

# Case Studies in Iranian Expansion Across the Middle East

## *El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon*

By Seth G. Jones, Nicholas Harrington, & Joseph Bermudez | May 2019

*This commentary is part II of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project's Iran satellite imagery analysis series. Part I focuses on the Imam Ali training facility in Iran, which can be found here: [www.csis.org/imam-ali](http://www.csis.org/imam-ali). For further analysis, please see, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," which can be found here: [www.csis.org/war-by-proxy](http://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy).*

There is growing Iranian activism in the Middle East despite U.S. and allied efforts to weaken Iran's economy and politically isolate Tehran. But Iran's primary military instrument is not its conventional army, air force, or navy, which are relatively weak. Instead, Iran has provided significant resources and power to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF). The IRGC-QF is Iran's main irregular force and is instrumental in helping Iran expand its influence in the Middle East and other regions. It engages in a wide range of activities, 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. The IRGC-QF has partners in countries like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bahrain.

In an effort to better understand IRGC-QF and broader Iranian activities, this analysis examines satellite imagery of the El Boqaa training facility in Lebanon, near the Syrian border. In Lebanon, the IRGC-QF's chief partner, Hezbollah, has improved its military capabilities and become more involved in the government. Iran has provided money, equipment, training, and ideological inspiration to Lebanese Hezbollah. Commercial satellite imagery acquired in 2019 highlights a training facility in southern Lebanon, located southeast of the town of Beit Moubarak, on the eastern and southern slopes of El Boqaa.

Figure 1: Location of El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon



Figure 2: El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon



The size, arrangement and dispersed layout of the El Boqaa facility suggest it is operated by a paramilitary or irregular military force for training light infantry-type units. This layout also suggests that it was deliberately used to:

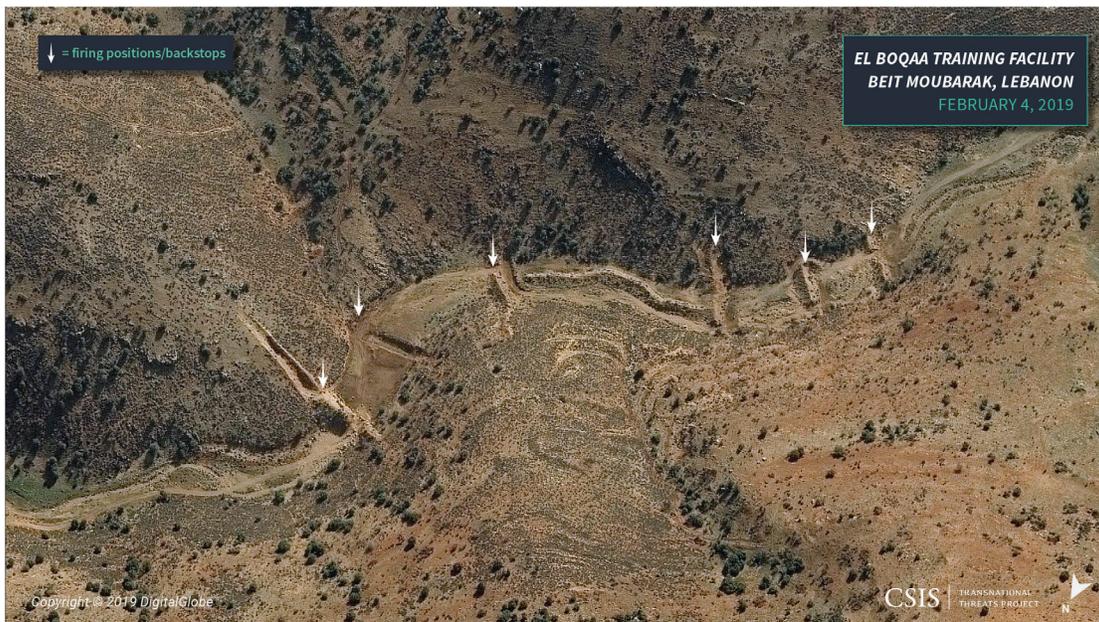
- minimize detection;
- allow for small groups of combatants to be trained independently and without contact with one another if desired; and
- minimize damage from aerial or artillery attack.

CSIS analysis of 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: (1) firing ranges; (2) a housing and storage area; (3) a driver training facility; (4) two urban combat facilities; (5) quarries; and (6) headquarters and support areas.

**Figure 3: Firing Range No. 1, El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



**Figure 4: Firing Range No. 2, El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**

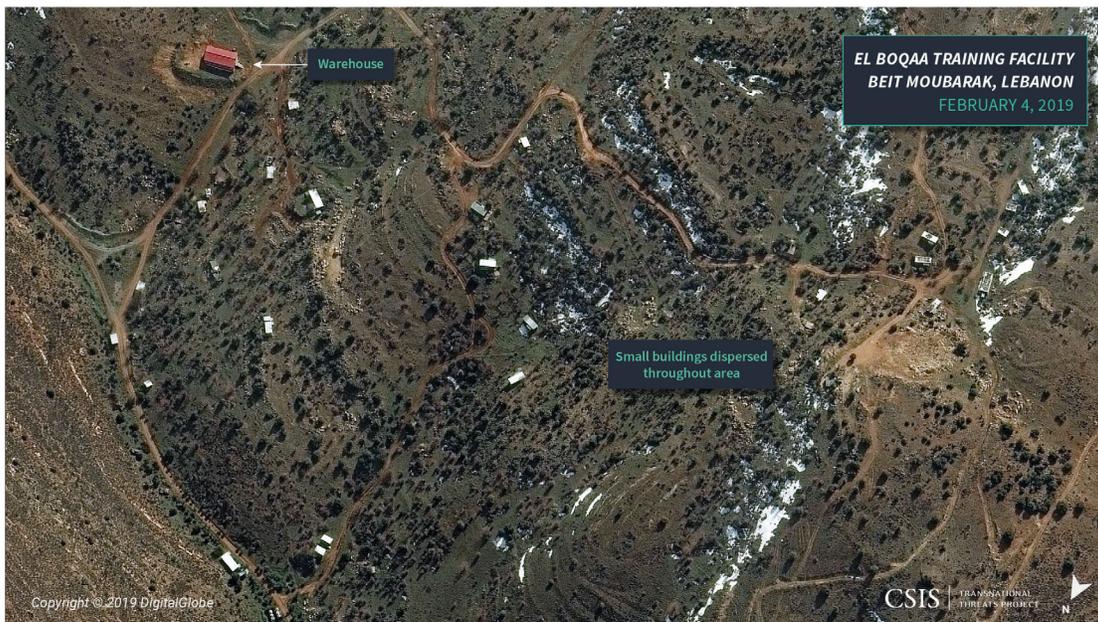


**Figure 5: Firing Range No. 3, El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



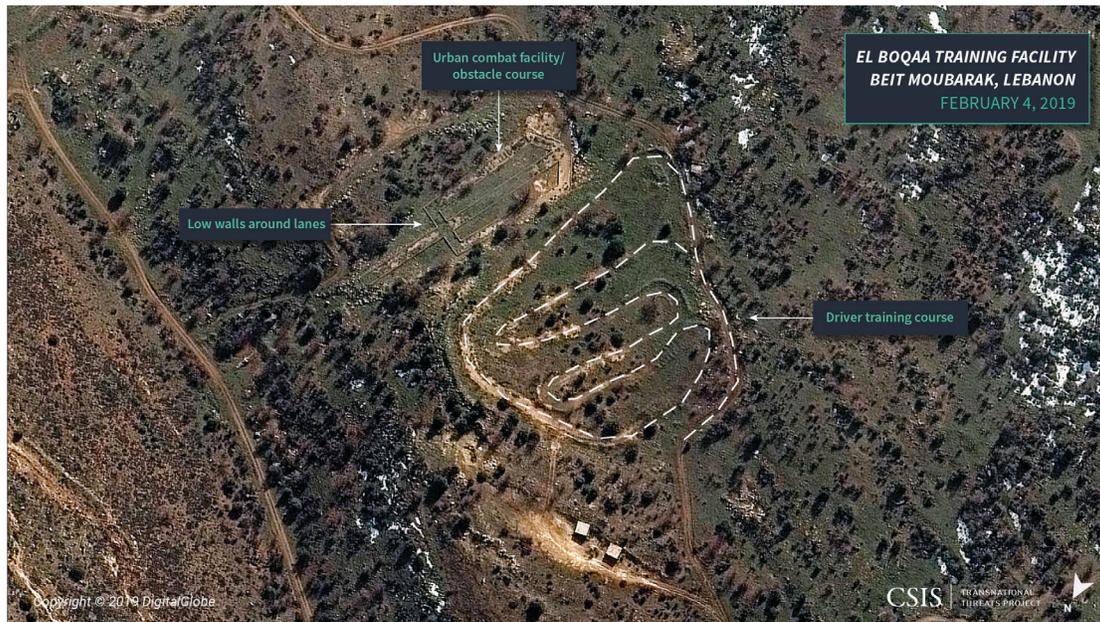
*Firing Ranges (Figures 3-5):* There are three firing ranges. The largest two are located in a small valley on the west side of the training facility. These appear to be designed for use by armored personnel carriers and improvised armored fighting vehicles. The third firing range is located 800 meters east of the first two. It consists of five small pistol and rifle ranges varying in length from 8 to 100 meters long.

**Figure 6: Housing and Storage Area, El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



*Housing and Storage Area (Figure 6):* 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 7: Driver Training Facility & Urban Combat Training Facility No. 1, El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon



*Driver Training Facility and Urban Combat Training Facility (Figure 7):* A serpentine one-kilometer long driver training course is located immediately east of the housing and storage area. It is capable of handling armored fighting vehicles, trucks, and smaller vehicles. The area also includes one of two urban combat training facilities. The first combat training facility (top of image in Figure 7) 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.

**Figure 8: Urban Combat Facility No. 2, El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



*Urban Combat Facility (Figure 8):* Another urban combat course is located 160m east of the driver training course. This second facility appears to represent a stylized small Lebanese village in which there is a main road that leads to a central square or building (typically for local government or religious use). The buildings on either side of this facility appear to represent the slightly taller buildings that are often seen closer to the center of small villages.

**Figure 9: Quarries, El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



*Quarries (Figure 9):* 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. The small quarry in the center of the image is unique

in that it has been enclosed by a high dirt berm and a retaining wall (or revetment) has been placed in the center. This suggests explosives training, such as for improvised explosives devices, or explosives ordnance disposal (EOD) training.

**Figure 10: Headquarters and Support Areas, Part 1,  
El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



**Figure 11: Headquarters and Support Areas, Part 2,  
El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



**Figure 12: Headquarters and Support Areas, Part 3,  
El Boqaa Training Facility, Lebanon**



*Probable Headquarters and Support Areas (Figures 10-12):* 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.

## Conclusion

Hezbollah's El Boqaa training facility, and similar facilities in Lebanon and across the Middle East, highlights Iran's commitment to using irregular methods, such as training partner forces, to project power through the region. Iranian leaders appear just as committed as ever to engagement across the Middle East using irregular methods. Based on Iran's continuing activism in the region—led by the IRGC-QF and its head, Qassem Soleimani—the United States needs to closely cooperate with its partners to continue assessing the threat and to effectively balance against Iran.

But as highlighted in this analysis of El Boqaa training facility, Iran relies on irregular—not conventional—means to expand its power and leverage proxy forces and other partners in countries like Lebanon. Consequently, the U.S. response should focus on countering Iran's activities through diplomatic, financial, informational, intelligence, and military (particularly special operations) means—but not escalating to conventional war.

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