

# Congressional Testimony

## **State Sponsor of Terror:** *The Global Threat of Iran*

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating. Thank you for inviting me to this very timely hearing to testify on the organic relationship between Iran and Hezbollah and the threat they pose to US interests.

Sensing that its moment has arrived, Iran is in the middle of an aggressive region-wide expansionist drive. Today, Iranian officials openly brag about controlling four Arab capitals — Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa. In each of these capitals, the Iranians have developed proxies, either by creating new militias on the Hezbollah model or by coopting pre-existing local actors. They are using these proxies to extend Iran's reach, integrating them into its regional strategy targeting US allies and interests. In each of these capitals, Hezbollah is at the center of Iranian designs.

Since the beginning of the Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran, Hezbollah has enjoyed a privileged place in Iran's regional strategy. Hezbollah was created as an extension of the ruling militant clerical clique and as the long arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the Arab world. Hezbollah is the first and to date most successful export of the Islamic revolution. From the early 1980's to the present, Hezbollah has been a constant feature of Iranian overseas operations against the US and its allies.

From the outset, the group's progenitors in the IRGC sought to spawn and support militant movements in line with Iran's interests and under its control. But Iran is separated from its Arab surroundings by ethnicity, language and sectarian affiliation. Which is why it invested heavily in Hezbollah. A 1984 statement by Iran's ambassador to Beirut is instructive as to the importance Tehran attached to Hezbollah and Lebanon in its regional strategy: "an Islamic movement [in Lebanon] will result in Islamic movements throughout the Arab world." Indeed, Hezbollah has been instrumental in helping Tehran develop Arab assets and spread its influence across the region. The ability to export its revolutionary model to willing Arab groups allowed Iran to embed itself in Arab societies and project influence, which otherwise would have been far more constrained.

This strategy has arguably reached its peak moment today. Iran's investment in Lebanon is paying dividends like never before since the success of the Islamic revolution. What the Iranians hadn't counted on, however, is that the US would acquiesce to their bid for regional hegemony.

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When Iranian officials talk about the various regional assets they are supporting in the Arab world, their essential point of reference is Hezbollah. Thus, Ali Akbar Velayati, adviser to Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei, recently said to a visiting group of Yemenite clerics in Tehran, "I hope that the [Houthi] Ansar Allah group in Yemen plays a role similar to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon."

Velayati is referring to a specific template that Iran has developed and which it's now establishing in the Arab territories over which it holds sway. In essence, it consists of developing politico-military structures parallel to Arab central governments, especially in countries where those governments are weak. In other words, much like the Soviet Union before it, Iran sets up proxies with the objective of dominating states.

There are several variants of the Hezbollah template. First, there's what Iranian officials call the Basij model, in reference to Iran's paramilitary force. These groups have been established in Iraq, under the name "The Popular Mobilization Forces," as a sectarian volunteer auxiliary to the various Shiite militias and Iraqi Security Forces. Similarly, the Iranians have also encouraged and helped train a parallel phenomenon in Syria, "The National Defense Forces." Describing these forces, the deputy head of the IRGC Lt. Gen. Hossein Salami recently told Fars News Agency, "in Syria, we have a popular army tied to the Islamic Revolution which has chosen the Basiji school of thought as its role model."

On a smaller scale, Hezbollah has cultivated similar groups in Lebanon that serve as its auxiliaries. The war with the Islamic State group (ISIS) has amplified Iran's ability to mobilize these groups and provide them with arms and training. In turn, this expands Tehran's penetration, cements its hold on the weak governments, and increases its influence over the strategic decisions of these states.

But Iran's biggest assets are the militias that, like Hezbollah, are direct extensions of the IRGC. Iran has had longstanding ties to Iraqi Shiite groups that it hosted and sponsored in the 1980's. Some of these groups conducted terrorist activities against Gulf Arab states in the 80's, working in tandem with Hezbollah. Today, these militias, and the multiple spin-offs and splinters that have arisen from them, effectively run southern Iraq. Many of

the old faces from the 1980's and 1990's like Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis of Kataib Hezbollah and Hadi al-Amiri of the Badr Organization, are now among the more powerful security figures in Iraq, working directly with Iran's Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani.

Importantly, these militias are not only operating under the command of the Qods Force, and many bear the IRGC logo, but also most adhere to the ideological doctrine underpinning the Islamic regime in Tehran. As ever, Hezbollah has been central to Iran's effort to train and advise these militias. And whereas Iran deployed these militias in the 1980's and 1990's to conduct terrorist operations against US and allied targets, it now has deployed them in Syria to advance Iranian strategic interests there. This ability highlights the extent of Iran's command and control over these groups and the broader geostrategic theater in which Iran is moving these assets to pursue its objectives.

The IRGC and Hezbollah have also built ties to the Houthi movement in Yemen. Well before the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, the Iranians were smuggling weapons by sea to Yemen. As a senior Yemeni security official told Reuters last December, Iranian weapons "are still coming in by sea and there's money coming in through transfers." Hezbollah advisers also came to Yemen to work with the Houthis. When the movement took over Sanaa in September of last year, they freed two Hezbollah operatives that were being held, as well as three IRGC members who were detained when the authorities intercepted an Iranian weapons shipment by sea in January 2013. Support for the Houthis is not only military. Their media arm is operating, with Hezbollah training and assistance, from Beirut where it runs a satellite TV channel.

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Along with building up alternatives to weak central governments, the Iranian strategy aims to dominate state institutions and dictate these states' overall strategic orientation against traditional US allies in the region.

Hezbollah's domination of the Lebanese government has been evident over the last ten years. Hezbollah's influence over the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) has now developed into a synergy. Hezbollah and the LAF might

deploy jointly, or the LAF might undertake support operations aiding Hezbollah's war effort against Syrian rebels. In addition, the LAF and other security agencies share with Hezbollah intelligence they receive from the US and other Western states. As such, Hezbollah, a terrorist group, is still able to work hand in glove with the LAF and directly benefit from its legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

The same arrangement exists in Iraq. The Shiite militias now hold sway over the Ministry of Interior. As Eli Lake recently reported from Iraq, "it's increasingly difficult to tell where the Iraqi army ends and the Iranian-supported Shiite militias begin." As with Hezbollah and the LAF, the Iraqi militias are now the beneficiaries of the Iraqi army's international legitimacy and partnership with the US. Consequently, they now operate under US air cover, and help themselves to US-made equipment supplied to the Iraqi army.

This strategy makes Iran and its assets the only viable interlocutors on regional security. Unfortunately, rather than push back, the US appears to be recognizing, if not enabling this new reality.

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Iran's expansionist push and the cultivation of assets across the region bring pressure on traditional US allies, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia. The recent episode in the Golan Heights serves as a good example.

On January 18, the Israeli army reportedly struck a convoy in the Golan Heights near the town of Quneitra. Riding in the convoy were senior Qods Force and Hezbollah officers, among them Qods Force Brig. Gen. Mohammad Ali Allah-Dadi — Soleimani's man in Syria.

This high-level delegation's presence in the Golan threw into stark relief how Iran's strategy poses a direct threat to US allies and interests. First, the Iranians and Hezbollah had set up "Hezbollah-Syria," which they intended to make a constant feature on the Golan, in order to activate it against Israel. Last April, the conservative Iranian newspaper *Jomhuri Eslami* explained the role "Hezbollah-Syria" would play: "The establishment of Syria's Hezbollah... will also be a strong arm of the resistance that will cause nightmares for the Zionists. The Zionist regime that was concerned about threats from the Lebanese borders, now should prepare itself for a new

situation (on the Golan Heights).”

But the threat is not confined to Israel’s borders, as Iran and Hezbollah possess global reach. Hence, following the Israeli strike, both the commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, and Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, threatened to retaliate “anywhere,” “not just in [Israel’s] borders, but in any place in the world.”

The list of countries in which Iran and/or Hezbollah planned or executed operations against Israeli or Jewish targets in the past few years is long, spanning the entire globe. As such, Jafari’s threat is not idle. Last October, Peruvian police arrested Mohammed Amadar, a Hezbollah member who was surveying Israeli and Jewish targets in the Peruvian capital and planning to attack them. Also, reports emerged recently that Uruguay expelled a senior Iranian diplomat in Iran’s embassy in Montevideo three weeks ago over his involvement in placing an explosive device near the Israeli embassy in early January. While Uruguay denies expelling the diplomat – who seems to have rather fled the country – this would not have been the first time Iran used its diplomatic corps and missions to conduct terrorist operations abroad – especially in Latin America. The role Iran’s “cultural attaché” in Argentina Mohsen Rabbani played in the attacks in Buenos Aires in the 1990’s serves as precedent.

Of course, Israel is hardly the only US ally in Iran’s crosshairs. The IRGC’s agitations in Yemen and Bahrain, to say nothing of Kuwait, testify to Iran’s intent to dominate the Gulf and pressure Saudi Arabia. But Yemen in particular affords Iran the additional potential benefit of control over the Red Sea, where Tehran already has longstanding relations in East Africa, especially the Sudan. The Red Sea, of course, is also Iran’s established smuggling route to transfer rockets into Gaza. It was in this context that Velayati told the Yemenite delegation in Tehran that “the liberation of Palestine passes through Yemen, which commands a major strategic location.”

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Iran’s expansionist drive — as it presses ahead with its nuclear program — represents without question the greatest strategic challenge for the US in the Middle East. Unlike Al-Qaeda, the Iranian network of assets is a state enterprise. What’s more, these assets now control weak central governments,

allowing them to use these government to obtain the cover of legitimacy. Meanwhile, they subordinate these states to their objectives. This extends beyond using the national armies and security forces, as in Iraq and Lebanon, to making government institutions complicit in terrorist operations, as Hezbollah has done with the Lebanese government. To give an example, Hezbollah has had government-issued passports with false names made for its operatives, as was the case with Mohammad Mansour (a.k.a. Sami Shehab) in Egypt in 2009.

It is therefore imperative for the US to hold the Lebanese government and its Armed Forces accountable. Unfortunately, the US has opted to turn a blind eye to the increased synergy of Hezbollah and the LAF under the pretext of fighting Sunni extremists operating in Syria. The same faulty logic applies in Iraq, where the US is acquiescing to malignant Iranian influence and the dominance of its Shiite militias over the state. Similarly, despite the Houthi group's putsch in Yemen, administration officials have acknowledged maintaining intelligence ties with the Houthis because, as Undersecretary for Defense Michael Vickers recently put it, "they are anti-Al Qaeda."

The Iranians have recognized this opening and are exploiting it, positioning themselves and their assets as the only viable partners against Sunni extremist groups. This is a disastrous policy course for the US. It will push Sunnis, who are revolting against Iranian hegemony in countries like Iraq and Syria, to align with groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda who present themselves as the vanguards of the fight against Iran and its proxies. Furthermore, aligning closely with Iran and its assets, as they brutalize Sunnis of all stripes, tars the US and alienates all its Sunni allies. The United Arab Emirates withdrawal from the anti-ISIS coalition, citing Washington's acquiescence to a growing Iranian role, should serve as an example of what lies ahead for the US alliance system in the region.

As things stand today, the Obama administration's de facto partnership with Iran across the region has resulted in the gradual loss of all commonality with America's traditional allies. But the US cannot lose sight of the fact that Iran remains an unreconstructed revolutionary, anti-American actor intent on replacing the US as the dominant power in the Middle East. Thirty six years after the Islamic revolution, the ruling clique in Iran is unchanged, as are its ideology, its regional objectives, and the violent tools it has long used to achieve those goals: terrorism, subversion, and setting up militias over which it exerts direct control. For decades, the US policy had been to

push back against Iranian subversion in the region, in order to protect the US alliance system in the region. It is time we turn again to that policy, roll back Iran's expansionist drive, and disabuse it of its dreams of regional hegemony.

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There are several steps that the United States could take to roll back growing regional fears regarding Washington's possible alignment with Iran. Some of them will take the form of reinforcing current administration policies. Some of them will require changes in the administration's current approach to the Middle East.

First, administration officials up to and including the President should make it clear to Iran, to regional allies, and to the global community that US concerns neither begin nor end with Iran's nuclear program. Iran's goal of regional domination and global influence are the overarching threat to American national security. Building a nuclear arsenal is part of that strategy, and a sure means to secure it.

Second, administration officials need to clarify that they understand the links between Sunni radicalism, including and especially in the form of ISIS, and Iranian influence. The United States must make it clear that it understands the enormous degree to which Tehran's influence fuels ISIS. It must to the greatest extent avoid de facto alliances with Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. US policymakers will have to adjust how they conduct their operations in the region, and in some cases will have to degrade cooperation with elements otherwise aligned against ISIS.

In Lebanon, assistance to the LAF should be conditioned on the measure of Hezbollah's influence on the institution, and how closely the two work together. Those conditions should be enforced.

In Iraq, we must make it clear to Baghdad that the price for American assistance is genuine inclusiveness with moderate Sunnis, as well as an end to cooperation between Iranian-backed Shiite militias and the Iraqi Security Forces. Other steps may become necessary to rebuild trust in Sunni communities, including dismantlement of the Shiite militias that have been allowed to gain prominence under successive US-backed Iraqi governments.



In Syria, any explicit or implicit coordination with the regime in Syria must be absolutely and totally ended. The objective in Syria needs to be to remove Assad from power, not to legitimize him as a partner.

In Yemen, as our allies have condemned the Houthi coup, any cooperation with the Houthis should be halted at this point.

Congress can play a constructive role in pushing forward these policy goals.