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## Iran's Protests: Unity Remains, But National Angst is Unresolved Persia Rising: The Strategic Ramifications of Iran's Regional Proxies

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### Iran's Protests: Unity Remains, But National Angst is Unresolved

**Analysis. By Gregory R. Copley, Editor, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs.** Iran, during late December 2017 and early January 2018, saw the first upsurge of widespread protests in civil society since 2009. However, there is little firm evidence that the Iranian governance structures around the ruling clerics are about to undergo sudden, unanticipated change in the immediate future.

But there are signs in Iranian society of profound evolutionary change; signs which could point to danger in the foreseeable future. The danger, expressed by the protests, is the result of improving economic performance in Iran, married to an even more rapid rise in societal expectations, particularly after a period of gradually worsening personal economic fortunes.

The current Government of Supreme Leader *Ayatollah* Ali Hoseini-Khamene'i and Pres. *Hojjat ol-Eslam* Hasan Fereidun Rouhani is facing some of the same factors faced by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1978-79:

- Social and economic expectations rising more rapidly than can be delivered (today largely caused by the expectation that the signing of the so-called "nuclear deal" would lead to immediate improvements in life;
- The growing education and restlessness of young Iranians, who now dominate the demographic pattern; and
- The perception among many educated younger Iranians that they are excluded from participation in governance (today by the reality that government is the province of the Shi'a clerics).

But it should be stressed that broad, popular internal support for Iranian unity and Persian historical and civilizational values may be higher now than at any time since the fall of the Shah in 1979.

So the signs may be good for the nation-state, but less positive for the governing structures. Even so, the belief in the prospect for popular revolt in Iran, expressed by Western (particularly US) media and government statements, is premature. History has

shown that when external pressures are applied to Iran that Iranians tend to put national unity ahead of any distaste they may have for their government.

That is not to say that unscheduled governmental change is currently impossible, but rather that — unlike 1978-79 — the conditions are not propitious for transformational change.

There are a significant number of challenges which face the clerical governing structures at this time:

1. The health of Supreme Leader *Ayatollah* Ali Hoseini-Khamene'i remains poor<sup>1</sup> and it is possible that he will not be able to remain in office much longer;
2. There is infighting, or more naked competition, at many levels within the clerical power structure, including within the clerics' own Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC: *Pasdaran*), not least over and flowing from the question of succession to the position of Supreme Leader, and what this could do to the shape of governance, and the holders of key posts. There is also the question, for example, of whether the "reformist" faction, now represented by Pres. Rouhani, will be blamed for failing to deliver what the public expected, and whether this would lead to a collapse of the reformist position, giving an opening to hard-line clerics, which could in turn lead to even greater public disenchantment;
3. The fact that the economy has begun to rally — with the easing of international sanctions following the July 14, 2015, the "nuclear deal": the P5+1 (People's Republic of China (PRC), France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the European Union (EU), and Iran accord, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — had created a sense of "rising expectations" within the public which the Government cannot meet, in terms of satisfying material and economic demands;
4. Continued international uncertainty about the future of the JCPOA and the sanctions has meant that foreign investor confidence in Iran has yet to fully recover, making it difficult for the private sector to help satisfy pent-up domestic demand, or even for improved employment levels. At the same time, moving from a system — under sanctions and isolation — of top-down controls on economic and social activities, to a more open-market situation has not been smooth, and public belief in the probity of national leaders (and the clerics generally) has suffered;
5. The general Iranian perception of a widespread international threat to the country, though not as comprehensive as in, say, 1990 or 2001, helps galvanize public belief that Iranians need to hold fast to their Persian historical identity. This, in some respects, challenges the clerics, who have been perceived to some degree to be anti-Persian and representative of an external religious system. The result has been a desire for the clerics to demonstrate a growing resurgence of classical Persian geopolitical thinking in the way they govern Iran; and this has, in fact, helped much of the public see the clerics as gradually conforming to a more traditional Persian model. It has also helped Iran achieve some key geopolitical advances<sup>2</sup>. It has also led the current leadership to stress Shi'ism as a distinctly Persian view of Islam (in other words, "nationalizing" the religion), something which has been reinforced by the xenophobic opposition to Shi'ism expressed by Saudi Arabia (as well as Qatar and Turkey, despite the attempts recently of those two states to temporize with Tehran);

6. The Government is being forced by the nature of real and perceived regional and global threats to fight or defend against a range of adversaries, particularly seen to revolve around the US, Saudi Arabia (and, to a degree, the UAE), and Israel, with other secondary concerns in the national security sphere. This is not only financially draining; it is also a deterrent to foreign direct investment and revived trade.

As a result, the consumer marketplace problems (price rises in basic foodstuffs) which resulted in public demonstrations starting on December 28, 2017, did not make matters easier for the Government. Even so, the public outcry could have been far worse. It did not match the levels of activity seen in 1999 and 2009, but the potential for a more deeply-seated problem for the Government could be seen.

The series of street protests began to take place on December 28, 2017, in Mashhad, Iran's second-largest city, and in, initially, at least three other cities, over rising food prices and inflation. Mashhad Governor Mohammad Rahim Norouzian said that the gatherings in his city were illegal. The protests were called "No to high prices" events. The price of a number of staple products, including eggs, had risen by as much as 40 percent in the days preceding the events, with cost rises attributed by farmers to higher costs for imported feed. Protests had spread by the next day to include a total of 10 cities (including Kermanshah, Noushahr, Sharoud, Nishapur, Mashhad, Kashmar, Birjand, Qom, and Yazd), and some of the crowds were chanting "death to the dictator" and "death to [Pres.] Rouhani". State media said on December 29, 2017, that 52 people had been arrested. It was understood that all the crowd control had been in the hands of the Police, and that neither the Revolutionary Guard nor the *Basij* paramilitary had been brought in to handle the problem. Police did, however, use water cannon, tear gas, and batons.

By January 4, 2018, it was being said that at least 20 people had been killed in the protests, and at least 450 arrested in Tehran (and some 90 percent of those were under the age of 25).

The protests had spread to the capital, Tehran, and to smaller cities and towns over the days following the initial demonstrations. So, even by January 4, 2018, the outbursts had not been fully contained, even though they did not at any stage seem to reach unmanageable proportions. IRGC Commander Maj.-Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari indicated that pro-Government rallies on January 3, 2018, had marked an end to the period of protest which he called "the sedition". But it was by no means clear that the Government could confirm that further unrest would not continue.

What was significant was that the protests began in areas normally considered the clerics main support regions: the countryside and smaller cities and towns. This differed from the 1999 and 2009 protests.

*The Washington Post* correspondent noted on January 4, 2018: "Six of the latest casualties took place during an attack on a police station in Qahdarijan, according to state television. The clashes were allegedly sparked by protesters who tried to steal guns from the station. State television also reported an 11-year-old boy and a 20-year-old man were killed in the town of Khomeinishahr, and a member of the Revolutionary Guard was killed in the town of Najafabad."

It is significant that the protests occurred at a time of rising public expectations, normally a time of greatest danger to governments which have relied on rising performance to

show how well they have been treating their populations. The great outbursts against the Shah in 1978 occurred at a time when Iran was, economically, growing rapidly, but when the Shah was extremely ill and there was division among leading members of the Government. The parallels with the conditions surrounding the 2017-18 protests (when the economy was growing and the supreme leader was ill) should not be ignored.

Youth unemployment is, once again, steadily rising in Iran, generally not a good sign at a concurrent time of rising expectations. The International Labor Organization (ILO) said that 26.7 percent of 15-24 year-olds were currently unemployed, although in some regions the percentage was much higher. Under-employment was also high, at an estimated 12.4 percent among 15 to 24 year-olds, according to the ILO.

The youth unemployment rate in January 2018 was several percentage points higher than during the 2009 demonstrations (when it was significantly under 25 percent). This becomes a factor in the degree to which crowds can be mobilized, particularly at a time when cell-phone texting communications applications are more sophisticated than they were in 2009. It now seems probable that, in Iran, the personal electronic communications capabilities of youths may have, by volume and technology, moved ahead of the extremely capable and advanced cyber and counter-cyber capabilities of the Iranian security agencies, particularly the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence & Security (MOIS) and the intelligence components of the IRGC.

Euromonitor International reported that 41.3 percent of Iranian homes had access to smart-phones in 2016, compared with 16.2 percent in 2011, and yet GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* sources in 2009 was able to identify that the MOIS and IRGC Intelligence capability to mount counter-cyber and cyber-based disruptive psychological operations accounted for the success of the Government in suppressing those protests around the 2009 Presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> Has the MOIS/IRGC capability grown to match the growth in the domestic threat factors (growing youth population, growing youth unemployment, growing smart-phone availability, and growing smart-phone applications' capabilities)?

There is no sign that any potential rivals for power are emerging from cover to mount an open challenge. At this point, as with the 1978-79 Iranian unrest, any crowd-based uprising could probably be dealt with by a combination of the security forces (starting with the civil police, but then rising to include the *Basij* paramilitary, the IRGC, and, potentially, the Armed Forces). Hence calls from some of the street protestors for the security services to join them; in reality, it would, if anything, be the other way around, but with the appearance of popular mobs being supported by the armed units.

The obvious *cæsar* waiting in the wings, and well outside the Rubicon, is Maj.-Gen. Qasem Suleimani, Commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, who has demonstrated considerable dynamism and success fighting for Iranian interests outside of Iran's formal borders (just as Julius *Cæsar* did, with his legions outside of Rome, returning to the Italian Peninsula at the Rubicon River, in 49 BCE). Clearly, the ambitious Gen. Suleimani has no desire at this stage to break cover and promote any agenda for his advancement; in fact, he may genuinely eschew such a proposal.

As GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* noted on April 14, 2017: "[H]ow much attention the leadership of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (the *Pasdaran*), the significant combat force, would be paying to ensuring national stability in the event that a vacuum was perceived to emerge. It seems probable that the *Pasdaran* itself could produce a strong leadership figure to fill such a vacuum in the way that Gen. Reza Khan did in

1921, removing the pro-British Government of Iran. [He then went on to serve, in 1923, as Prime Minister, until the Constituent Assembly appointed him as Shah, in 1925, to replace the last Qajar Shah, Ahmad Shah Qajar. That began the Pahlavi Dynasty.]”

For the moment, and with successful and careful Russian encouragement, Iran has dampened the strategic competition it has traditionally had with Turkey. Both states can now help each other, but their underlying strategic competition should not be forgotten. Apart from their present mutual need for each other in trade terms, their greatest strategic commonality is the fact that both are cautious allies, of necessity, of the Russian Federation, which must work hard to overcome the fear of Russian (and later Soviet) imperial designs on their territories.

On July 17, 2015, following the signing of the P5+1 [United Nations Five Permanent Members of the Security Council, plus Germany] JCPOA accords with Iran, this writer and International Strategic Studies Association (ISSA) Senior Fellow Dr Assad Homayoun wrote:

“The reality is that the post-agreement era will transform the fundamentals of Iran, including its self-perception, its goals, and socio-political framework. Iran, in other words, now becomes another country. The question which must be posed, before anything else, then, is what does Iran become? And when and how does the event start to transform Iran?”<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that the transformation has now begun. It has its own path, and external pressures to hurry it on its way may have unanticipated consequences.

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#### Footnotes:

1. For specifics, see: “Iranian Leadership Aspirants Move as ‘Supreme Leader’ Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamene’i Declines”, *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [April 14, 2017](#).
2. See, Bodansky, Yossef: “Is a New Iranian Empire Finally in the Making?”, in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [November 27, 2017](#).
3. See, particularly: “Iranian Political Battleground Serves as Breakout Case for Cyber, Psycho-Cyber, Warfare” in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [June 19, 2009](#).
4. “Now Can Cyrus and Darius Be Recalled: The Persians, Not the Clerics, Begin to Revive”, in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [July 17, 2015](#).

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## Persia Rising: The Strategic Ramifications of Iran’s Regional Proxies

**Analysis. By Jonathan Alexander Hoffman, Research Associate, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs.** The new strategic reality within the Middle East for 2018 could be said to be dominated by one enduring factor: Iran. Iran’s regional proxies, friendships, alliances, and relationships serve as the cornerstone of its strategic doctrine.

Iran continued to make dramatic gains throughout 2017, particularly following the removal of *al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī al-‘Irāq wa ash-Shām* (DĪ’ISH, aka ISIS/ISIL) from the majority of its territorial strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

By the end of 2017, Iranian proxies collectively represented a new supranational power dynamic within the greater Middle East. It is a force of activist paramilitaries estimated at more than 250,000 strong, and this new transnational dynamic remained capable of

causing and capitalizing upon regional unrest and turmoil. Recent advances made within Iraq and Syria will also be used by Iran as examples of success in order to further bolster its regional proxy campaign.

However, when analyzing Iranian proxy forces within the region, it is important to keep in mind that some organizations are more “proxy” than others. In other words, the extent to which certain groups go to advance Iran’s geostrategic ambitions depends largely on how developed/matured their relations are with Tehran.

As of January 2017, Iran was poised to capitalize upon these dramatic advances and further pursue its strategic geopolitical ambitions within the greater region and ultimately alter the regional balance of power further in its favor, even though they came of the rise of the hawkish Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MbS) in Saudi Arabia, and the rise and rhetoric of US Pres. Donald Trump, both of whom have focused on Iran as a major adversary.

More significantly, the strengthening of Iran’s regional projection capabilities<sup>1</sup> must be seen also in light of domestic popular unrest at home.

**Background and Historical Context:** Iran’s regional proxies have historically served as one of the primary tools for realizing the ultimate goals of Persia’s methodical strategic geopolitical goals.

Geographically speaking, Persia (Iran) is a mountainous country — strategically defended by the Zagros, Alborz, and Mahran mountain ranges — with two significant, largely uninhabitable, salt deserts: the *Dasht-e Kavir*, and the *Dasht-e Lut*. Due to this challenging landscape, Persia has historically always sought to influence/dominate the plains to its west within Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq and Syria). These plains would not only serve as an effective buffer area for the country outside its mountainous stronghold, but would also provide a clear path to the Mediterranean Sea.

While Iran’s mountains provided the country with a formidable defense structure, they posed serious problems to any sort of offensive operations: traversing this terrain in order to provide logistics, supplies, and manpower for any sort of offensive operation has proven historically challenging. Therefore, established proxies outside the mountainous stronghold would allow Persia/Iran to exert its influence within a desired area and circumvent the problems posed by the mountainous terrain.

Proxies also allowed Persia/Iran to overcome ethnic and linguistic barriers by providing indigenous — often Arab — forces to advance its Persian geopolitical imperative westward. Historically, the territories of what is now Iraq had always served as the foundation of Persian power projection throughout the Levant and onward by serving as a springboard for future offensive operations. These overarching geopolitical ambitions have remained constant regardless of the prevailing doctrine or ideology of Persia/Iran’s various rulers, and continue to serve as the foundation of Iran’s strategic geopolitical calculus.

Iran — the largest and most successful *Shi’a* polity in history — actively seeks to leverage its overarching religious identity in its favor when establishing proxies. Shi’a Muslims represent roughly 10 percent of the religion of Islam and have historically been discriminated against and disenfranchised by the Sunni majority. Iran seeks to capitalize upon these grievances, establish a presence within various Shi’a communities/ movements, and then exploit them for its own geostrategic purposes. While it is clear that geopolitics dominates religion (Iran supports various Sunni movements/groups as well),

religion itself — and religious identity — remain an essential/crucial legitimizing and mobilizing tool for regional powers and hegemony, particularly Iran.

Shi'a Islam — specifically Twelver Shi'ism — has been effectively used by political and religious leaders as a means for mass mobilization: there is an inherent loyalty to religious authorities in the absence of the *Mahdi* (the Twelfth Imam that is currently in occultation — awaited by the Shi'ites) within Shi'a Islam. Religious and political authorities have used motifs/symbols inherently sewn into Shi'ism — sacrifice, martyrdom, and the fact that they have been the victims of discrimination throughout the region — in order to successfully mobilize the Shi'a community against both real and perceived threats. The contemporary revival of activist Shi'ism has also provided religious and political leaders large bases from which to recruit and promulgate their respective agendas.

**“Land-Bridge” Corridor (LBC) via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon:** The LBC is the strategic backbone of Iran's geopolitical calculus within the region. The LBC fulfilled the historic — Persian — goal of a direct land route to the Mediterranean Sea through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This corridor will continue to serve as the foundation of Iranian power projection within the greater region and is a springboard for the future deployment of proxies elsewhere.

The transnational nature of the proxies within the LBC is demonstrated by the multinational deployments the various groups currently maintain.

Without yet discussing the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the following organizations are considered the most ardent Iranian proxies within the land bridge corridor:

- Lebanese *HizbAllah*: 45,000 fighters (21,000 full time), 6,000 to 8,000 currently in Syria;
- *Kata'ib HizbAllah* (KH): Claim 30,000 fighters, 1,000 to 3,000 likely deployed to Syria;
- *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH): 10,000+ fighters, 1,000 to 3,000 likely deployed to Syria;
- *Harakat al-Nujaba* (HAN): 10,000+ fighters;
- *Badr Corps Brigades* (BCB): Between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters;
- Afghan *Fatemiyoun* Brigade: Claim 18,000, total number unknown;
- Pakistani *Zainabiyoun* Brigade: Up to 1,000 deployed to Syria, total number unknown.<sup>2</sup>

The success of Iranian influence within the LBC is largely predicated on the degree to which Iran can freely exercise its agenda within neighboring Iraq. Iran's influence within Iraq has grown exponentially over the past several years and is not expected to be reduced easily.

Spearheading the pursuit of Iranian Interests within Iraq is the *al-Hashd al-Sha'abi*, aka the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Approx. 100,000 to 120,000 strong, roughly 80,000 are considered to be Iranian proxies and more responsive to the interests of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) than the Iraqi Government [four of the organizations listed above — KH, AAH, HAN, and BCB — are part of the PMF].

The PMF was formed in 2014 as a result of Grand *Ayatollah* Ali al-Sistani *fatwa* calling for Shi'ites to mobilize and defend themselves by fighting against D'I'ISH after it cap-

tered large swaths of territory throughout the country. Since its inception, the PMF has been at the forefront of anti-DI'ISH operations throughout Iraq and has garnered substantial support amongst the Iraqi populace (particularly Shi'as).

The PMF — specifically Iran's most ardent Iraqi proxies KH, AAH, HAN, and BCB — are overwhelmingly located within Diyala, Baghdad, Salah al-Din, Anbar, and Nineveh provinces. This strategic positioning is no coincidence: it provides Iran with a direct land route through Iraq into Syria. Diyala province directly borders Iran and is the direct point of entry into the Iraqi state. Salah al-Din province is the transit point into Anbar and Nineveh provinces, which directly border Syria. These provinces serve as the backbone of the LBC into Syria and Lebanon.

The critical importance of these strategic provinces to Iran was demonstrated through the reaction of Iranian proxies *vis-à-vis* the Kurdish referendum on independence from the Iraqi state.<sup>3</sup>

In the fight against DI'ISH, Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces captured sizable amounts of territory from the organization, primarily within Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Nineveh provinces. These contested areas — if absorbed by the Kurds through any sort of autonomy — would threaten Iran's LBC and limit the freedom of movement of Iran's proxies. It is no surprise, then, that Iran's proxies sent numerous reinforcements towards these contested areas before the Kurdish vote, and then worked in conjunction with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) after the referendum to push the Kurds out of these strategic areas.

In other words, Iranian proxies were the first on the scene before and after the referendum in order to secure the LBC under the auspices of supporting the sovereignty of the Iraqi State. Not only did this serve to secure the LBC, but it deepened the influence and legitimacy of the Iranian proxies amongst the local Arab and Turkoman communities which opposed Kurdish rule/presence [not to mention the fact that Kurdish independence in Iraq could likely spur/incite Kurdish secessionist movements in Iran to pursue a similar path].

Also significant was the death, on October 12, 2017, of a US soldier in neighboring Salah al-Din province by an explosively formed penetrator (EFP). EFPs were a weapon commonly deployed by Iranian-backed militias against the US following the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iranian-provided EFPs killed nearly 200 US troops and wounded more than 800 from 2005-2011 according to figures declassified by US Central Command. If linked to Iranian militias, the attack was likely meant to serve as a warning to the US against taking any action *vis-à-vis* the Kurdish situation, and further demonstrated the strategic centrality of these provinces to the LBC.

After successfully securing the Iraqi portion of the LBC, Iran's proxies are now poised to capitalize upon their popular support and legitimacy during Iraq's Parliamentary election in May 2018.

Throughout 2017, Iraq's High Electoral Commission (IHEC) licensed several Iranian proxy political parties — the Badr Organization's political wing, the political arm (the *Sadiqoon* Movement) of Iran's elite proxy *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH), and *al-Tayyar al-Risali al-Iraqi al-Jadid* (the political arm of Iranian-proxy *Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali*) — and authorized them to run in the 2018 parliamentary elections.<sup>4</sup> These proxy political parties have since combined and merged with other Iranian proxy parties — such as elements connected with *Harakat al-Nujaba* (HAN), *Kata'ib HizbAllah* (KH), and *Kata'ib*

*Jund al-Imam* — to form the “*Mujahedin Alliance*” which will run as a collective body in the 2018 parliamentary elections.<sup>5</sup>

These proxy political parties pose a significant problem to the current US-backed Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who will also run for re-election in 2018.

These developments are especially disturbing for the United States, which had relied on its alliance with Haider al-Abadi to conduct its counterterrorism operations within Iraq.

The anti-US nature of several of these organizations had been long known: *Kata'ib HizbAllah* (KH) is a US-designated terrorist organization; the leader of *Harakat al-Nujaba* (HAN) — Akram al-Kaabi — called US troops a “legitimate target”; and both HAN and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH) had threatened violence against US troops in the region following the introduction of a bill in the US House of Representatives — the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017 — which would impose terrorism-related sanctions on both AAH and HAN.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to using their acquired popularity and legitimacy from anti-DI'ISH operations, Iranian proxy parties should also be expected to capitalize on the lack of effective security provided by Abadi and the ISF in predominantly-Shi'a areas. Despite declaring DI'ISH “defeated”, the organization has maintained the ability to launch attacks deep within Shi'ite-dominant territory in Iraq, including Baghdad. These continued attacks serve to delegitimize Abadi and bolstered the legitimacy of Iranian proxy parties who have vowed to provide greater security for the Shi'a masses.

Likewise, the situation in neighboring Syria also unfolded largely in Iran's favor.

Similar to Iraq, Iran maintains an extensive proxy network within Syria that has been instrumental in supporting the Assad Government and recapturing territory from both Opposition forces and DI'ISH. Iranian proxies are critical to the survival of the Assad Government: it is currently estimated that the manpower of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) under direct government control is somewhere between 20,000 — 25,000 active troops, while militias fighting on behalf of the Assad Government are estimated to be between 150,000 — 250,000 strong (80 percent of which are — according to US National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster — Iranian proxies linked to the IRGC, *HizbAllah*, the Afghan *Fatemiyoun* Brigade, the Pakistani *Zainabiyoun* Brigade, and the Iraqi PMF).

In addition to the outright Iranian proxies present within Syria, Iran contributed to the development, training, and funding of the National Defense Forces (NDF). Approx. 100,000 strong, the NDF is a volunteer militia that seemed to be modeled after the Iraqi PMF and Iranian *Basij*, and cooperates directly with Iran's most ardent proxies. Furthermore, Iran is now working on establishing a formalized “Syrian *HizbAllah*” organization comprising tens of thousands of mostly *Shi'a* and Alawite members.

Iran's proxies within Syria have already successfully reached the eastern border with Iraq — which completed the LBC from Iraq, through Syria, into Lebanon — and are poised to recapture more territory from DI'ISH and Oppositionist forces in 2018. Homs province — which stretches from Syria's western border with Lebanon to the eastern border with Iraq — is the primary LBC component for Iran's proxies within the Syrian theater.

Iran's advances within Syria are critical to the overall geopolitical calculus of Tehran and will continue to serve as part of the foundation for Iranian regional power projection. The longevity of Iran's strategic calculus is demonstrated through two different develop-

ments: the establishment of permanent military bases within Syria, and various reconstruction contracts signed between the IRGC and Syrian entities.

In terms of military basing, Iranian military plans include a naval base/wharf on the Mediterranean, and a ground base for Iran's proxies [on November 11, 2017 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) released satellite imagery of construction at an unused Syrian ground base — located near al-Kiswah, south of Damascus — which is believed to be managed by Iran for this purpose]. In relation to reconstruction projects, the IRGC will be the main beneficiary of Syria's reconstruction process and have already secured several major contracts: the Iranian Government signed several agreements with Damascus to restore Syria's power grid infrastructure, Iran and Venezuela are set to start constructing an oil refinery in Syria, and the IRGC-affiliated Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran has signed a major contract to build a new mobile phone network in Syria. Iran's new military basing will provide its proxies with the training and logistics networks needed for effective power projection, while the reconstruction projects will provide the funding needed to do so.

The proxies within the LBC — whether they be Iraqi, Afghani, Lebanese, etc. — are a transnational force and are gradually evolving to represent a single entity under a more unitary (Iranian) command. The supranational nature of this fighting force is best explained by the chief commander of the IRGC, Maj. Gen. Ali Jafari, who described the creation of an “International *Basij*” as the ultimate fulfillment of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and emphasized that Iran and its allies do not recognize borders in their “ideological war” against the US and its allies. Similarly, the commander of *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH) — Qais al-Khazali — emphasized the desire of Iran's proxies to establish a “*Shi'ite* full moon” not a “*Shi'ite* crescent” and that this alliance of *Shi'a* forces will include groups from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen.<sup>7</sup>

The transnational nature of these proxy forces is best exemplified through their collective reaction to the US Government's decision to formally recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. While it was obvious that Iran would object to and denounce the move, the level to which its various regional proxies mirrored Iran's hardline rhetoric and stood in unison with one another demonstrated Tehran's deep-rooted influence and the supranational nature of the proxies themselves, even though opposition to the US embassy move would also have been a natural reaction from those groups.

Following the US announcement, the commanders of *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH), *Harakat al-Nujaba* (HAN), and the Afghan *Fatemiyoun* Brigade all expressed their readiness to aid *HizbAllah* in any future confrontation with Israel. Qais al-Khazali — the commander of AAH — even traveled to the Lebanese-Israeli border and toured the area with prominent *HizbAllah* commanders. This symbolic trip was meant to carry an “important message” to Israel and the regional Arab states, and “confirms that the axis of resistance, from Iran to Syria and Lebanon and Iraq, has taken control of the region.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the announcement by the commander of HAN — Akram al-Kaabi — expressed his group's readiness following his establishment of a “Golan Heights Brigade” in May 2017, with the explicit purpose of fighting Israel.

Further adding to and demonstrating this transnational nature is the stated determination of the Afghan *Fatemiyoun* Brigade — by one of its military commanders — to fight in other regional conflicts and around the world as dictated by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Hoseini-Khamene'i: “our war is an ideological war and does not recognize geography

and borders. We believe that although the existence of murderous DI'ISH in Iraq and Syria has come to an end, DI'ISH's masters in Tel Aviv and Washington will not remain idle and will continue to inflame violence, hatred, and tragedy within the broader Islamic community, among both Shi'ites and Sunnis."<sup>9</sup>

This transnational unity was intended to demonstrate that any attack on one of the proxy groups would be considered an attack on all due to their supranational, interconnected nature.

The manpower and capabilities of this force — *HizbAllah* alone now possessed 120,000+ rockets and the factories to produce them — meant that any action against this proxy dynamic would come at a great cost, both militarily and economically. The presence of this *de facto* "deterrence force" should allow Iran to further ingratiate itself both politically and economically within the countries constituting the LBC, thereby making future possible deployment of these proxies to other theaters easier and more effective. The LBC would likely, therefore, serve as a strategic launching pad and a vehicle for future proxy operations elsewhere within the greater region.

**Other Strategic Theaters:** Outside of the LBC, there are three primary theaters of interest to Iran and its proxy network: Yemen, Bahrain, and Eastern Saudi Arabia (ESA).

**Yemen.** Out of these three non-LBC theaters, Yemen represented — as of January 2018 — the most strategically opportune arena for Iran's proxy network. The Saudi campaign against the (essentially Zaedi Shi'a) *Ansar Allah* (Houthi) Movement, continued unabated throughout 2017, and proved incapable of ending the conflict, which has led to a prolonged military campaign within the country. In general terms, the Houthis and their allies continued, as of January 2018, to control Sana'a and the majority of the north and west, while the Sunni anti-Houthi forces and loyalists to Pres. Hadi controlled the majority of the south and east.

See also: "Al-Qaida's Resurgence in Yemen: How the Intra-Muslim Wars Overlay the Geopolitical Conflict" in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, January 27, 2017.

The Saudi's fear that the success of the Houthis — who have received weapons shipments from Iran and training from Iranian proxies such as *HizbAllah* — would not only generate an Iranian threat directly on their southern border, but would also encourage and assist the Shi'ites located within the Kingdom itself (who are located in the oil-rich east and represent at least 15 percent of the total Saudi population) to call for greater representation or complete autonomy.

See, particularly, Bodansky, Yossef: "Iran Moves at Highest Level to Support the Newly-Declared 'Republic of Eastern Arabia'", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [March 18, 2009](#).

The Saudis believe, and the argument can be made, that the Iranians are attempting to create another proxy, *HizbAllah*-like, guerilla group in northern Yemen through the Houthis. While the possibility of this outcome within the foreseeable future is unclear, the continuation of the conflict and the subsequent exacerbation and intensification of its sectarian and geopolitical dimensions seemed likely to continue to drive the Houthis — who have their own, distinct brand of Shi'ism, and are supported also by Sunni Yemeni groups — into the hands of Iran. The current widespread indiscriminate bombing campaign led by Saudi Arabia, routinely killing and displacing civilians, advanced this align-

ment, fueling notions of hopelessness and indignation felt among civilian populations upon which Iran and its proxy forces could easily exploit.

The Houthis are an example of a potential Iranian proxy which has not yet reached full “maturity” in its relationship *vis-à-vis* Tehran.

The killing by the Houthis on December 4, 2017, of ex-Pres. ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh — a Shi’a, who had been in an alliance with the Houthi Movement until he apparently reached a separate deal with the Saudi Government in late November 2017 — will likely allow the Houthi to solidify their supremacy within areas they currently control [the Gulf States — specifically Saudi Arabia — had been courting Saleh in an attempt to have him distance himself from the Houthis].

The death of Saleh provided an opportunity for Iran to further bolster the Houthis and entrench itself further in Yemen. Indeed, it could be argued that the war on Yemen, begun by Saudi (then) Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman did more than anything to open the former North Yemen up to Iranian influence.

Also significant has been the myriad of missiles launched from Houthi-controlled territory into Saudi Arabia. According to a UN sanction report, there were shared “design characteristics” between the missiles used by the Houthis and Iran’s *Qiam-1* short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM). Known as the *Burkan-2H* in the Houthi arsenal, the missile successfully reached as far inland as Riyadh (more than 800km). This is significant because none of the missiles within Yemen before the outbreak of the civil war were capable of having the range that could reach Riyadh: meaning they received help in advancing their missile program.<sup>10</sup>

These missile attacks — coupled with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman’s (MbS) hawkish foreign policy outlook *vis-à-vis* Iran — would likely exacerbate the Yemeni conflict well into 2018. Yemen provides Iran with a low-risk, low-cost avenue through which it can challenge Saudi Arabia and further spread its regional influence. The more entrenched Iran becomes within the Yemen, the more Saudi anxiety is exacerbated, thus fueling the conflict in a cyclical nature.

**Bahrain.** In Bahrain, Iran is also pursuing a low-risk, low-cost campaign to undermine the ruling al-Khalifa family and their Saudi backers.

See also: “Is Manama Next, or is the Tide Turning?: Rising Extremism and the Ever-Present Iranian Influence in Bahrain” in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [May 26, 2017](#).

Shi’as within Bahrain have historically been marginalized by the al-Khalifa Government (both politically and economically). Bahraini Shi’as have regularly participated in coup attempts, uprisings, and protests calling for an overhaul of what they have claimed as a corrupt *status quo*. Since the crushing of the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, more Bahraini Shi’a began to turn to violence — and Iran — to solve their grievances.

The two most important Shi’a extremist groups engaged in Bahrain have emerged as *Saraya al-Ashtar* and *Saraya al-Makhtar*. Their choice of names denotes their staunch religiosity, and particularly their Shi’a identity: Malik al-Ashtar was one of Ali Ibn Abi Talib’s [the fourth Islamic Caliph and the individual viewed by Shi’as as the rightful successor to the Prophet Mohammed] greatest companions, and Makhtar al-Thaqafi launched a campaign against the Umayyads in the Seventh Century after the martyrdom of the third Shi’a *Imam*, Husayn Ibn Ali, during the battle of Karbala.

*Saraya al-Ashtar* and *Saraya al-Makhtar* are both linked to Iran and have been actively engaged in carrying out terrorist operations within Bahrain. *Saraya al-Makhtar* has also established itself within Syria, where it is fighting in support of the Bashar al-Assad Government, alongside Iran's LBC-based proxies. The organization has developed deep links with both the IRGC and *HizbAllah*, which have likely been training *Saraya al-Makhtar* for operations back in Bahrain. Also, *Saraya al-Makhtar's* social media accounts regularly reference the plight of marginalized Shi'as within Eastern Saudi Arabia, describing their mission and cause as one.

In February 2017, *Saraya al-Ashtar* also announced an alliance with the Iran-backed Shi'a *HizbAllah* Brigades (*Kata'ib HizbAllah*: KH) in Iraq which is also a US-designated terrorist organization and one of Iran's most ardent proxies within the LBC. This move served to demonstrate the increasing rôle of Iran and the transnational interconnectedness of its various proxies. *Kata'ib HizbAllah* reportedly provided explosives and weapons training at camps in Iraq and offered "logistical and financial support" to *Saraya al-Ashtar*.<sup>11</sup>

As of December 2017, tensions within Bahrain between the al-Khalifa Government and Shi'a militants had been steadily rising. In total — as of December 25, 2017 — six terrorist attacks were successfully carried out by Shi'a militants in Bahrain, as opposed to only two in 2016. In March 2017, Bahraini security forces arrested a terror cell which plotted to assassinate various government and community figures, and which was comprised of several individuals who had been directly trained by the IRGC in Iran [more than 60 such individuals were arrested in Bahrain during 2016 for having extensive ties to the IRGC and *HizbAllah*].

Iranian interference has been gradually growing over the past several years, as have the efforts to supply domestic terrorist organizations (namely *Saraya al-Ashtar* and *Saraya al-Makhtar*):

- On December 28, 2013, a speedboat from Iran was intercepted by Bahraini forces carrying large quantities of advanced bomb components, including 31 claymore-type anti-personnel fragmentation mines and 12 armor-piercing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs);
- On July 25, 2015, the Bahraini Navy intercepted another speedboat carrying 43 kilograms of C4 explosives, detonators, and eight AK-47-like assault rifles with 32 magazines and ammunition [one of the two men detained on the boat confessed to having received extensive weapons and explosives training at an IRGC camp in Iran]; and
- On September 30, 2015, Bahraini authorities discovered an elaborate bomb factory containing over \$20,000 in lathes and hydraulic presses for making EFPs [the finished bombs discovered were very similar to ones constructed by Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq], and a cache of 1.5 tons of C4 explosives [several EFPs constructed at this factory were intercepted *en route* to Shi'as in eastern Saudi Arabia which would have allowed them a significant capability against Saudi armor].

The low cost/burden of continuing such supportive action for Shi'a militant groups means the support will likely continue. Advances made by Iran and its proxies regionally could serve to increase Iranian support *vis-à-vis* Bahraini extremist groups, particularly as conflicts within the LBC continue to slow down.

Therefore, the risk is how far the mainstream Shi'a polity could be pushed towards the more extreme margins. As with Yemen, fully matured proxies have yet to develop — with the possible exception of *Saraya al-Ashtar* and *Saraya al-Makhtar* — but continuing conflict and grievances amongst the Shi'a community would serve to expedite the process. The continued oppression of Shi'a political activism in hopes of curtailing Iranian influence could serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy as more people became disenfranchised and radicalized.

**ESA (Eastern Saudi Arabia)** — which is both oil-rich and overwhelmingly Shi'a — presented another opportunity for Iran to extend its geopolitical leverage with the region and specifically over Saudi Arabia. Saudi *Shi'a* — which constitute roughly 15 percent of the total population — have historically been discriminated against and persecuted by the Saudi Wahhabist Government.

Already reported by *GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs*, Saudi Arabia now appears to have moved beyond the point of recovery, and could collapse at any time into internal conflict or fracturing.<sup>12</sup> Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has carried out a series of mass arrests against his rivals, while continuing at an economic “burn rate” of more than \$100-billion a year of its financial reserves. This — coupled with the inability of Saudi Arabia to achieve a decisive military victory in Yemen and MbS' hawkish agenda *vis-à-vis* Iran — points towards an impending financial crisis within the Kingdom and, ultimately, civil strife.

Civil strife within Saudi's eastern province is already underway, with approximately nine attacks carried out by Shi'a militants against government/police targets in 2017, as opposed to only three in 2016.

A collapse of the Saudi state would send shockwaves throughout the region and the international community. Iranian proxies — strategically positioned around Saudi Arabia in the LBC, Bahrain, and Yemen — would undoubtedly be quick to exploit the instability on behalf of Iran. This would most likely come in the form of Saudi Arabia's eastern Shi'a province declaring independence. The collapse of Saudi Arabia would also likely lead to the collapse of Bahrain and Yemen to Iranian proxies, considering that the Saudis are the primary supporters of the al-Khalifa Government in Bahrain and the pro-Hadi coalition in Yemen.

Continued conflict, grievances, and desperation within Yemen, Bahrain, and eastern Saudi Arabia will continue to fuel Iran's influence amongst the various Shi'a movements by providing ripe environments for exploitation by Iranian proxies. Furthermore, the fracturing of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) over the rift with Qatar hinders the ability of the Gulf States to reverse the tide of Iranian influence within the region.

**Conclusion:** By January 2018, Iran seemed determined to further alter and shape the Middle East in its favor in 2018, with its transnational proxy force at the forefront of its regional ambitions.

The presence of Iran's extensive and formidable proxy network throughout the region must be taken into consideration by policymakers and military commanders when trying to plan for future crises within the Middle East.

What will it mean to have large numbers of Afghan Shi'a fighters on Israel's border? Could Iran's Iraqi Shi'a proxies move south into Kuwait? Will the Afghan Shi'a fighters return home, or be deployed to other possible theaters such as Yemen and Bahrain? Will Yemen's Houthis become full-blown Iranian proxies as the civil war continues? Will

larger segments of Bahraini Shi'a turn to Iran in their struggle against the al-Khalifa family? Will Saudi Arabia crumble internally and Iranian proxies seek to establish its Eastern Province as a distinct polity? Will these proxies begin to directly target US forces and interests within the region?

These are all legitimate questions and viable possibilities for 2018 — and beyond — as Iran seeks to continue its march towards establishing hegemonic dominance within the region.

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**Footnotes:**

1. See Bodansky, Yossef: "Is a New Iranian Empire Finally in the Making?", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, November 27, 2017.
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  3. See Bodansky, Yossef: "The Kurdish Referendum: After the Earthquake, There Remain the Perpetual Victims", *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*. [December 5, 2017](http://www.defenseandforeignaffairs.com/2017/12/05/kuwait-referendum/).
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  5. Formally announced on [Alalam News](http://www.alalamnews.com).
  6. Majidiyar, Ahmad. "Iran-Backed Iraqi Groups Threaten Violence Following US Terrorism Bill." *Middle East Institute*, Dec. 6, 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/iran-backed-iraqi-groups-threaten-violence-following-us-terrorism-bill>.
  7. Majidiyar, Ahmad. "Iran-Backed Iraqi Groups Threaten Violence Following US Terrorism Bill." Op cit.
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  10. Nichols, Michelle. "Exclusive: Yemen Rebel Missiles Fired at Saudi Arabia Appear Iranian." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 30 Nov. 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un-exclusive/exclusive-yemen-rebel-missiles-fired-at-saudi-arabia-appear-iranian-u-n-idUSKBN1DU36N](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un-exclusive/exclusive-yemen-rebel-missiles-fired-at-saudi-arabia-appear-iranian-u-n-idUSKBN1DU36N).
  11. Browning, Noah, and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin. "Shiite Exiled Cleric Points to Iran's Strong Influence in Bahrain." *English.alarabiya.net*. NP, Apr. 18, 2017. Web. April 25, 2017. <<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/04/18/Shiite-exiled-Bahraini-cleric-points-to-Iran-s-widening-interference-in-Manama.html>>.
  12. See: "Collapse of the Kingdom: MBS Adds Accelerant to the Saudi Fire" in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [December 12, 2017](http://www.defenseandforeignaffairs.com/2017/12/12/saudi-kingdom/).
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