFLI) who led the assault on the American embassy, to be his envoy to the hajj. In 1982, Khoieniha urged the Iranian pilgrims to chant pro-Khomeini slogans in the Grand Mosque, triggering a violent confrontation with the Saudi police. In the same year, the SFLI leader also chose to stage a demonstration in the al Baqi Cemetery in Medina, where, in 1926, the government demolished the graves of the four Imams venerated by the Shiites.<sup>7</sup>

To tamp down the tension, the then president Ali Khamenei and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani speaker of the Majlis replaced Khoieniha with the more moderate Mehdi Karrubi. However, Mehdi Hashemi, OLM’s primary contact with the MVM and OIRAP were bitterly opposed to efforts to patch up relations with Saudi Arabia. Indeed, MVM publication arm went into overdrive printing pamphlets and books about the alleged Saudi transgression against the Shiites, including the destruction of the al Baqi

<sup>6</sup> Ofira Seliktar, *Failing the Crystal Ball Test: The Carter Administration and the Fundamentalist Revolution in Iran*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000; Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, pp. 104–106; Ray Takeyh and Steven Simon, *The Pragmatic Super Power. Winning the Cold War in the Middle East*, p. 73; Hossein Haghighi, *Witness to the Triple Falls (Shahede Soghoothaye Seganeh)*, Ketab Corp, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*, pp. 161–183.

Cemetery graves. Ayatollah Montazeri was also on record reviling the Saudi royals while Hashemi and radical elements in the IRGC smuggled arms and explosives to Saudi Arabia ahead of the 1986 hajj. However, OLM hardliners run afoul of the government when they leaked the details of the secret American mission to Tehran in May 1986. Hashemi was arrested and executed in 1987 and Ayatollah Montazeri, the designated successor to Khomeini, was removed from political life and permanently sequestered in his compound in Qom. The freelancing OLM was disbanded, and the newly created Quds Force took over its functions.<sup>8</sup>

Moving against extreme revolutionary exporters in the regime, however, came too late to prevent a significant conflagration between Iranian pilgrims and the Saudis in 1987. Each side blamed the other for the outcome of the riot in the Grand Mosque which left more than 400 Iranians dead. Khomeini lambasted the “vile and ungodly Wahhabis,” and Montazeri described the royals as a “bunch of English agents from Najd who have no respect for the House of God.”<sup>9</sup>

The Grand Mosque riot occurred during an intense debate within the MVM and its OIRAP affiliate about the merits of an aggressive stance toward Riyadh as opposed to a reconciliation with the regime. OIRAP activists who stayed in Iran became radicalized and declared themselves in favor of the *velayat-e faqih* principle. Known as *Khate Imami* (the Line of Imam), they also advocated terror attacks in Saudi Arabia. However, when the majority of OIRAP declared a truce with the Kingdom, the IRGC was instrumental in creating Hezbollah al Hijaz in May 1986. A violent terror organization under Ahmed Ibrahim al Mughassil was one in the chain of the transnational Hezbollah groups crafted to bolster the Axis of Resistance.

In its early years, the Saudi Hezbollah seemed to be somewhat redundant given in the warming relations between Iran and the Kingdom. In 1991, foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati traveled to Riyadh to discuss restoring relations. As a measure of good will, the Saudis agreed to raise the quota for the hajj to 115,000, a twofold increase from previous years. In 1996, the Saudis approached the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to hold its Islamic Summit Conference in Tehran on December

<sup>8</sup> Steven K. O'Hern, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, Potomac Books, 2012, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Shi'ite Revival*, pp. 169–173. Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran, Aljazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/saudi-arabia-severs-diplomatic-relations-iran-160103202137679.html>.

9–11, 1997. The meeting ended with the “Tehran Declaration” which promised to pursue “positive international, dialogue and rejecting the theories of clash and conflict.”<sup>10</sup>

However, the IRGC-QF continuing activity in general and the Gulf, in particular, did not match the lofty language of the declaration. Over the years, the Saudi Hezbollah was implicated in numerous deadly terror attacks, including the bombing of the Khobar Towers, Dhahran. As noted in Chap. 4, the attack was carried out in collaboration with Al-Qaeda and the Lebanese Hezbollah under Iranian supervision. In 2015, al Mughassil who lived under the protection of Hezbollah in Lebanon was deported to Saudi Arabia, Iran’s goodwill gesture that coincided with the signing of the Iran’s nuclear agreement.<sup>11</sup>

Although a major target, Saudi Arabia was only one of the countries in MVM’s purview. With more than 60 percent of Shiites population, Bahrain was also high on Ayatollah al Shirazi agenda. In 1981, Mohammed Taqi founded the *al Jebha al Islamiyaa al Tabrin al Bahrain*, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) and appointed his brother Hadi to lead the organization. Soon after, the IFLB, which pledged its full allegiance to the “universal Islamic revolution under the leadership of Imam Khomeini,” launched a coup d’état against the ruling Sunni al Khalifa dynasty. The plan called for an attack on the *Dar al Hukuma* (government offices), the radio and television station in Manama, and select military facilities. After the removal of the Khalifa family, the IFLB hoped to appoint Hadi al Modarrisi as the Spiritual Leader of the Islamic Republic of Bahrain. Ayatollah Khomeini publicly blessed the would-be revolutionaries; other hardline clerics went as far as to describe Bahrain as “the fourteenth province of Iran and called for unification.”<sup>12</sup>

After the plot failed, the authorities arrested close to 300 individuals whose interrogation revealed extensive connections with Iran. In addition to training, the IRGC smuggled military equipment to Bahrain, and even

<sup>10</sup>UN, Tehran Declaration the Eighth Islamic Summit Conference the Session of Dignity, Dialogue, Participation Sha’aban, 1418-December 1997, General Assembly Security Council, A/53/72 S/1998/156 27 February 1998.

<sup>11</sup>Matthiesen, “Hezbollah al Hijaz.”

<sup>12</sup>Hassan Tariq Alhassan, “The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2011, pp. 603–617.



police uniforms to be used in the plot. The British navy intercepted a boat carrying Iranian supplies in the Bahraini coastal waters.<sup>13</sup>

Compared to Bahrain, the other Gulf principalities which had much fewer Shiites were poor candidates for regime change. However, the IRGC targeted Kuwait which supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War to deter others. As one analyst put it, “massive destruction and heavy loss of life” would have “provided an example to other oil-rich” allies of Iraq. Recalling Chap. 2, the Dawa Party and the Lebanese Hezbollah planned to carry out what would have been the largest bombing attack at the time. Fortunately for Kuwait, a technical malfunctioning hampered the assailants, causing minimal casualties and little material damage. Still, Kuwait was subject to years of bombings and hijackings aimed at freeing the jailed perpetrators.<sup>14</sup>

### ARAB SPRING IN THE GULF: A SECOND CHANCE FOR THE ISLAMIST REVOLUTION

For the IRGC-QF strategists, the Arab Spring was a new opportunity to spread the Khomeini revolution. From this perspective, the situation in Saudi Arabia around 2011 was more in 1979. Ayatollah Mohammed al Shirazi died in 2002, and his nephews, Mohammed Taqi al Mudarrisi and his brother Hadi took over, creating the *mudarrisiyya*, a more confrontational movement than the old *shirazyiyya*-driven OIRAP. The Mudarrisi brothers instructed their followers in Qatif and Al Hassa to demand more autonomy and a more balanced distribution of wealth. Two more organizations founded in Iran helped to spread the revolution message in Eastern Province. One was the Hijazi Community in the Holy City of Qom (*al Jaliyya al Hijaziyya fi Madina Qum al Muqaddasa*), a group of some 500 Saudi Shiites who studied in an exclusive seminary in Qom named for Ayatollah Khomeini. The other was the Society for Development and Change (*Jami'at al Tanmir va Tagheer*) led by Ahmed Mohammed al Rebh, a secular activist who spent some years in exile in Iran and condemned Saudi policy toward Iran.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Ali Alfone, “Between Reform and Revolution: Sheik Qassim, the Bahraini Shia, and Iran.” *AEI Reader*, July 12, 2012.

<sup>14</sup>“Iran and Iraq: The Next Five Years,” *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 1987, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup>Toby Matthiesen, “A Saudi Spring? The Shiite Protest in the Eastern Province, 2011–2011,” *Middle East Journal*, 66, No. 4 Autumn, 2012, pp. 628–659; QO, The New Wave of Detention

However, it was Sheik Nimr al Nimr, a mid-ranking clergy from the village of Awamiya, near Qatif, who turned out to be the kind of ethno-sectarian entrepreneur that the Quds Force favored. Al Nimr lived in Iran from 1989 to 1999, first in Qom and then in Tehran attending *Hazrat-e Ghaem* Seminary overseen by Mohammed Taqi Modarresi. He returned to Awamiya where he preached an anti-Saudi and anti-American message. A cable published by WikiLeaks described a conversation of two American diplomats with al Nimr in 2018. The Sheik told them that “the Shiites of Saudi Arabia should avail themselves of foreign support” in case of trouble, implying that he would not hesitate to invite the Iranians to help with active resistance. In 2010, al Nimr opened the al-Imam Ghaem religious center in Awamiya which became a hotbed of anti-government activity.<sup>16</sup>

Unsurprisingly, when the protesters took to the street in the spring of 2011, their demands skewed to al Nimr and other radicals. Only one, the call for more autonomy, was shared with the moderates such as the OIRAP leader. Calls to release Hezbollah al Hijaz prisoners charged with the Khobar Towers bombing and demands to windthrow Saudi troops from Bahrain were not likely to be headed by Riyadh. Incensed by the refusal of the authorities, al Nimr notched up his opposition, at one point also warning the government against attacking Iran. Tehran reciprocated by urging Riyadh to stay away from al Nimr. Hossein Amir Abdollahiyan, Deputy Foreign Minister for Arabian Middle East and African affairs, advised the Saudi authorities to “abandon adventure and pursue rationality.” On October 25, 2015, Abdollahiyan warned: “the execution of Sheikh Nimr will cost Saudi Arabia a lot.” Several Iranian parliamentarians also called on the Saudi government to exercise “rationality” with regards to the Sheikh Nimr. However, after months of violence in the province, al Nimr

of Political Activists and Clerics in Saudi Arabia to Suppress Critics Voices, *Quds Online*, [quds-online.ir/news/615674/موج-جنبندگان داشت فعالان سیاسی-و روحانیون در-عربستان برای سرکوب](http://quds-online.ir/news/615674/موج-جنبندگان داشت فعالان سیاسی-و روحانیون در-عربستان برای سرکوب)

Al-Alam, Wahabism is Seeking to Destroy Islam's History, *Al-Alam TV Network*, <https://fa.alalamtv.net/news/283004/م-ال-س-ا-خ-ی-ر-ا-ت-ن-د-ر-ب-ن-ی-ب-ز-ا-ل-ا-ب-ن-د-ب-ت-ی-ا-و>; FNA, Establishing a Political Association in Saudi Arabia for Violating the People's Right, Fars News Agency, <https://www.farsnews.com/news/13900621001064/ر-د-س-ا-ی-س-ی-ت-ی-ع-م-ج-س-ی-ا-ت>; ABNA, The Latest Developments in the Arab Uprising: The Fear of the Revolution has Caused Al Saud to Buy weapons, Abna News Agency, [fa.abna24.com/special-issue/archive/2013/02/09/389222/story.html](http://fa.abna24.com/special-issue/archive/2013/02/09/389222/story.html).

<sup>16</sup> Biography of Martyr Baqir Al-Nemar, *ISNA*, <https://www.isna.ir/news/94101206237/زندگینامه-شهید-باقیر-النمر>; The Al Saud Assassinated Ayatollah Sheikh Al-Nemar, *Tasnim News Agency*, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1394/10/12/959353/ال-سعود-آیت-الله-شیخ-النمر-را-جه-شهادت-ر-ساند-ز-ندگی-نامه>.

and some of his followers were arrested on July 8, 2012, and the authorities managed to quell the protest soon after.<sup>17</sup>

Faced with the prospect of losing its front man, Tehran reacted with rage. Both Ayatollah Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards commanders threatened Riyadh with “grave consequences” if Nimr is not released. The Foreign Ministry summoned the Saudi ambassador but to no avail. Nimr was executed on January 2, 2016, triggering violent protests in Iran. On the day of the execution, hundreds of demonstrators in Tehran set fire to the Saudi embassy before the police made 40 arrests. In Mashhad, four more protesters were arrested after a crowd torched the Saudi consulate. According to sources, elements in the Basij organized the assault. To contain the political fallout, President Rouhani denounced the attacks, calling them “totally unjustifiable.” Rafsanjani also urged to restore calm, but his efforts failed to appease the Saudis. Riyadh severed diplomatic relation with Tehran on January 3, 2016.<sup>18</sup>

While Iran was bound to be disappointed by the Arab Spring in the Eastern Province, developments in Bahrain in 2011 looked much more encouraging. The initial protests against the al Khalifa monarchy were broad-based, attracting an array of opposition groups, including leftists such as the National Democratic Action Society (NDAS). However, within a short time, the Islamists from the Wefaq Party and the more radical Haq Movement as well as newly formed February 14 Youth Coalition asserted control over the demonstrations. Unsurprisingly, the Iranian media gave extensive coverage to the upheaval in Manama including demands to abolish the monarchy. Regime media renewed the claim that Bahrain was the 14th province of Iran. Such calls went well beyond the normal rhetoric because of the intense preoccupation of Tehran with the American Fifth Fleet stationed in Bahrain since 1995. After years of involvement in Iraq, as detailed in the preceding chapter, Iranian leaders

<sup>17</sup>The execution of Sheikh Nimr will cost Saudi Arabia a lot, *Tasnim News Agency*, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1394/08/03/897884/>؛ امیر عبداللہیان-اعدام-شیخ-نمر-ہزینہ-سنگینی-را-متوجہ-عربستان-خواہد-کرد.

<sup>18</sup>Matthiesen, “A Saudi Spring?” pp. 628–659; Saudi Arabia cut all ties with Iran, *Tabnak*, January 3, 2016, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/558403/>؛ عربستان-تمامی-روابط-با-ایران-را-بہ-طور-کامل-قطع-کرد-و-یدیو Ignorant and Emotional People Inside Iran Gave Excuse to Saudi Arabia to Get Away From Iran’s Pressures, *Saham News*, [sahamnews.org/2016/09/302344/](http://sahamnews.org/2016/09/302344/)؛ Saham News, Assaulting Saudi Embassy had no Result Except Discrediting Government, *Saham News*, [sahamnews.org/2016/03/297408/](http://sahamnews.org/2016/03/297408/).

were concerned about a possible American naval retaliation. In 2012, senior military officials, such as Brigadier General Ali Fadavi and Major General Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, warned that “we have a plan to destroy and sink US navy in the Persian Gulf.” A pro-Iranian government in Manama would have simply asked the Americans to leave.<sup>19</sup>

However, Iran’s hopes for regime change dimmed when Bahrain invited the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Peninsula Shield Force which crushed the uprising. Still, the IRGC was reluctant to give up the Bahrain project, leading to a change of tactics. In 2013, the Quds Force founded the *Saraya al Ashtar*, the Al Ashtar Brigade (AAB), the military wing of the banned *al Wafa* Movement. AAB fighters—a virtual Quds Force front—were trained in Iran, and the Martyrs Foundation assumed support for the family of AAB’s “martyrs.” *Saraya al-Mukhtar* (SaM) was created in 2014, followed by a number of small groups, among them *Saraya al Karar*, *Saraya Waad Alla*, *Liwa Abis*, self-described as Al Muqawama al Islamiyya fi Bahrain (the Islamic Resistance of Bahrain), *Saraya al Muqawama al Shabiya* (SMS), *Harakat Ahrar Bahrain*, Hezbollah Bahrain, and the Youth Coalition. Iranian sources indicated that they were essentially fronts for AAB, a policy model developed by the IRGC-QF to create the appearance of a broad-based resistance front and hide the Iranian input. Western analysts confirmed that “evolution toward external backed resistance” involved “grooming and training of leadership” supplying arms, and helping with logistics. Brigadier General Ali Gholam Shakuri and Brigadier General Abdulreza Shahlai were in charge of coordinating the Bahrain project. Iran publicly acknowledged its patronage of AAB and SaM by conducting a funeral for its “martyrs” in a Qom cemetery. The Martyrs Foundation assumed support for the families of AAB’s and SaM members killed in action.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Fadavi: The IRGC is able to Sink US Navy, *Mashregh News*, <https://www.mashregh-news.ir/news/381098>; Sardar Hajizadeh: Sinking US Warship Navy is Easy, *Aftab News*, [aftabnews.ir/vdcm1qss2bqp48.ala2.html](https://aftabnews.ir/vdcm1qss2bqp48.ala2.html); General Fadavi, Kicking US from the Persian Gulf is the IRGC Plan, <https://hawzah.net/fa/News/View/98261>.

<sup>20</sup> The bodies of three Bahraini martyrs are buried in Qom, [hawzahnews.com/detail/News/441520](http://hawzahnews.com/detail/News/441520); The Story of the Bahraini Martyrs who were Buried in Qom? *Tabnak*, [www.tabnakqom.ir/fa/news/570610](http://www.tabnakqom.ir/fa/news/570610); The Body of Three Bahraini martyrs of the Islamic Resistance Front was Buried in Qom, *Mehr News Agency*, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4234857/>; Saudi Arabia and Bahrain Have Designated the IRGC and General Suleimani on the list of terrorism, *Shia News*, [www.shia-news.com](http://www.shia-news.com).

Unlike other Iranian proxies, the Bahrain militias had refrained from suicide bombings because of a fatwa by Ayatollah Isa Qassim, the leading Shiite authority of the island. Instead, the terror cells targeted security personnel, politicians, and critical oil infrastructure linking Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. For instance, in 2017, the Bahraini authorities disrupted an AAB plot to assassinate top politicians and bomb three critical pipelines. However, AAB and SaM have also scored some successes by killing and wounding several police officers, blowing up an oil pipe, attacking ATMs of several banks, and even trying to sabotage the American naval base.<sup>21</sup>

For its part, the IRGC-QF intensified its supply of more sophisticated weapons, including the lethal EFPs. The Bahraini navy intercepted numerous boats carrying Iranian weapons, and the security forces uncovered large stockpiles in Shiite villages around Manama. Analysts noted that IRGC-QF used the Bahraini militias to smuggle arms to Eastern Province where, as noted, Shiite militants launched sporadic attacks on government targets. The American decision to withdraw from the JCPOA turned Bahrain into one of the IRGC-QF deterrence “hotspots.” Military commanders promised to challenge the American Navy should it deploy its ships into the Persian Gulf and, as on previous occasions, threatened to disrupt oil shipment to retaliate for American sanctions.<sup>22</sup>

With minor exceptions, the Arab Spring had little traction in Kuwait and other Gulf states, quashing potential Iranian plans to profit from the upheaval. Additional factors worked against Tehran as well. Memories of the 1983 terror attack were still fresh in Kuwait, adding to the distrust of all things Iranian. The Shiite treatment of the Sunnis in Iraq also weighed heavily on the Gulf Sunnis who came to expect the worse from any Shiite

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The Bodies of Martyrs of the Resistance of the People of Bahrain were Buried in Qom, IRNA, [www.irna.ir/qom/fa/News/82841143](http://www.irna.ir/qom/fa/News/82841143); Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt, “The Evolution of Shia Insurgency in Bahrain,” *Sentinel*, January 2018, vol. 11, no. 1, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point.

<sup>21</sup> Ibrahim Zabad, *Middle East Minorities. The Impact of the Arab Spring*, 155; Phillip Smyth, “Saraya al Karar: Bahrain’s Sporadic Bomber,” *Hizabollah Cavalcade, Jihadology*, December 1, 2014; Phillip Smyth, “Liwa Abis: A New Active Militant Group in Bahrain,” *Hizbollah Cavalcade, Jihadology*, May 5, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> We Do Not Allow Stannis to Approach our Territorial Waters, ISNA, <https://www.isna.ir/news/97100301441/اجاز-منمی-دهیم-استتیس-به-آب-های-سرز-مینی-مانز-دیک-شود>.

victory. However, it was Tehran's leading role in helping the Syrian regime to brutally crash the popular demonstrations that wiped out whatever legitimacy Iran had advocating for the Shiites in the Gulf. As one observer put it, "Sunnis were asking Shiites what about Syria."<sup>23</sup>

Disappointing as this turn of events was for the IRGC-QF strategy of hitching a ride on the Arab Spring, Yemen, a marginal state not initially targeted for revolutionary export, delivered a rather unexpected success.

### THE RISE OF THE HOUTHIS: FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE CENTER

While the majority of Shiites have followed the Twelve-Imam, the Yemeni Zaydis, an eighth-century offshoot, considered themselves followers of the fifth Imam, Zayd bin Ali because he led a rebellion against the Umayyad Empire. Estimated at 30 percent of the population, after centuries of semi-assimilation they had become close to *Shafei madhab*, one of the Sunni schools of Islam than to classic Shiism. However, starting in the 1980s, the Zaydi tribes of the mountainous northeast of Yemen launched a cultural renaissance aimed at pushing back at the perceived proselytizing of the Saudi Wahhabism.

Badreddin al Houthi, a prominent Zaydi theologian, and his son Hussein infused the cultural revival with a distinctive religious element. The elder al Houthi spent time in Qom as a guest of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's foundation the *Majma Jahani Ahl-e Beyt* (Global Association of Ahle-e Beyt), a hardline institute which nourished promising Shiite religious leaders from the region. The institute also published al Houthi's influential work *Tahrir al Afkar*, an attack on Wahhabi influence and a call to return to the *Ahl-e Beyt* school of thought, a thinly disguised effort to pivot the Zaydis toward the path of the Twelve-Imam. In a piece of creative research, the Institute produced a genealogy which showed al Houthi to be a direct descendant of the first Imam Ali. Hussein, who also studied at the Institute, forged links with Ayatollah Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah. The al Houthi family closeness to the Iranian Shiite model did not go unnoticed. Some Zaydi theologians lambasted Badreddin as being "closet imamist," a reference to his alleged effort to promote the younger al Houthi as the new Zaydi Imam. Others noted that, whatever the

<sup>23</sup>Matthiesen, *The Sectarian Gulf*, loc. 106.

personal ambition of the family, their teaching has moved the Zaydis closer to the Twelver Shiites.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these objections, however, Hussein, who returned to Yemen in 2000, used the revivalist movement, the Believing Youth (BY), to spread his view. After launching in mid-1990s, the group boasted youth clubs and summer camps which offered sports and recreation activities. However, students were also exposed to religious materials prepared by the Qom Institute which included lectures by Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah and Hassan Nasrallah. Iraqi clerics from Karbala had also visited the camps. The BY movement also adopted Ayatollah Khomeini's virulent anger at the West. Hussein distilled the spirit of Khomeinism in a popular chant (*shiar*) "God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam." He also instituted the International Jerusalem Day modeled on the Iranian Quds Day.<sup>25</sup>

Theology aside, Hussein al Houthi nursed serious political grievances against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh who ruled the country since its unification in 1990. Although a Zaydi himself, the president was suspicious of the Houthi family's connection to Iran which threatened his traditional pro-Saudi stand. Hussein, who was highly critical of the Kingdom, was even more incensed when the reluctant Saleh, under considerable pressure from the United States and Riyadh, joined the war on terror in the wake of 9/11. Accusations of selling out to America and charges of economic neglect of the Zaydis became staples in the rallies organized by the Houthi family. The American invasion of Iraq radicalized the Houthi movement which renamed itself Ansar Allah and adopted Hussein's *shi'ar* as its official emblem. More crucially, the charismatic Hussein and his close aides, including his brother Abd Malik, transitioned from a peaceful protest movement to armed resistance. Given that the Zaydis had access to arms, part of an ancestral tribal tradition, creating a militia was not particularly difficult. The sprawling arms markets in Souq

<sup>24</sup> Badreddin al Houthi, [fa.wikishia.net/view/بدرالدين\\_الحوثي#cite\\_note-1](http://fa.wikishia.net/view/بدرالدين_الحوثي#cite_note-1); Alex Watanaki, "Iran's Yemen Play," *Foreign Affairs*, March 4, 2015; Ludovico Carlino, "Militant Leadership Monitor," *Academia*, vol. 4, no. 8, August 2013, 12; Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Houthi Phenomenon*, RAND, 2010, 116, 119.

<sup>25</sup> Put the Farsi reference, then Alex Watanaki, "Iran's Yemen Play," *Foreign Affairs*, March 4, 2015; Ludovico Carlino, "Militant Leadership Monitor," *Academia*, vol. 4, no. 8, August 2013, 12; Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Houthi Phenomenon*, RAND, 2010, 116, 119.

al Talh and in Marib were ostensibly closed down by the government, but business flourished in back streets. As one observer put it, “tribesmen hoping to adorn themselves with rifles and pistols as it was customary in Yemeni tribal tradition,” could not be deterred by the government’s effort to cut down on weapons. The proliferation of arms stemmed from hundreds of years of tribal warfare which rendered large swaths of the country lawless. The tribal tradition explained the existence of 60 million weapons in a country of 30 million inhabitants. The Houthi leaders, “flush with cash” from *khums* (a religious tax) could travel across the country to buy illegal weapons to arm their followers.<sup>26</sup>

Hezbollah, fresh from its triumph of forcing the IDF out of Lebanon, offered an inspiration. Hussein al Houthi who fashioned himself as the “Nasrallah of Yemen,” regaled the BY participants of his weekly rallies in Saada city, with stories of Hezbollah’s triumph over Israel, followed the chanting the *shi’ar*. Hezbollah, which by the early 2000s took over some of the Quds Force function, provided more than inspiration. As a former American intelligence official put it, “Hezbollah offered mentoring and expertise.” The hostile demonstrations unnerved Saleh whom the Houthis accused of being a tool of Saudi and American oppression. In a further complication, the Houthis were adamant that Al-Qaeda in general and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in particular was an American creation as part of “grand conspiracy” to take over Yemen.<sup>27</sup>

Initially, Saleh tried to buy off the Houthi family, an honored tradition in dealing with the tribes, but they refused. When the president visited Saada in January 2003, a hostile crowd chanting the *shi’ar* ran out of town. In March 2003, chanting protestors marched on the American embassy in Sana even though the government outlawed the offensive slogan. After attempted to appease the Houthis failed, the government launched a counterinsurgency operation in June 2004, and killed Hussein in September.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Shaun Overton, “The Yemenis Arms Trade. Still a Concern for Terrorism and Regional Security,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, vol. 3, no. 9, May 6, 2005; John R. Bradley, *After the Arab Spring*, 112.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Riedel, “Who Are the Houthis and Why Are We in War with Them,” *The New Geopolitics of the Middle East*, Brookings Institute, December 18, 2017; Lucas Winter, “Conflict in Yemen: Simple People, Complicated Circumstances,” *Middle East Policy Council*, vol. 18, spring, no. 1, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas Winter, “Conflict in Yemen: Simple People, Complicated Circumstances,” *Middle East Policy Council*, vol. 18, spring, no. 1, 2011.



Rather than quelling the Houthi insurgency, Hussein's death created a "martyr" which his family used to mobilize a considerable resistance. Unsurprisingly, Iranian media devoted extensive coverage to the death of the leader, placing it in the context of the broader Shiite struggle against the United States and Saudi Arabia. The Iranians emphasized that Hussein was a victim of the Wahhabi hate of the Shiites. As one media outlet put it "an ally of Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia killed the Shiite leader Hussein al Houthi and other 400 Houthis."<sup>29</sup>

To what extent the Iranian pro-Houthi rhetoric translated into immediate help for the insurgency is not clear. In the first five out of the six rounds of the "Houthi wars" against the Saleh regime—June–September 2004, March–June 2005, November 2005–early 2006, January–June 2007, March–July 2008—the clashes were sporadic and confined to the Saada governorate. Under the leadership of Abdul Malik, the younger brother of Hussein, the Houthis scored few decisive victories, but Saleh chose to suspend the fighting, either to regroup or to find a negotiated solution. Major General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, a close confidant of Saleh who was in charge of the counterinsurgency, was criticized for his heavy-handed policy which allegedly generated more resistance to the government.

In any event, by 2004, the Houthi movement which attracted numerous Zaydi followers from neighboring tribes aimed at creating an autonomous region in the north. The Houthis run their prisons and schools, collected taxes, recruited children soldiers, and smuggled arms and drugs. Badreddine al Houthi who served as the spiritual leader of Ansar Allah made statements alluding to a future imamate. In a widely quoted 2005 interview with *Al Wasat*, the older Houthi praised the imamate as superior to democracy, adding that this was the only system that could restore a week ummah. On the practical side, his son Abdul Malik laid the foundation of an independent media system to serve the region. In 2007, he founded a website *Al Minbar* (the Pulpit) which offered *khutbas*, scholarly teaching, and commentaries "to direct the nation and spread awareness of Islamic teaching in the best possible way." In due course, the Houthis

<sup>29</sup> Kayhan Newspaper, A Review of the History of the Six Wars of the Yemeni Government Against Al-Houthi: Ansarullah, A Leader of the Struggle for Demands of Yemenis, September 11, 2014, available at [www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=3023747](http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=3023747); Ansarullah Movement from the Beginning to the Present Day; Hussein al-Houthi's journey to Iran, [defapress.ir/fa/news/43191/جنش-انصارالله-از-پیدایش-تاکنون-سفر-حسین-الحوثی-به-ایران](http://defapress.ir/fa/news/43191/جنش-انصارالله-از-پیدایش-تاکنون-سفر-حسین-الحوثی-به-ایران).

created the *al Masira* TV channel which was streamed from Lebanon. The Houthis also vigorously prompted the *Eid al Ghadeer*, named after the event in which Mohammed proclaimed Ali to be the Imam. For its part, the government accused Abdul Maliki of launching a Hezbollah-like organization in order to create a separate state in the north.<sup>30</sup>

The continuing violence, including attacks on the military and government officials, roadside bombs became a severe threat to the regime. Adding to the atmosphere of lawlessness were the frequent kidnapping of foreigners, a tribal custom used to pressure the government for concession. As a rule, the hostages were released after complex negotiations over a particular grievance. However, in June 2009, nine foreigners were kidnapped and killed outside Saada. The president blamed the Houthis, but others suggested that the atrocity was committed by an AQAP cell. Some Western observers, however, argued that at the time Al-Qaeda in Yemen did not kill civilians. Despite Saleh's offer of a \$250,000 reward, the murders remained unsolved.<sup>31</sup>

On August 11, 2009, the government responded with a massive attack on Houthi strongholds codenamed Scorched Earth. The fighting which killed thousands of government soldiers, Houthi rebels, and civilians became internationalized when the Houthis crossed the Saudi border and seized two villages in the Jabal al Dukhan region. The insurgents asserted that the Saudis let the Yemeni army use their territory, a claim which Riyadh vehemently denied. After several months of heavy fighting, in early 2010, Abdul Malik agreed to a deal, but sporadic violence persists.<sup>32</sup>

Yemen's "Arab Spring" launched by youthful protesters against President Saleh in Sana, in 2011, revived the Houthi prospects. After considerable pressure, Saleh resigned, paving the way for his vice president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, a Sunni born in the southern governorate of Abyan to assume power. On February 21, 2012, Hadi was elected president for a two-year term; in 2014, his mandate was extended for another year. Hadi's immediate priority was to restore the ruined economy

<sup>30</sup> Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures. Civil War, Saudi Adventurism, and the Future of Arabia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 178; *Al Minbar*, Mission Statement; Lucas Winter, "Conflict in Yemen: Simple People, Complicated Circumstances," *Middle East Policy Council*, vol. 18, spring, no. 1, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Ginny Hills, *Yemen Endures*.

<sup>32</sup> BBC, Yemen rebels 'seize Saudi area,' *BBC News*, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8341875.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8341875.stm); "Houthis Say They Will Withdraw from Saudi If Riyadh Ends Attacks," Naharnet (AFP), 23 December 2009. Retrieved 29 December 2009.

and put an end to the conflict in the north. However, his economic reforms, dictated by the United Nations (UN) and international donors, stirred up strong opposition from tribal leaders and segments of the Yemeni elite which flourished in the traditional patronage system perfected by Saleh. Political reforms fared no better because the proposed federal structure was giving the provinces more autonomy run into opposition from numerous elements aggrieved by efforts to turn Yemen into a federation. The federal map drawn with the help with UN experts failed to reflect the myriads of tribal arrangement and clashing historical claims.

However, it was the manipulation of Saleh who resisted giving up power which doomed the Hadi government. In a secret deal, Saleh, who commanded the loyalty of some half of the Yemeni military, put his weight behind his former foes. In 2014, the combined Houthi-Saleh forces launched an offensive in which they took occupied Sana. In January 2015, the Houthis seized the presidential palace, resolved the parliament, and established the Revolutionary Committee. Hadi was put under house arrest but managed to escape to Aden where he declared himself to be lawful president. The international community, the powerful Hashid tribal confederation, and the military forces loyal to Hadi rejected the Houthi Revolutionary Committee. However, the victorious Houthis overrun large swath of Yemeni territory, including the port of Hodeida, the southern governorate of Taiz, and almost took over Aden.

The swift victory of the Houthis surprised both the Yemenis and outside observers. The Houthis justified their action by claiming that the Hadi administration was as corrupt and mismanaged as that of his predecessor. Supporters of *Ansar Allah*, many of them the young activists who brought down the Saleh regime in the hope of creating a more democratic and equitable society, were most susceptible to such claims. For their part, Abdul Maliki and his brother Yahya al Houthi, the official spokesman of Ansar Allah, categorically denied any ambition to rule the country, noting that their only goal was to fight corruption and receive a fair share of the economic pie after decades of governmental neglect. In yet another successful appeal, the Houthi portrayed Hadi as an “American stooge” for allowing drone strikes on AQAP operatives, including the one that killed Anwar al Awlaki in September 2011. Since the Houthis claimed that Al-Qaeda was an American invention, they could justify their campaign as “a preemptive war” to protect their ancestral home in Saada. As *Ansar Allah* proclamation stated, Saada “was the center of future Islamic

resurgence during the Messianic age,” and both Jews and Christians tried to prevent this outcome because it would “lead to their demise.”<sup>33</sup>

Foreign observers and United Nations officials were taken aback by the event. Ginny Hill, a leading expert on Yemen who worked as a consultant for the United Nations, recalled that “the rebels simply said they wanted their people released from prison, the withdrawal of Yemeni army from Saada, and the freedom to worship according to their tradition.”<sup>34</sup> Admitting to an early sympathy for the Houthi narrative, the now chastened Hill criticized the diplomats and foreign advisers for failing to realize the Houthi role in undermining Hadi’s transition. Calling their “arrogance staggering,” she explained that they bought into the “utopian” plans for a constitutional sound, a democratic system without realizing that in Yemen there were always “significant gaps between the formal power structure and informal networks of patronage.” Other observers were more lenient toward Westerner who had to deal with Yemen. As one analyst put it, Yemen’s “tribal mosaic was complex and subject to frequently shifting alliances,” making the understanding of internal dynamics difficult.<sup>35</sup>

If Westerners were oblivious to the complex Yemeni system, they were virtually clueless to the Iranian role in supporting the Houthi insurgency.

### THE IRGC IN YEMEN: A2/AD AND A “SOUTHERN HEZBOLLAH?”

As long as the Houthis were confined to their mountainous base in Saada, Iran provided little material assistance to its fulsome rhetorical support. In 2009, the Yemeni Navy seized a small boat with Iranian weapons, but there was little to indicate that the IRGC was invested in the project. Things changed, however, around the time of the mass protests in Sana. Appointed as deputy IRGC chief for political affairs, Brigadier General Rasool Sanaee Rad spotted an opportunity to advance the Houthis amid the growing chaos. As a semi-official spokesman for the Yemeni portfolio, Sanaee Rad promised Houthis to send advisors and help “poor Yemeni people” subject to Saudi bullying. However, it is not clear whether the

<sup>33</sup> Ginny Hill, *Yemen Endures*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 177.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 181, 266.

<sup>35</sup> Hill, *Yemen Endures*, 248, 265; Mehran Kamrava, *Troubled Water: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf*, 2018, Cornell University Press, p. 144.



During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran used the A2/AD strategy to disrupt oil shipment in the Strait of Hormuz. In 1985, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the IRGC to create a naval unit, *Neyroye Daryaa Sepah-e Iran* (NEDSA) under the command of Hossein Alaei. Initially, NEDSA engaged in the “tankers war,” small boat attacks on oil tankers traversing the Straits, prompting the United States to start a reflagging and protection operation. When, in April 1988, Iranian mines damaged one of its ships, the United States launched Operation Praying Mantis which, among others, destroyed two offshore Iranian oil terminals and compelled Ayatollah Khomeini to sue for a cease-fire with Iraq. The NEDSA failure, however, spurred the IRGC to search for an improved A2/AD strategy. On January 25, 2005, Mujtaba Zolnur, a high-ranking official at the Revolutionary Guards stated that “this [naval warfare] is another weak point of the enemy because we have certain methods for fighting in the sea, so war will spread into the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean.”<sup>38</sup>

CENTCOM commanders were aware of the NEDSA’s goals. In 2006, General John Abizaid stated that the IRGC’s naval strategy was “designed primarily to internalize a conflict by choking off oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz.” General Lloyd Austin told a Senate hearing that “Iran maintains hegemonic ambitions and will continue to pose a threat to the region through the employment of various anti access and area denial capabilities.” Mark Gunzinger, author of a study on the subject named it “Anti Access/Area Denial with a Persian Twist,” noted that despite modest conventional naval resources, Iran would seek to use a “wide range network of clients and proxy groups” to disrupt traffic in the Gulf and hinder American operations.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, even those most familiar with Iran’s A2/AD plans did not realize that the conflict in Yemen expanded Tehran’s ambition. In 2009, an Iranian intelligence-gathering ship took up a position near the Eritrean archipelago of Dahlak to monitor the maritime traffic. In the same year, reports indicated that Tehran was looking for ways to invest in the Yemeni port of Midi. According to *Al Watan*, Iran tried to “turn Yemen into a regional arena for conflict,” by having a say over Bab al-Mandab, a

<sup>38</sup> Quoted Anthony Cordesman and Martin Klieber, *Iran’s Military Forces and Fighting Capability*, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> David Dileggo, Alma Keshavarz, Robert J. Bunker, eds. *Iran and Hezbollah. Hybrid Warfare Activity, A Small Wars Journal Anthology*. (Bloomington, iUniverse) 2016, p. 36 and 436; Mark Gunzinger, “Outside In. Operating from Range to Defeat Iran’s Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2011, 21, 31.

passageway between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Also, in 2009, the Yemeni Navy intercepted an Iranian ship carrying military cargo between the Midi and Hodeida, an important port on the Red Sea.<sup>40</sup>

With the Houthis triumphant march south, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei became confident enough to order NEDSA under the command of Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi to work on ambitious 20-year A2/AD plan (known in Farsi as *Strategi-e Zed-e Dastresi/Enkar—ZD/E*). Published by IRGC-linked Imam Hussein University in 2012, the document was titled “Strategic Triangle Maritime, Irregular Maritime Warfare” (*Mosalath-e Estrategik-e Darayi, Jange-e Daryai Namonzam*). The strategy to ward off a possible attack against its interests called for retaliatory action by disrupting a triangle of maritime choke points stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the Red Sea, and the Strait of Malacca in the Indian Ocean. NEDSA, in conjunction with the regular navy (*Neyroyi Daryai Artesh*), planned to use traditional A2/AD capabilities such as land and sea-based anti-ship missiles and sea mines. Asymmetrical guerrilla tactics called for the deployment of swift boats for swarming operations, man-operated suicide boats, and drone boats laden with explosives.<sup>41</sup>

Houthis’ occupation of Sana in 2014 opened up a new vista for the Iranians. Qassem Suleimani described the development as a “golden opportunity” (*moqiat-e tala’ee*), prompting Alireza Zakani, a hardline Majlis member to state that Iran was now in control of “four capitals,” Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus, and Sana. Zakani was not the only one to allude to Iran’s ongoing project of extending the “Shiite crescent” to its southern rim. Even Hassan Rouhani, the moderate Iranian president joined the celebration. In February 2015, he praised the Houthis control of Sana as “brilliant and resounding victory.” After failing to destabilize the Kingdom from within, as noted above, the Iranians considered the low-intensity conflict along the Saudi border to be the next best thing. In

<sup>40</sup> Michael Knights and Farsin Nadimi, “Curbing Houthi Attacks on Civilian Ships in the Bab al-Mandab,” *The Washington Institute, Policy-Watch* 2998, July 27, 2018; Michael Theodoulou, ‘Rebellion reflects ‘regional rivalry,’ November 9, 2009, available at <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/rebellion-reflects-regional-rivalry-1.593779>.

<sup>41</sup> The Report of a US Think Tank About Iran’s Anti-Access Strategy, *Mashregh News Agency*, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/669094/>; گزارش-اندیشکده-آمریکایی-از-راهبرد-ضددسترسی-ایران-در-منطقه-عکس: Farhad Rezaei, *Iran’s Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement: Politics of Normalizers and Traditionalists*, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

the words of one analyst, “somebody in Tehran seems to be playing with a metaphorical dial of tension to irritate without actually prompting a direct Saudi-Iranian clash.”<sup>42</sup>

As with all other IRGC-QF proxy programs, finding effective ways to transfer weapons was key. Houthi’s takeover of Sana and the Hodeida port solved Quds Force’s logistic problems of weapons delivery. By 2012, the IRGC’s Weapons Transfer Unit (Unit 190) under the command of Brigadier General Behnam Shahariyari and Brigadier General Sayyed Jabar Hosseini looked for ways to smuggle weapons to Yemen. When *Ansar Allah* took over Sana, Mahan Air, the IRGC airliner, moved to create an “air bridge,” starting with two daily flights. Later on, an Iranian flotilla delivered military cargo to the port of Hodeida.<sup>43</sup>

This logistic window of opportunity, however, closed in March 2015 when Saudi Arabia and a coalition of nine mostly Arab countries launched an intervention at the request of the Abdrabbou Mansur Hadi. Codenamed Operation Decisive Storm followed by Operation Restoring Hope. Alarmed by the collapse of Hadi’s last outpost in Aden, the Saudis, under the activist King Salman and his son, Mohammed bin Salman who held the Yemen portfolio in the government, decided to roll back the Houthi advances. Having determined that the free Iranian operation in Yemen would endanger Riyadh, the Obama administration provided logistic and intelligence support. The Americans had also helped with interdiction. For instance, in April 2015, the United States dispatched the USS *Theodor*

<sup>42</sup> Quds Online, The rise of Iran’s supreme power in the region, November 13, 2014, [quds-online.ir/news/246473/ظهور\\_قدرت\\_برتر\\_ایران\\_در\\_منطقه](http://quds-online.ir/news/246473/ظهور_قدرت_برتر_ایران_در_منطقه); Dana, Iran has dominated the four Arab capitals, *Dana.Ir*, [www.dana.ir/news/152213.html](http://www.dana.ir/news/152213.html); ایران-بر-4-پایتخت-عربی-مسلط-شده-است; Rouhani says “brilliant and resounding victory” in Yemen; Iranian prisoners freed, *Aden Alghad*, [adengd.net/news/124484/#.VCQUb\\_ldWjI](http://adengd.net/news/124484/#.VCQUb_ldWjI); Nadir Uskowi, *Temperature Rising. Iran Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, 2603; Thomas Juneau, “Iran’s Policy Toward the Houthis. A Limited Return on a Modest Investment.” *International Affairs*, 92, No. 3 (2016), 649–963; Simon Henderson, “Conflict and Cover Up,” *The Hill*, January 25, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Schmitt and Robert F. Worth, “With Arms for Yemen, Rebels Seek Wider Middle East War,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2012; Revision of US Strategies to Prevent Iran from Transferring Weapons, *Tabyin Center*, [www.tabyincenter.ir/qadim/index.php/rasad/](http://www.tabyincenter.ir/qadim/index.php/rasad/); تجدید-نظر-در-استراتژی-امریکا-در-جایز-داشتن-ایران-از-انتقال-سلاح; Mahan Air: An Airline that supports Iranian-backed conflicts in the Middle East, [afghanistan.asia-news.com/prs/articles/cnmi\\_st/features/2017/03/27/feature-03](http://afghanistan.asia-news.com/prs/articles/cnmi_st/features/2017/03/27/feature-03).



*Roosevelt* to stop a flotilla of Iranian vessels bearing military cargo to the Houthis.<sup>44</sup>

Having determined to turn the Houthis into a naval proxy, NEDSA was keen to test its A2/AD strategy in the Bab al-Mandab Straits. Iranian supply of asymmetrical warfare was hand-tailored to the peculiarities of the geopolitical terrain. In addition to anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCAM), the Houthis were given radar systems, sophisticated mines, and explosive drone boats. In the ensuing four years, the Houthis launched several attacks on Saudi ships and port facilities in Jizan, a strike on a Turkish-flagged bulk food carrier, and engaged in extensive mining of crucial sea lanes. In November 2016, the chief of staff of Artesh, General Mohammed Hossein Baqeri, indicated that Iran might seek a naval base in Yemen, apparently in Hodeida. Speaking to a group of naval commanders, Baqeri explained that “we need distant bases, it may be possible to have a few bases on the shores of Yemen or Syria, or bases on islands or floating islands. Is having bases less than nuclear technology. I say it is worth a thousand times more.”<sup>45</sup>

The Iranians wasted little time in implementing their A2/AD strategy using the Houthis. On January 30, 2017, two speedboats attacked the Saudi frigate *al Madina* killing two sailors and in April 2017 a drone boat struck an oil distribution facility in Jazin and on November 27, 2017, *Al Masira* warned of the danger to “enemy vessels” in Bab al-Mandab. The TV station alluded to a speedboat attack on a Saudi frigate in January which killed two sailors. In May 2018, Reuters reported that two Houthi drone boats laden with explosives were destroyed in a failed attack on three commercial Saudi vessels.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Nader Uskowi, *Temperatures Rising*, loc. 2714.

<sup>45</sup> Iran Diplomacy, Iran’s success in Syria and the possibility of a long-term conflict, March 16, 2017, [irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1968033/](http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1968033/); موفقیت ایران در سوریه و احتمال درگیری طولانی مدت; Mojtaba Taleghani, Adventurous Expansionism Under the Guise of Defending Resistance Axis, *Mihan*, December 18, 2016, [mihan.net/1395/09/28/928/#m5](http://mihan.net/1395/09/28/928/#m5).

<sup>46</sup> Michael Knights and Farsin Nadimi, “Curbing Houthi Attacks on Civilian Ships in the Bab al-Mandab,” *The Washington Institute, Policy-Watch* 2998, July 27, 2018; Reuters, UAE Coaction Destroyed Two Boats, May 23, 2018; Maj. Gen. Bagheri: We May Have a Naval Base on the Coast of Yemen or Syria, *Asr Iran*, <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/507927/>; می‌شاید هت‌ش‌ا‌د‌ی‌ای‌ای‌ر‌د‌ه‌ا‌گ‌ی‌ا‌پ‌ه‌ی‌ر‌و‌س‌ا‌ی‌ن‌م‌ی‌ل‌ح‌ا‌و‌س‌ر‌د‌ی‌ن‌ا‌م‌ز‌د‌ی‌ا‌ش‌ی‌ر‌ق‌ا‌ب‌ر‌ک‌ش‌ل‌ر‌س‌; We May Have a Naval Base on the Coast of Yemen or Syria, *Donya-e Eqtesad*, <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/م‌ی‌ش‌ا‌ب‌ه‌ت‌ش‌ا‌د‌ه‌ا‌گ‌ی‌ا‌پ‌ه‌ی‌ر‌و‌س‌ا‌ی‌ن‌م‌ی‌ل‌ح‌ا‌و‌س‌ر‌د‌ی‌ن‌ا‌م‌ز‌د‌ی‌ا‌ش‌-64/1081134-ر‌ب‌خ‌ش‌خ‌ب‌>.

Things came to a head when, on July 25, 2018, the Houthis attacked a Saudi-flagged very large crude oil carrier *Arsan* and threatened another tanker. Israeli intelligence sources asserted that Iran's cargo ship *Saviz* was instrumental in coordinating the assault. Nasser Shabani, a Revolutionary Guards commander, admitted that Iran asked the Houthis to carry out the assault. His interview published by Fars News Agency on August 8, 2018, was quickly asserted that Shabani's words were distorted. However, the episode reflected a dispute at the highest level of the regime about how much of the Iranian involvement should be published. Just days before, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of *Kahyan*, a mouthpiece for Ayatollah Khamenei, called on the Houthis to continue their naval strikes against the Saudis. As an architect of the A2/AD, Khamenei held firm to the notion that the Houthi proxy should be integrated into the asymmetrical naval strategy.<sup>47</sup>

That the hardliners in Iran were compelled to hastily dissociate themselves from the *Arsan* attack indicated the high stakes of the Bab al-Mandab game. The environmental community was the first to sound the alarm about a potentially catastrophic oil spill from the tanker which carried two million barrels of crude oil. The Saudis temporarily suspended oil shipment through Bab al-Mandab, and Israel, whose traffic with Asia has traversed through the Red Sea, threatened a military response. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that "Israel would deploy its military if Iran were to try and block the Bab al Mandab Straits." Taking heed, the Houthis and their Iranian patrons ceased the campaign.<sup>48</sup>

Hopes for turning Yemen into "southern Hezbollah" to challenge Saudi Arabia did not turn out to be a success either. In a February 2014 interview with Fars News, Qassem Suleimani implied that Iran would seek to gain control of oil supplies in Shiite-populated regions of the Middle

<sup>47</sup> General Sharif's Reaction to a Claim Made by one of the IRGC Commanders, *Parsineh*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.parsineh.com/fa/news/457100/>; سردار شریف یمنی-هاو لبنانی-هادر سطحی-هستند-که-بیتوانند-از-کشور-شان-دفاع-کنند; Who is Nasser Shabani, the IRGC Commander who Made Controversial Statement on Yemen? *Radio Farda*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/op-ed-who-is-the-irgc-controversial-commander-on-Yemen/29419666.html>; Ansarullah Shooting to Riyadh: Dubai is the Next Target, *Kayhan Newspaper*, available at <http://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn40014737/>; شلیک-انصارالله-ریاض-لارز-متهران-وقتی-کیهان-خوی-زند; "Iran's Saviz 'Cargo Ship' Set Up Red Sea Attack on Saudi Tanker," *Debka*, July 28, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Knights and Farsin Nadimi, "Curbing Houthi Attacks on Civilian Ships in the Bab al-Mandab," *The Washington Institute, Policy-Watch* 2998, July 27, 2018; Simon Henderson, "Conflict and Cover Up," *The Hill*, January 25, 2018.

East. The Quds Force noted that the “Shiite crescent” is essentially an economic crescent—“and the most important economic issue in the world is oil. We know that 70 percent of global oil reserves are located in Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia where 80 percent of the oil is located in Shiite areas of the country such as Dammam and Katif.” Initially, the Houthis were poised to destabilize the Eastern Province. They increased cross-border raids into Jizan, Asaf, and Hajran provinces; they shelled military bases and civilians, forcing Riyadh to relocate a number of border villages. The Saudi air defenses intercepted missiles made fired into the Saudi territory. For instance, the Houthis fired a missile at the King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh. A January 2018 UN Panel of Experts identified that “The missile remnants, related military equipment, and military unmanned aerial vehicles that are of Iranian origin and were brought into Yemen.”<sup>49</sup>

Despite a new influx of Iranian weapons, including the sophisticated radio-controlled improvised explosive devices (RCIED), the Houthis lost ground to the Saudi-led coalition. While the insurgency held on to the capital Sana, coalition forces made important inroads into large swaths of its territory and pushed hard on the port of Hodeida. Even in areas still under Ansar Allah, opposition to the Houthis has been on the increase. Ironically, the former critics of President Saleh’s corruption created a highly oppressive and corrupt regime. Houthi loyalists were rewarded and their opponents subject to kidnappings for ransom, torture in special prisons, and forced disappearances. The capital Sana suffered especially badly because many inhabitants were connected to the al Amari family, the leaders of the Hashid confederation, and a major opponent of the Houthis.<sup>50</sup>

Ansar Allah’s control of Hodeida through which 70 percent of humanitarian aid came through gave rise to additional abuse and corruption, as the food was disproportionately channeled to all Houthi loyalists.

Going beyond the misappropriation of aid, however, the civil war created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis putting some 15 million at risk from starvation. Extensive coalition bombing which destroyed vital infrastructure was one of the reasons behind the tragedy. However, the collapse of the

<sup>49</sup> UN Panel of Experts, Yemen, January 26, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/letter-dated-26-january-2018-panel-experts-yemen-mandated-security-council-resolution>.

<sup>50</sup> “Harrowing Accounts of Torture in Houthi Prisons,” *Al Sharq al Awsat*, December 8, 2018; Maggie Michael, “ABC News AP Investigation Reveals Graphic Torture of Yemeni Prisoners by Houthis,” Associated Press, December 7, 2018; Con Coughlin, “Iran is the Force Behind the Houthis,” *The National UAE*, June 21, 2018.

Yemeni economy in the territories controlled by the Houthis was also linked to the inability or unwillingness of Iran to engage in the type of “dollar diplomacy” through which Saudi Arabia had previously supported President Saleh with billions of dollars. In fact, in the fall of 2017, the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) persuaded Saleh to rejoin the Hadi-led forces. In a televised speech, Saleh blamed his former partners for “recklessness” and called upon neighboring nations to stop their “aggression.” Soon after, on December 4, a Houthi hit squad assassinated Saleh as he was fleeing Sana.<sup>51</sup>

Saleh’s death weakened the Houthis who, in addition to the Hadi forces, had to face the former president’s loyalists when its forces had become depleted after years of fighting. Having no way to make up for the shortage, the Houthis were forced to rely on children recruits and instituted the death penalty for deserters. One survey found that Ansar Allah inducted some 16,000 children as young as ten. However, even these harsh measures were not enough to compensate for the fact that the Aden-based secessionist movement, *Hirak*, known more recently as Southern Resistance, added new muscle against the insurgency. Also, elements of ISIS in search of a new space after their defeat in Syria had relocated to Yemen, where they clashed with both AQAP and the Houthis whom they consider apostates. Coupled with the prospect of losing Hodeida, the mainstay of Houthi’s power, Ansar Allah was compelled to contemplate a political solution under the auspices of the United Nations, a position which it vehemently avoided in the past. In an unusual move for a movement which kept its connection to Iran and its proxies secret, in August 2018, a high-ranking Houthi delegation met with Hassan Nasrallah in public. Less than two months earlier, on June 29, 2018, Hezbollah leader paid homage to the Houthis: “I and all my brothers and the resistance in the world ... should bow in tribute to those fighters.”<sup>52</sup>

By publicizing its close ties with the Hezbollah, the Houthis were trying to position themselves as a dominant player in the new round of negotiations led by the UN in Sweden. The Stockholm Agreement of December 13,

<sup>51</sup> Faisal Edroos, “How Did Houthi-Saleh Alliance Collapse,” *Al Jazeera*, December 4, 2017; Saeed Al Batati, Al Houthis radicalised after Saleh death: Lavrov, *Gulf News*, December 28, 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/yemen/al-houthis-radicalised-after-saleh-death-lavrov-1.2148646>.

<sup>52</sup> UN Panel of Experts, Yemen, January 26, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/letter-dated-26-january-2018-panel-experts-yemen-mandated-security-council-resolution>; Sunniva Rose, Hezbollah is flaunting its support for Yemen’s Houthis, *The National*, September 16, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/hezbollah-is-flaunting-its-support-for-yemen-s-houthis-1.770904>.

2018, provided for a de-escalation and confidence-building measures such as demilitarization of Taiz, exchange of prisoners, and a mutual redeployment out of the city and port of Hodeida supervised by a Redeployment Coordination Committee. Since the Houthis received Iranian oil through the port of Hodeida to finance their war, the latter was seen as vital to solving the conflict. Despite efforts by Martin Griffith, the UN special envoy, no meaningful progress on implementing the Stockholm Agreement was made. Major General Michael Anker Løllesgaard, the head of the Redeployment Coordination Committee, expressed confidence in the future of the negotiations but privately the UN officials expressed frustration with the Houthis. Yemen's Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yemeny was blunter, noting that "the Houthis intransigence confirms their loyalties to Iran's negotiating tactics. These usually begin with the implicit approval of negotiating solutions, followed by complete retraction in order to force the international community to make more concessions and implicit to fait accompli on the Yemeni government."<sup>53</sup>

Al-Yemeny has pressured the United Nations to state publicly that the Houthis had hindered the peace process. It is not entirely clear, however, whether such a declaration would help the peace process along. The Revolutionary Guards have considered the struggle in Yemen to be an important proxy war with Saudi Arabia and one they could win cheaply. In the words of one analyst, "hardline elements appear to see as a relatively low-cost and low-risk means of sustaining political, economic, and military pressure on Saudi Arabia." Experts estimated it to be a few million dollars a year, a fraction of the billions which Riyadh invested so far. Iran also benefited from the series of highly publicized mishaps by the Saudi-led coalition such as the bombing of school buses and civilian infrastructure. The international community had also blamed Saudi Arabia for the widespread famine while the Houthis had escaped censure.<sup>54</sup>

Arguably, the Houthi case represents one of the more successful uses of proxy power to date. However, as the concluding chapter makes clear, the cost-benefit calculus of the proxy wars has varied across cases but has recently moved into negative territory.

<sup>53</sup> Sunniya Rose, "Hezbollah Is Flaunting Its Support for Yemen's Houthis," *The National UAE*, September 16, 2018; quoted in Soeren Korn, "Is Iran Winning in Yemen?" Gatestone Institute, April 11, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/letter-dated-26-january-2018-panel-experts-yemen-mandated-security-council-resolutionn's>.

<sup>54</sup> Soeren Korn, "Is Iran Winning in Yemen?" Gatestone Institute, April 11, 2019; Gerald Feierstein, Iran's Role in Yemen and Prospects for Peace, *The Iran Primer*, December 5, 2018, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2018/dec/05/iran's-role-yemen-and-prospects-peace>.

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## Conclusion: The Success of the Proxy Strategy and Its Limits

This study demonstrates that the Islamic Republic of Iran's use of proxies has been a resounding success in spreading its revolution and creating the Shiite Crescent, also known as the Axis of Resistance across the Middle East, the Gulf States, and Yemen. With limited conventional resources, within three decades the regime has managed to expand its quest for political influence in the Middle East in ways which few would have predicted in 1979. Hezbollah, the flagship of the proxy militias, has become the de facto ruler of Lebanon while posing a serious threat to Israel. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) enabled Iran to extend its reach to southern Israel.

The Revolutionary Guards saved the regime of Bashar Assad while turning Syria into a semi-vassal of Tehran. By creating an extensive network of Shiite militias, Iran became deeply embedded in Iraq. On the Shiite Crescent outer periphery, the Houthi insurgency in Yemen has extended Iran's Anti-Access, Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy into the Bab al-Mandab Straits and threatened Saudi Arabia and its vital oil infrastructure.

There is no single explanation for the remarkable success of the proxy project. Rather it is a combination of several Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC) winning strategies. Turning non-enemy civilians into human shields to embed military assets has served as a strong force multiplier because it reduced the deterrence capacity of state actors restrained by the international humanitarian law of proportionality. As well-known, state actors in a conflict must refrain from targeting a lawful

military objective if the attack can be expected to result in unnecessary civilian harm. In the early decades of the proxy era, Israel was restrained in pursuing Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad militants who were hiding in public spaces such as schools, hospitals, mosques, and even private residences. More recently, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen has encountered difficulties in targeting the embedded Houthis.

Another factor of success is the clandestine and complex nature of the ties between the Revolutionary Guards, and its bank of proxies has kept the spotlight off Iran, offering the regime the so-called plausible deniability. For instance, the Iranians have preferred to portray the groups operating in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia as authentic grass-root Shiite opposition to the House of al-Saud. In Bahrain, where initially genuine opposition to the Khalifa family has operated along with Iranian-backed cells, the demarcation line was hard to draw. Even though recently, most of the Gulf militias have received their orders from Tehran, critics have rejected Saudi and Bahraini claims of Iranian subversion. Some went as far as to accuse the authorities of so creating an “anti-Iranian hysteria” to hide their ill-treatment of the Shiite minorities.

The lower-intensity, sporadic linkage which did not fit the paradigm of the Sunni-Shite animosity proved even more impenetrable to outside observers. For example, the American intelligence community did not comprehend the extent of the initial contacts between Al-Qaeda and the Revolutionary Guards in Sudan and the extent of the Iranian involvement in the civil war in Somalia. Until the 2011 discovery of Osama bin Laden documents in Abbottabad, the intelligence community did not realize the extent of Quds Force’s patronage of Al-Qaeda. While most of the Osama bin Laden family had left Iran, there have been reports that his son and heir apparent, Hamza, had sought renewed shelter there, along with Saif al Adel. The same reports indicated that Ayman al Zawahiri, the head of Al-Qaeda Central, has been hiding in Iran. Quds Force long-standing support of elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan has been likewise ignored until quite recently.

Although some of these strategies predated the creation of the Quds Force, it is Qassem Suleimani, the second Quds Force commander, who should be credited with their success. Considered one of the world’s best practitioners of asymmetrical warfare, Suleimani attained a unique position in Iran. He can count on virtually unlimited support of Ayatollah Khamenei, another ardent supporter of revolutionary export. As such, he is the virtual embodiment of the ideological strain in Iranian foreign

policy. His self-image as the “viceroy of Iraq” and the *de facto* ruler of Syria indicate that speaks volumes to Suleimani’s ambition to manage the entire Shiite Crescent arena.

If the unique blend of strategy and personality have accounted for much of Iranian success, the lack of Western resolve in standing up to the proxy project and its brutal methods has also played an important role. As noted, President Ronald Reagan refused to bomb Iranian targets after the destruction of the American embassy and the marine barracks in Beirut. The United States and Europe opted to bargain for their citizens that Hezbollah held hostage. There was no censure of Iran despite its involvement in multiple attacks on American targets in the Middle East and beyond. Indeed, the Clinton White House refused to name Tehran as a culprit in the Dhahran bombing despite the findings of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Having extensive trade relations with Iran, the EU was even more reticent than Washington to jeopardize its standing with Tehran.

The international community was equally permissive in tolerating the massive violation of the laws of war by Iranian proxies. Hezbollah constructed its entire infrastructure in the Shiite villages along the border with Israel, exposing the population to Israeli bombing raids. Hamas and PIJ borrowed a page from Hezbollah in configuring their defenses in the Gaza Strip. The Houthis used civilians as a human shield, kidnapped and inducted children, manipulated food supplies to punish tribes loyal to the government, and laid up to two million mines which killed scores of non-combatants. The pro-Iranian militia, however, has rarely been called out by the international community. The 2019 UN International Mines Awareness Day did not mention the Houthis and their victims in the roster of countries affected.

With little push-back from the West, there were few costs to international adventures, a highly fortuitous development for the revolutionary exporters facing criticism for undermining state interests. Indeed, the negotiated political order was suffused with a rigorous cost-benefit analysis of the revolutionary export venture. State-minded elites considered some forms of foreign adventurism harmful to the interest of the state.

To recall, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had the radical Office of Liberation Movement (OLM) disbanded to protect Iranian relations with Saudi Arabia. Most recently, the costly intervention in Syria amid growing economic hardship had stirred up unrest around the country. It was hardly comforting to the Revolutionary Guards that the demonstrators linked

their predicament to the cost of hegemony. They frequently-heard chant, “leave Syria, think about us,” was a clear indication that the proxy project was not popular among the rank-and-file citizen.

However, it was sanctions that dramatically increased the “cost of doing business” for both the Guards and the nation. The Islamic Republic has lived with sanctions since the Carter administration, but in the last decade, the economic pressure had intensified. Rattled by the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, the international community imposed harsh sanctions, including a virtual ban on exporting oil. Faced with an unprecedented collapse of the economy, Ayatollah Khamenei sided with the state elites that pushed for an agreement against bitter opposition from the Guards and other hardliners. The latter considered a nuclear capability to be the best protector of their revolutionary project, but the Supreme Leader, sensing an existential threat to the regime, had overruled them, paving the way to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by the Obama administration, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China.

In 2018, President Donald Trump pulled out of the JCPOA and imposed new and harsh sanctions and named the IRGC a terror group, not least because of its extensive network of proxies. Trump explained that the Guards had funneled money released in the nuclear deal to their militias, which, in turn, fomented more chaos in the Middle East. The administration made clear that any attempt to renegotiate the agreement would need to include Iran’s commitment to refrain from running the proxy network. There is little doubt that adding the proxy provision on top of limitations on the production of medium- and long-range missiles, another stipulation of the administration, would make negotiations with Tehran extremely difficult.

To gain tractions against Washington, the IRGC has deployed a two-step strategy to push back on the American sanctions. Under the slogan of “if we cannot sell oil, no one else would,” the naval IRGC unit *Neyroze Daryae Sepah-e Iran* (NEDSA) allegedly sabotaged two oil tankers in the Straits of Hormuz and another two in the port of Fujairah, in the spring of 2019. At the same time, the Shiite militias in Iraq and Yemen had attacked American assets in Iraq and Saudi oil installations. The Houthis used Iranian-made drones and missiles against targets in Saudi Arabia. All along, the Iranians warned that a kinetic attack on their soil would prompt a counterattack by Hezbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ on Israel, a deterrence message not likely to go unnoticed by observers.

Given the current amount of volatility, the results of the Iranian-American confrontation can vary dramatically from regime change, a solution that Washington prefers, to a war in the Middle East, an outcome which hardliners may prefer. To the extent that this study can offer an insight into the Iranian conundrum, the conclusions are sobering. The proxy militias have become an integral part of the regime's playbook for extending its dominance in the region. Only an extremely high "cost of doing business" in the form of economically devastating sanctions may persuade the regime to adopt a more conventional state-oriented foreign policy.

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