

War by Proxy

Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East

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THE ISSUE

There is growing Iranian activism in the Middle East despite U.S. and allied efforts to weaken Iran's economy and politically isolate Tehran. There has been an increase in the size and capabilities of militias supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen collectively. Iran is also working to establish a land bridge across the region. Nevertheless, Iran has weaknesses and vulnerabilities that can be exploited by the United States and its partners.

INTRODUCTION

Tehran wields influence in the Middle East through its use of non-state partners, despite renewed U.S. sanctions against Iran and a U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Iran's economic woes have not contributed to declining activism in the region—at least not yet. If anything, Iranian leaders appear just as committed as ever to engagement across the Middle East using irregular methods. According to data collected and analyzed in this brief, there has been an increase in the overall size and capability of foreign forces that are partnered with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Iran's paramilitary organization responsible for foreign operations. The IRGC-QF's partners are in countries like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Iran is also attempting to establish land corridors across the region and increase its ability to move fighters and material from one theater to another.

More broadly, there is a growing regional conflict with Iran, which consists of a war in Yemen (including the Houthis use of ballistic missiles against Saudi Arabia), an escalating conflict with Israel in Syria, a growth of Shia militia forces in Iraq, targeted assassinations, and cyberattacks. Iran's expanding presence in Syria, for example, has led to concerns

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among Israeli leaders, who have authorized hundreds of military strikes against missile and other targets over the past few years. Based in part on IRGC-QF assistance, Iran's partners have improved their capabilities in such areas as missiles and drones. These developments are significant because Iranian leaders have assessed that irregular warfare—including support to non-state partners—is a critical element to competing with the United States in the region.

Yet Iran—and the IRGC-QF in particular—have vulnerabilities and weaknesses that may be exploitable, such as possible long-term overextension with an already weak economy and continuing divisions among Iraq's Shia community about Iran and its doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (the Islamic system of clerical rule). Overall, Iranian actions have also created growing regional concerns about Tehran's attempt to expand

its power and influence, which can be leveraged for more effective balancing.

This brief analyzes IRGC-QF activities in several ways. It compiles a data base of Iranian proxy groups over time—including their capabilities and size—in order to gauge trends. It also analyzes satellite imagery of bases in countries like Syria, Lebanon, and Iran used by the IRGC-QF to better understand Iranian force posture and activities.¹ Finally, it compiles and analyzes a data base of Israeli attacks against targets in Syria, which provides a useful indicator of Iranian activity.

The rest of this brief is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of the IRGC-QF's creation, activities, and organizational structure. The second section analyzes trends in IRGC-QF activity, including patterns in the size of Iranian state and non-state partners. The third assesses IRGC-QF actions in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and other countries. The fourth analyzes weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and opportunities.

BORN OF THE REVOLUTION

The IRGC, or *sepah-e pasdaran-e engelab-e eslami*, was founded in 1979 shortly after the Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini envisioned the IRGC as a force to protect the revolution against internal and external threats. As he remarked, IRGC soldiers were to be “the guardians of the revolution and the fighting sons of Islam.”² Since Khomeini was suspicious of the loyalty of some officers in Iran's regular military, whom he worried still had ties with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, he created the IRGC to defend Iran and—more importantly—safeguard Iran's theocratic system. Since Khomeini's conception of *velayat-e faqih* emphasized the importance of the clergy (*ulama*) in national decisionmaking, the IRGC's link to the supreme leader was critical. In Khomeini's view, a legitimate Islamic government needs to be run by a senior cleric (*marja al-taqlid*) or by a body of high-ranking clergy (*fuqaha*).³ Pro-clerical militants had been helpful in bringing down the Pahlavi regime, and Khomeini pulled them together under a single banner in the IRGC. The organization's proximity and devotion to Khomeini gave it immense power and legitimacy. The IRGC, then, would be the vanguard of the revolution.⁴

The IRGC eventually included an air force, land force, navy, IRGC-QF, and Basij (or mobilization). The Basij is an auxiliary militia that is engaged in activities such as conducting internal security, enforcing state control over society, policing morals, and suppressing dissidents. The IRGC manages large domestic commercial elements and,

The IRGC-QF is Iran's primary irregular force and is instrumental in helping expand its influence in the region.

along with the Office of the Supreme Leader, controls a substantial portion of the Iranian economy.⁵

Shortly after the IRGC's creation, its leaders established a paramilitary organization, which became the IRGC-QF (*sepah-e quds*). Over time, the IRGC-QF, which reports directly to the Supreme Leader of Iran, became active in supporting state and sub-state allies outside of the country through units like Department 400 (or the Misaq Unit), which is in charge of special operations.⁶ The IRGC-QF is Iran's primary irregular force and is instrumental in helping expand its influence in the region. It engages in a wide range of activity, such as gathering intelligence; training, equipping, and funding state and non-state partner forces; conducting assassinations and bombings; perpetrating cyberattacks; and providing humanitarian and economic aid.⁷

The IRGC-QF includes sections devoted to specific countries and regions, such as the Ramazan Corps (Iraq), Levant Corps (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel), Rasulallah Corps (Arabian Peninsula), and Ansar Corps (Afghanistan).⁸ These forces help Iran counter its state adversaries in a broad “Axis of Resistance” that extends from the Persian Gulf through Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq to the eastern parts of the Mediterranean Sea.⁹ The IRGC-QF also has active and growing cyber capabilities.¹⁰ While the IRGC as a whole has over 125,000 forces, there are more than 15,000 IRGC-QF soldiers.¹¹

Figure 1 shows satellite imagery of the Imam Ali facility west of Tehran, which has been used by the IRGC-QF for training.¹² CSIS's review of satellite imagery of the facility indicates that the base was a minor facility from 2000 to 2003, and then went through a major infrastructure development phase beginning around 2003. The approximately 222-acre facility is surrounded by a security wall and fence with guard towers and includes a comprehensive collection of training and support components. Functionally, it can be divided into several areas: warehouse and storage, housing and support, headquarters administration and classrooms, mosque and religious education, the original base, and combat training facilities. The combat facilities include a 100-meter firing range; a second 100-meter open range that could be used for rocket launcher, improvised explosives and other weapons training; a driver training course; an obstacle course; and a combat course consisting of a dispersed collection of small walls, miscellaneous objects and likely small vehicles used to train troops for combat in urban areas.¹³ Locations like Imam

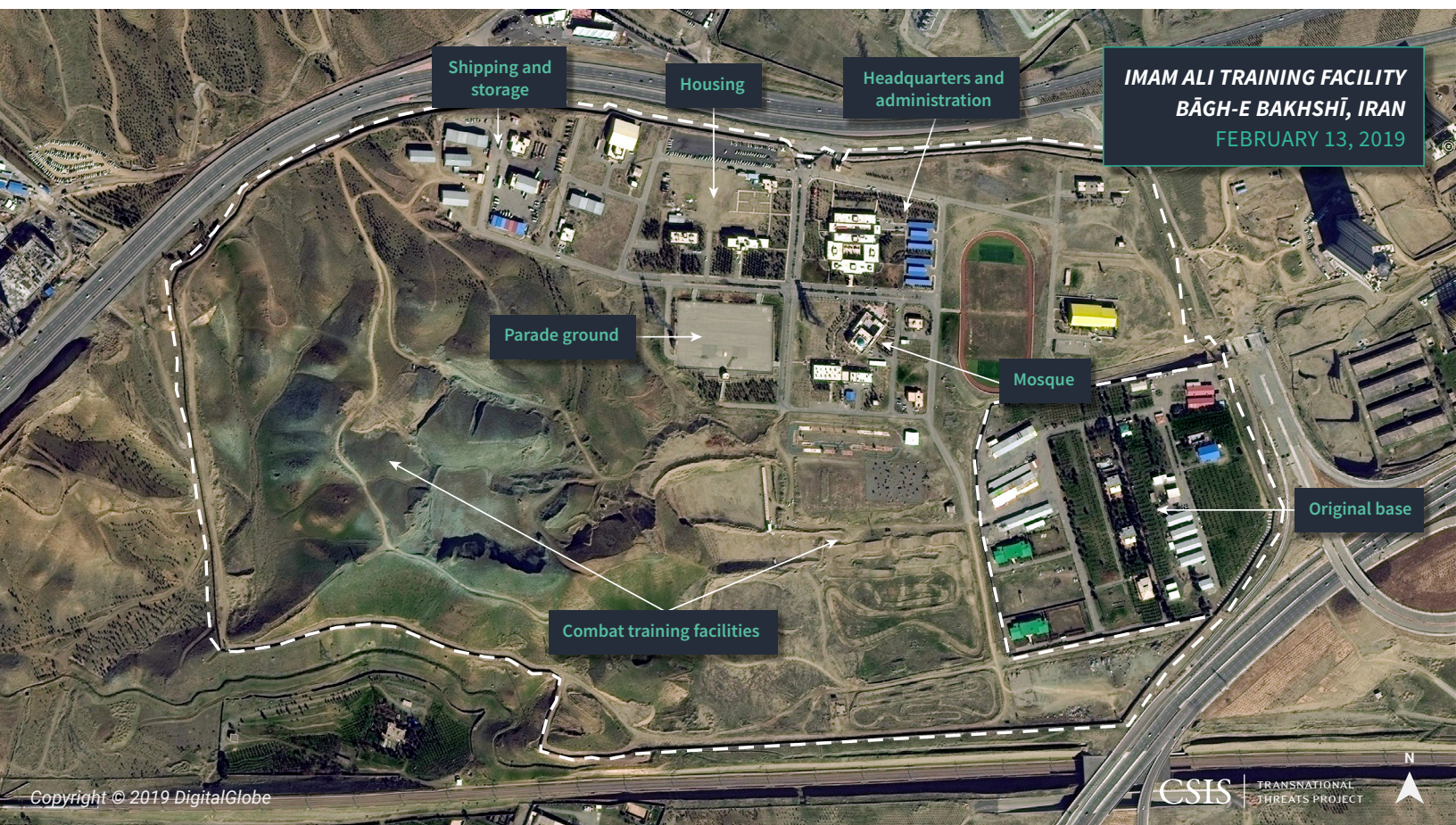


Figure 1: Satellite Imagery of Imam Ali Facility, Outside of Tehran, Iran

Ali have allowed Iran to train and advise partner forces from across the region.

The IRGC-QF has its roots in irregular warfare. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was a major turning point in Iran's military doctrine, since Iranian conventional units performed poorly against a much smaller Iraqi force.¹⁴ Instead, Iran's comparative advantage became its ability to work with state and non-state actors—an irregular approach led by the IRGC, including the IRGC-QF, rather than conventional Iranian military forces (artesh). During the Iran-Iraq War, for example, Iran aided Iraqi Shia militant groups. Some of this training was done inside Iran, which allowed Tehran to develop a system and infrastructure within its borders to train and equip foreign fighters. Among the most important of the Iraqi Shia groups trained by Iran was the Badr Brigade, the armed wing of Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir Hakim's Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Overall, nearly 5,000 foreign Shia militants wearing IRGC uniforms were killed in the war.¹⁵

Outside of Iraq, the IRGC established a relationship with the Amal Movement in Lebanon and then Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran provided money, equipment, training, and ideological inspiration to Lebanese Hezbollah. As the IRGC commander in

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Lebanon noted in 1985, "The Muslims of Lebanon, especially the Shiites of Lebanese Hezbollah, consider themselves the offspring of the Islamic revolution and therefore know that they have a duty to imitate [taba'iyat kardan] the Islamic revolution."¹⁶ Over the next several decades, the IRGC-QF and other Iranian agencies like the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) established relationships with state and non-state actors in the Middle East and South Asia.¹⁷ Not all were Shia groups. The Taliban in Afghanistan and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Palestinian territory, for example, were Sunni organizations.¹⁸

IRANIAN EXPANSION

Today, the IRGC-QF is active in building, funding, training, and partnering with a growing number of actors in the region—a testament to Iran's commitment to irregular warfare. The IRGC-QF's relationship with these actors varies considerably, and in many cases is more of a partnership than a malleable patron-client relationship.¹⁹

To get an estimate of the number of fighters in IRGC-QF partner forces, we compiled a data set of fighters from 2011 to 2018 and then totaled the number operating each year. We did not attempt to estimate the broader number of supporters, since we could find no reliable estimates of individuals that provided part-time logistical help, funding, intelligence, or other aid. Calculating the number of fighters is still challenging. Groups generally do not provide public estimates of their numbers, and their numbers can vary considerably over the course of a group's existence. Consequently, we included high and low estimates for the number of fighters by year. We attempted to reconcile differences in estimates by examining the sources of data and interviewing government and non-government experts. We used high and low estimates with the assumption that the actual numbers each year were somewhere between the extremes.

Figure 2 shows trends in the size of IRGC-QF partners in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Lebanon. While the IRGC-QF's relationship with these groups varies dramatically, aggregating them together provides a useful indicator of trends. The data and figure suggest several developments. First, there has been an increase in the number of Shia fighters. The war in Syria contributed to a significant rise, particularly by 2014, as Lebanese Hezbollah deployed fighters and Iran

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trained, equipped, and funded Shia militias from across the region to support the struggling Assad regime. Today, examples of forces supported by the IRGC-QF include Lebanese Hezbollah; the Hashd al-Sha'abi in Iraq (including groups like the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq); militia forces in Syria, including Lebanese Hezbollah; the Houthis in Yemen; Liwa Fatemiyoun from Afghanistan; Liwa Zainabyoun from Pakistan; and several groups in Palestinian territory like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Second, there has been an expansion in locations where IRGC-QF forces have been active. The IRGC-QF has worked to broaden its areas of operation to include traditional countries like Lebanon and Iraq (where the IRGC-QF has long had partners) to countries like Yemen and Syria.²⁰

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the inability of the United States and its partners to prevent Iran from filling the

Size of IRGC-QF Partner Forces, 2011-2018

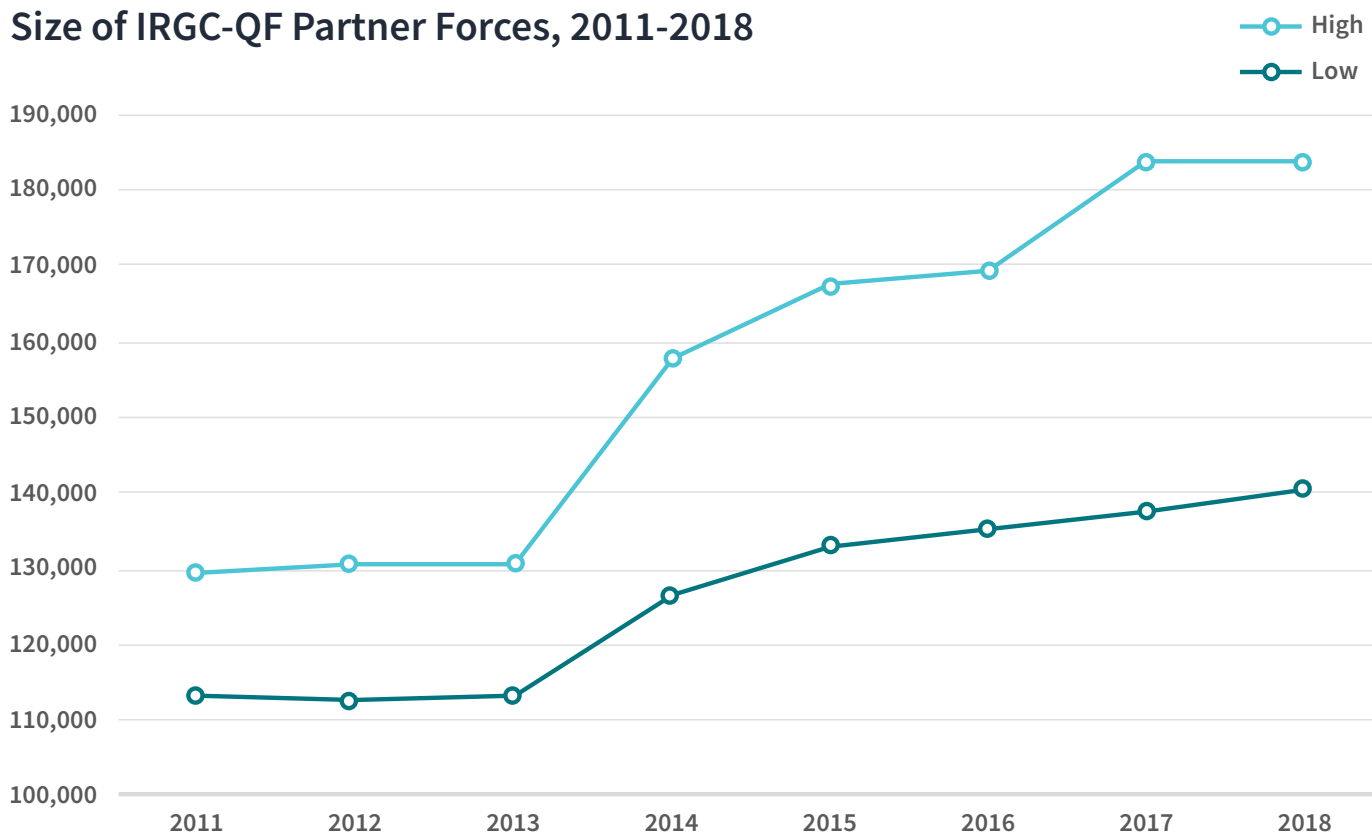


Figure 2: Number of Fighters From IRGC-QF Partner Forces, 2011-2018²¹

vacuum, and the establishment of a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad contributed to a rise in Iranian influence and an increase in IRGC-QF-supported militias. By 2011, the Arab Spring created opportunities for Iran with the weakening of regimes and the onset or expansion of insurgencies in countries like Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. In Iraq, the 2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces was helpful to Iran, particularly with an Iraqi government that welcomed Iranian help. In Syria, the Assad regime was in dire need of help following a civil war that began in 2011. Iran supported Syrian military advances and Russian airstrikes by aiding local militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah. In Yemen, Houthi security forces seized the capital, Sana'a, in 2014. In addition, the IRGC-QF and its leader, Qassem Soleimani, took advantage of these opportunities to provide money, weapons, and other assistance to partners in the absence of significant balancing by the United States and other countries.

Iran has used its partners and activities in an attempt to establish a land bridge across the region, as highlighted in Figure 3. Some Lebanese Hezbollah fighters have referred to this land bridge as Wilayat Imam Ali (the state or province of Imam Ali), in honor of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.²² These routes, which remain partly aspirational, include: a northern route through Iran, Iraq's Kurdish region, the Iraqi city of Sinjar, northeastern Syria cities like Al-Hasakah, and into Lebanon; a central route through Iran, central Iraq, the Iraqi border town of Al-Qaim, Syria's Abu Kamal and Dayr az Zawr, and into Lebanon; and a southern route through Iran, the Iraqi border town of Al-Walid, Al-Tanf in Syria, Damascus, and into Lebanon. These corridors resemble the Royal Road, the ancient land bridge built by Persian King Darius the Great in the fifth century BC.²³ A U.S. withdrawal from Syria could facilitate the expansion of these corridors, particularly a departure of U.S. troops from bases like Al-Tanf in southeastern Syria.

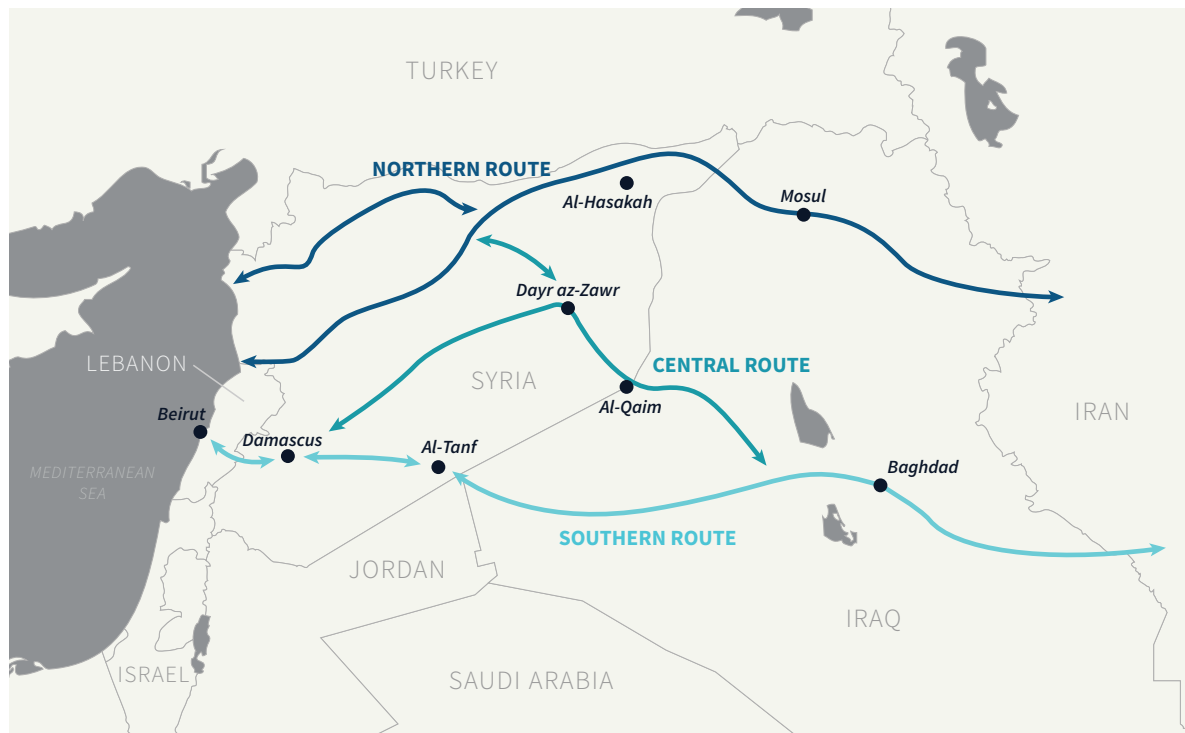


Figure 3: Potential Iran Land Bridge

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Iran's growing influence has been particularly concerning in Syria. Figure 4 uses CSIS research and analysis to plot the location of Israeli attacks against Iranian and other targets in Syria. The darker shades of blue in the heat map indicate a higher concentration of Israeli strikes. Most of Israel's attacks were in southwestern Syria, near the Israeli border. But a few operations were against major bases used by Hezbollah, Iran, and other proxy militias, such as T-4 Tiyas Airbase in Homs, the airbase north of al-Qusayr, and Damascus International Airport. Both Israeli government public statements and the rising number of strikes over the past two years indicate that Israel has been increasingly concerned about the encroachment and growing capabilities of Iran and its partner forces. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remarked, "We will continue to aggressively act against Iran's efforts to entrench in Syria."²⁴

The Israeli military has conducted strikes—and dropped 2,000 bombs alone in 2018—to retaliate against Iranian actions like rocket launches; move Hezbollah and Iranian positions further from the Israeli border near the Golan Heights; and degrade the number of rockets and missiles from Iran,

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Lebanese Hezbollah, and other groups that could hit Israel.²⁵ There are indications that Iran may move some of its missiles and missile parts to Iraq after coming under Israeli pressure in Lebanon and Syria.²⁶ An interactive version of this map is available on the CSIS website.

PROXY WARS

The IRGC-QF is particularly active in such countries as Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. It has provided military and non-military aid to partners, boosting their capabilities and increasing Tehran's influence.

In Lebanon, the IRGC-QF's chief partner, Hezbollah, has improved its military capabilities and become more involved in the government.

Lebanon: In Lebanon, the IRGC-QF's chief partner, Hezbollah, has improved its military capabilities and become more involved in the government. Among the most important activities is the "Precision Project": the effort to expand and upgrade Hezbollah's inventory of rockets, missiles, and drones.²⁷ With Iran's help, Hezbollah has amassed a range of weapons and systems, such as the Fateh-110/M-600 short-range ballistic missile, Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 short-range ballistic missiles, Toophan anti-tank guided missiles, Kornet man-portable anti-tank guided missiles, M113 armored personnel carriers, T-72 main battle tanks, Karrar unmanned combat aerial vehicles, and Katyusha rocket launchers.²⁸ Hezbollah's armed drone capabilities are among the most advanced of any terrorist group in the world, and it has used Karrar armed drones to destroy Islamic State targets in Syria.²⁹ In addition, Hezbollah may have stockpiled chemical weapons in Syria, including chlorine.³⁰

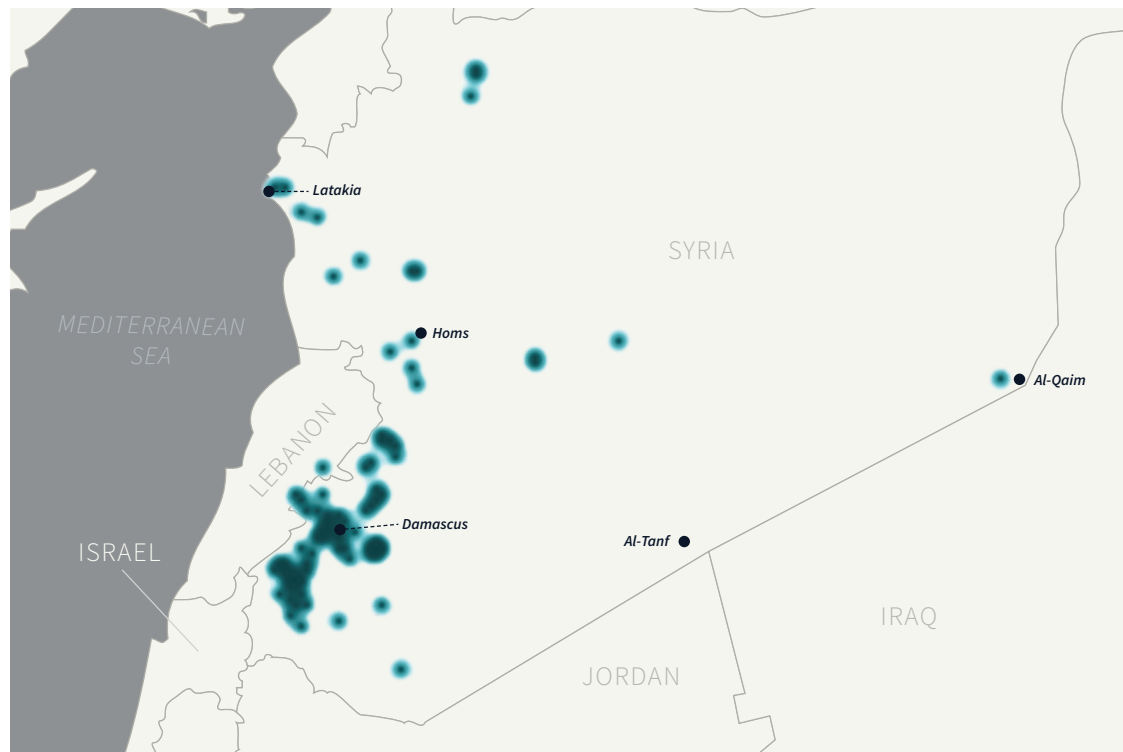


Figure 4: Israeli Strikes in Syria

The IRGC-QF has been critical to these developments. Hassan Nasrallah, the group's secretary general, said in June 2016: "Hezbollah's budget, salaries, expenses, arms and missiles are coming from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Is this clear? This is no one's business. As long as Iran has money, we have money. Can we be any more frank about that?"³¹

Figure 5 highlights satellite imagery of a Hezbollah training camp in southern Lebanon located southeast of the town of Beit Moubarak, on the eastern and southern slopes of El Boqaa.³² A CSIS analysis of satellite imagery suggests that the El Boqaa facility is dispersed within an area encompassing approximately 4.5 square kilometers and consists of at least six general components:

- **Firing ranges:** There are three firing ranges. The largest two are located in a small valley on the west side of the training facility. These appear to be designed for use by armored personnel carriers and improvised armored fighting vehicles. The third firing range is located 800 meters east of the first two. It consists of five small pistol and rifle ranges varying in length from 8 to 100-meters-long.
- **Housing and storage area:** Located just north of the firing ranges is an area that appears to be used for both housing and storage with approximately 35 small structures and a single large storage building.



Figure 5: Satellite Imagery of Hezbollah Training Camp Near El Boqaa, Southern Lebanon

- *Driver training facility:* Immediately east of the housing and storage area is a serpentine one-kilometer-long driver training course that is capable of handling armored fighting vehicles, trucks, and smaller vehicles.
- *Two urban combat facilities:* Located on the east of the driver training course are two different urban combat courses. The first is approximately 115-meters by 35-meters and consists of six interconnected lanes. Each lane is bordered by a low wall. Numerous dispersed objects within these lanes strongly suggest that it is also used as an obstacle course. The second urban combat course is located a further 160 meters to the east.
- *Quarries:* There are numerous small quarrying-type activities throughout the area encompassing the combat training facilities. These quarries could be used for improvised explosives and rocket launcher training.
- *Probable headquarters and support areas:* Located on the northern and northeastern sides of the training facility are small areas that consist of approximately 20 larger storage, maintenance, office, and housing structures.³³

Hezbollah also became more directly involved in Lebanese politics after the group and its allies expanded their share of seats in Lebanon's May 2018 parliamentary elections. In 2019, Hezbollah continued to increase its influence in the government, particularly through positions like the Ministry of Health. The U.S. government warned Hezbollah that if it tried to "exploit these ministries to funnel money or undertake other activities in support of their terrorist agenda, then we will have significant concerns."³⁴

Yemen: The IRGC-QF also has provided aid to the Houthis (officially called Ansar Allah). Of particular concern are Iranian weapons and parts, including ballistic missiles and drones, that have been used by the Houthis to threaten shipping near the Bab el Mandeb Strait and conduct attacks against land-based targets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).³⁵ The Bab el Mandeb Strait, located at the southern end of the Red Sea between Yemen and Djibouti, is important because roughly 5 million barrels of oil pass through it every day.³⁶ Iran's objectives in Yemen include retaining—and perhaps increasing—Iran's influence along the Red Sea as well as weakening Saudi Arabia and the UAE.³⁷

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Around 2016, as the war in Yemen intensified due to the growing involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Iran began increasing its aid to the Houthis. It provided anti-tank guided missiles, sea mines, aerial drones, 122-millimeter Katyusha rockets, Misagh-2 man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), RDX high explosives, ballistic missiles, unmanned explosive boats, radar systems, and mining equipment.³⁸ The IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah also provided training in Yemen and Iran.³⁹

The Houthi threat has increased because of Iran's proliferation of missiles, missile technology, and missile parts. One example is the use of Borkan-2H mobile, short-range ballistic missiles, which the Houthis used to strike Riyadh and other targets in Saudi Arabia. A United Nations panel of experts concluded that the missiles were "a derived lighter version" of Iran's Qiam-1 missile and that Iran provided key missile parts to the Houthis.⁴⁰ Analysis from the wreckage of 10 Borkan-2H missiles indicates that they were likely smuggled into Yemen in parts and then put together. Iranian components were also integrated into Yemeni SA-2 surface-to-air missiles to construct the Qaher series of surface-to-surface rockets.⁴¹ Iran may have used a number of routes to transport the material to Yemen, including ship-to-shore transfers through the Yemen ports of Nishtun and Al-Ghaydah in Al-Mahrah governorate.⁴²

Iraq: The IRGC-QF remains active in Iraq and has enhanced Iran's political, military, and economic power. Iran has helped Shia militia forces in Iraq build their missile production capabilities. According to some reporting, there have been factories used to develop missiles in such Iraqi locations as Jurf al-Sakhar (north of Kerbala) and Al-Zafaraniya (east of Baghdad).⁴³

There are three main groups that comprise the Hashd al-Sha'abi, an umbrella organization of Shia militias. First are those groups loyal to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, which have a particularly close relationship with the IRGC-QF. Examples include the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kataeb Sayed al-Shuhada, and Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba. Second are the groups loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, such as Sarayat al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Sarayat al-Ataba al-Huseiniya, Sarayat al-Ataba al-Alawiya, and Liwa Ali al-Akbar. Sistani urged fighters

to join the Iraqi government's security organizations—not paramilitary groups tied to Iran—in his June 2014 fatwa. Third are groups loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr. The primary organization is Sarayat al-Salam (Peace Brigades), which includes two Hashd brigades (Brigades 313 and 314).⁴⁴

The IRGC-QF has provided some Iraqi militias with short-range ballistic missiles, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, unmanned aerial vehicles, and MANPADS. In addition, several Iraqi militias worked with the IRGC-QF and Iraqi forces to help liberate Tikrit, Fallujah, Ramadi, Tal Afar, Mosul, and other Iraqi cities from Islamic State control.⁴⁵ As one assessment of the 2017 Mosul campaign concluded, "The Quds Force-led Shia militia forces had some 10,000 troops in the battlespace, with many of these fighters embedded in the [Iraqi Security Forces] and FedPol."⁴⁶

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Syria: Iran has provided substantial assistance to the Assad regime by helping organize, train, and fund over 100,000 Shia fighters. Following the onset of Syria's civil war in 2011, Iranian leaders became alarmed at both the rise of Sunni extremist groups like the Islamic State as well as U.S., European, and Gulf support to rebel groups.⁴⁷ In addition to providing light and heavy weapons to the Syrian regime and militias, up to 3,000 IRGC-QF helped plan and execute specific military operations like Dawn of Victory (the 2016 military operation to retake Aleppo).⁴⁸ The IRGC-QF worked closely with the Assad regime and the Russian military, which conducted strikes from Russian combat aircraft and naval vessels in the Mediterranean Sea. Syrian forces and militias, which were supported by the IRGC-QF, shelled rebel positions in Aleppo while Russian close air support and Kalibr cruise missile strikes reduced entire neighborhoods to rubble. By December 2016, ground forces routed rebel forces, who departed under an agreement brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran.⁴⁹

Figure 6 shows the results of an Israeli strike against a munitions storage area at a Syrian military base in Haqlat as Şafrah, Syria, which has been allegedly utilized by the IRGC-QF.⁵⁰ The precise nature of the Israeli attack strongly suggests accurate intelligence and a desire to limit damage to both infrastructure and personnel.⁵¹

Pre-Strike: Satellite Imagery, December 9, 2018



Post-Strike: Satellite Imagery, December 27, 2018



Figure 6: Satellite Imagery of Israeli Strike at a Munitions Storage Area, Haqlat aş Şafrah, Syria

In addition, Lebanese Hezbollah deployed up to 8,000 fighters to Syria and, as previously noted, increased its arsenal with greater numbers and ranges of rockets and missiles from Syrian territory.⁵² Hezbollah also trained, advised, and assisted Shia and other non-state groups in Syria. Collectively known as Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suria (the Islamic Resistance in Syria), examples of those groups included: Quwat al Ridha (or Ridha Forces), which have operated in such Syrian governorates as Homs; Al-Ghaliboun: Saraya al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suria (or The Victors: The Companies of the Islamic Resistance in Syria), which have been active in governorates like Daraa and Quneitra; and Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir (or Baqir Brigade), which has deployed to such governorates as Aleppo.⁵³

Today, the IRGC-QF works with thousands of trained fighters in Syria who are operating in local militias. Many of these groups, like Lebanese Hezbollah, have advanced stand-off weapons, improved cyber capabilities, more recruits, and more expansive forces in Syria capable of striking Israeli targets. The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War demonstrated Israel's difficulty of rooting out Hezbollah sites in Lebanon's heavily urbanized environment. Time has only expanded the nature of this problem for Israel's military to include Syria and Iraq.

Other Countries: The IRGC-QF has aided other non-state groups across the region and used them in battlefields like Syria. For example, the IRGC-QF organized between 10,000 and 15,000 Afghan militants under the Fatemiyoun Brigade (named after Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad) and deployed them to Syria to fight alongside pro-Assad forces. Fatemiyoun fighters were used in such battles as Aleppo, Daraa, Damascus, Hama, Homs, Latakia, Palmyra, and Dayr az Zawr. The IRGC-QF also trained and equipped roughly 2,000 Pakistan fighters under the Zaynabiyoun Brigade (named after Zaynab, Fatima's daughter).⁵⁴ Iran has also utilized Bahraini fighters in Syria. More broadly, the IRGC-QF has attempted to overthrow the Bahrain government several times and trained (along with Lebanese Hezbollah and Kata'ib Hezbollah trainers) Bahraini proxies.⁵⁵ The IRGC-QF has aided other forces, such as the Afghan Taliban, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas—though Iran's relationship with these organizations has been complicated. There is an ongoing internal debate within Hamas, for example, about the group's relationship with Iran. The IRGC-QF also has operatives in other regions, such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

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WEAKNESSES, VULNERABILITIES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite IRGC-QF activism, there are several potential Iranian weaknesses and vulnerabilities, as well as opportunities for the United States and its partners.

First, Iran's economy remains fragile. The regime's willingness to continue to resource the IRGC-QF at significant levels and remain heavily engaged across the region may eventually increase political costs at home. According to International Monetary Fund estimates, the Iranian economy is expected to contract by 3.6 percent in 2019 because of U.S. sanctions and reduced oil production.⁵⁶ Some economists predict an inflation rate of up to 50 percent in the coming year because of high unemployment and a currency that has lost nearly 70 percent over the past 12 months.⁵⁷ The World Bank also estimates that Iran will be negatively impacted by falling exports on the demand side and a contracting industry sector on the supply side.⁵⁸ The IRGC is particularly vulnerable to an economic slowdown because it owns a vast empire of businesses and foundations, from construction companies to petrochemical and cement companies.⁵⁹

But the activity of the IRGC-QF and partners like Lebanese Hezbollah may have long-term costs and risks in blood and treasure. According to some estimates, Iran spent up to \$16 billion in Syria between 2012 and 2018.⁶⁰ The Lebanese Hezbollah presence in Syria has been controversial among some of its members and supporters because of the high number of casualties and, perhaps more importantly, the support of the Assad regime.⁶¹ It is one thing for Lebanese Hezbollah supporters to fight Israel or even the Islamic State. But aiding the Assad regime has been contentious. "We are a resistance [movement], and you don't do resistance by going to war in Syria," said one former Hezbollah fighter, "I will gladly go to fight Israel. But I won't send my sons to die in Syria."⁶² Some protesters in Iran have expressed outrage at Iran's interventions abroad, including in Syria.⁶³

Iranian media periodically has announced memorial services for fallen Quds Force officers and other military personnel in Syria, including in newspaper obituaries. Iran

suffered substantial casualties during offensive operations in cities like Aleppo. According to some accounts, over 30 IRGC-QF operatives were killed in the first two weeks of the Aleppo campaign alone, including Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani, a former commander of Iranian forces in Syria. IRGC-QF personnel of virtually all ranks were killed in action, from general officers to colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors.⁶⁴ Iran's state-backed Martyrs Foundation financially supported thousands of families of Iran-backed forces killed in Syria.⁶⁵ The Iranian people need to be reminded of the costs and risks in money and casualties that their government has incurred to fight wars in countries like Yemen and Syria, particularly with their weak economy.

Second, there is wide variation in Iraqi views of Iran, including among the Shia community. Najaf's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and his "quietist" school of Iraqi Shiism shun direct clerical participation in politics. Sistani's stance is an implicit rebuke of Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*.⁶⁶ In addition, Iraqi nationalism and anti-Iranian sentiments among Iraqis continues to linger from the Iran-Iraq War. Some public opinion polls indicate that many Iraqis are highly critical of Iran's role in the country.⁶⁷ In Sunni areas like Al-Anbar Province, locals bitterly complain about the proliferation of Shia militias, feel alienated from a government in Baghdad they believe is too closely aligned with Shia, and protest the slow pace of reconstruction following the collapse of the Islamic State's so-called caliphate. As one Iraqi intelligence official acknowledged, "This is not just revenge on ISIS. This is revenge on Sunnis."⁶⁸

Muqtada al-Sadr's relations with the IRGC-QF has been mixed. His father was an ardent Shia Arab activist, and his teachings on the importance of Arabism run counter to Khomeini's pan-Shia, anti-nationalist ideology. Muqtada also does not believe in Khomeini's *velayat-e faqih*.⁶⁹ Iran is now stuck attempting to mediate between the fractious Iraqi Shia groups in an environment where a single Lebanese Hezbollah-style structure is not possible. In September 2018, Iraqi protesters stormed the Iranian consulate in the southern Iraqi city of Basra and set it on fire.⁷⁰ These fissures create opportunities for the United States and its partners—including Gulf countries—to continue to engage with Iraq's Shia communities. Riyadh, for example, has established a political and economic relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr. There may be opportunities for Iraq to work with Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to further develop economic ties—

Iranian activism and the proliferation of Iranian-backed non-state actors has alarmed most governments in the region—such as Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco—making it possible to conduct broader balancing. Iran is largely isolated in the region.

including rail, road, and electricity links—with southern Iraqi cities like Basra.⁷¹

Third, Iranian activism and the proliferation of Iranian-backed non-state actors has alarmed most governments in the region—such as Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco—making it possible to conduct broader balancing. Iran is largely isolated in the region. Some public opinion polls suggest that support for Iran across the Middle East—including in Iraq—has declined.⁷² These countries can play an important role in helping the United States balance against Iran and IRGC-QF activities.⁷³

Israeli actions have limited Iranian activity in Syria, including near the Golan Heights. But this pressure needs to continue, and the United States and other allies need to coordinate with each other in intelligence collection, diplomatic engagement, and limited military action to prevent an Iranian missile build-up in Syria. Houthi expansion has stalled in Yemen because of Saudi and UAE support to local actors and aggressive interdiction. But further political and intelligence efforts will be required to: encourage a settlement that provides sufficient guarantees that Iran will not have the same access it has enjoyed in Lebanon following the 1989 Taif Agreement; protect Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States from further missile attacks, including through improvements in air defense systems; and punish Iran for the further proliferation of missiles and missile parts.

While the situation with Iran is tense, there has not been a major conventional war with Iran. And, as U.S. intelligence agencies recently noted, Iran is not producing a nuclear weapon despite the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.⁷⁴ Still, there is a steady drumbeat of irregular conflict. The Houthis have launched ballistic missiles against Saudi Arabia. The Israelis have conducted airstrikes against fixed and mobile positions in Syria that are storing or transporting Iranian missiles and missile parts. There has been a rise in the number and capabilities of

U.S. engagement is critical to deal with these issues and prevent the outbreak of a wider war with Iran that risks further instability in the region.

militia forces working with the IRGC-QF. And all sides have used irregular tactics like assassinations and cyberattacks.

Yet Iran's continuing activism across the region—including by the IRGC-QF and its leader, Qassem Soleimani—requires more effective U.S. cooperation with governments in Europe and across the region to balance against Tehran. The results thus far have been mixed.

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