



Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Hearing on “Hezbollah’s Strategic Shift: A Global Terrorist Threat”

Iran’s Global Force Projection Network: IRGC Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah

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March 20, 2013

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the American Enterprise Institute.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is first and foremost concerned with regime preservation, and its strategic calculus and behavior are deeply influenced by this concern. It is therefore essential that Iran's global terror campaign is considered within this context. Iran's global force projection network, to include the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran's proxies in Iraq and Gaza, is primarily a deterrence and retaliatory force, nested within a strategy designed to protect the regime from external threats. By demonstrating a capability to strike U.S. and Israeli interests anywhere in the world, or creating a perception of this capability, Iran's leaders hope to stave off a military strike, or at least make it extremely costly for their foes.

This has been a component of Iran's strategic thinking since the earliest years of the Iranian Revolution. In 1980, while the regime was still in its infancy and officials were debating the direction of Iran's foreign policy, the official organ of the IRGC published an editorial describing why Iran's global terrorist network is fundamental to regime survival. It reads in part:

In order to achieve ideological, political, security and economic self-reliance we have no other choice but to mobilize all forces loyal to the Islamic Revolution, and through this mobilization, plant such a terror in the hearts of the enemies that they abandon the thought of an offensive and annihilation of our revolution.... If our revolution does not have an offensive and internationalist dimension, the enemies of Islam will again enslave us culturally, politically, and the like, and they will not abstain from plunder and looting.¹

This, in my view, is an accurate reflection of Iranian strategic thinking still today. In order to understand the Iranian global terrorist activity that we see currently, it is important to bear in mind the strategic thinking out of which this behavior has emerged.

It is noteworthy that this sentiment was articulated by the IRGC, as this is the organization that is primarily responsible for managing Iran's global force projection network.

The IRGC is a revolutionary, ideological military organization and an economic and political powerhouse within Iran. The IRGC's self-described primary mission is to defend Iran's Islamic Revolution; in other words, to preserve the regime.² To accomplish this mission, the IRGC is tasked with internal security, conventional deterrence and defense, internal and external intelligence collection, and foreign military operations.

The IRGC's senior leadership consists of a core network of individuals who developed professional military experience and enduring personal relationships during Iran's eight-year war with Iraq (1980-1988).³ The commander of the IRGC, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, reports to Iran's Supreme Leader and each of the IRGC's five combat service commanders report directly to Jafari, with the exception of one. Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Suleimani also reports directly to the Supreme Leader.⁴

This point is extremely important to understanding the extent to which Iran's senior leadership is complicit in the global activities of the Quds Force, its partners, and proxies. There is no

intermediary between the Supreme Leader and Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani. Any Quds Force activity has, at a minimum, tacit approval of the Supreme Leader.

The notion that Quds Force operations – such as the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. in a mass-casualty attack in Washington, D.C. – is undertaken by rogue elements of the Quds Force without the approval of Qassem Suleimani and the Supreme Leader is anathema to the IRGC's command structure.⁵

The IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah have a well-known historical relationship that continues to this day. The IRGC deployed one of its brigades to southern Lebanon in the early 1980s to create and stand up Hezbollah.⁶ Since that time Iran has provided continuous financial and materiel support to Hezbollah, and their partnership has materialized in the form of multiple mass-casualty terrorist attacks around the globe, targeted assassinations, and military operations in wartime environments.⁷ This last element of collaboration is well-documented and provides insight into the depth of cooperation between the Quds Force and Hezbollah in their operations. Moreover, the Quds Force personnel known to have been involved in these operations continue to play senior roles in Iran's global force projection network today.

During the Iraq War, the Quds Force teamed with Lebanese Hezbollah to train, fund and arm Iraqi Shia militant groups, and plan and execute attacks against U.S. and Coalition Forces. In one such example, Deputy Commander of the Quds Force External Special Operations Unit, Abdul Reza Shahlai, along with senior Hezbollah operative Ali Musa Daqduq, planned a sophisticated attack in 2007 that resulted in the death of five U.S. soldiers in Karbala, Iraq.⁸

Shahlai later went on to help plan and facilitate the failed 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. in Washington, D.C.⁹ Daqduq, who had been appointed in 2005 by Hezbollah to coordinate training for Iraqi militants inside Iran with the Quds Force, was detained by Coalition Forces in 2007.¹⁰ He was released by the Iraqi government in 2012.¹¹ Reports indicate that Daqduq fled Baghdad for Lebanon after his release.¹²

The third highest-ranking commander of the Quds Force, Operations and Training Deputy Mohsen Chizari, was also active in Iraq. Chizari was detained by U.S. forces in Baghdad in 2006 along with another unnamed Quds Force officer and detailed information on the import of sophisticated weaponry from Iran to Iraq.¹³ The Iraqi government quickly released Chizari and his co-conspirator, citing diplomatic immunity.¹⁴ Five years later, in May 2011, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Chizari, along with Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani, for their role in supporting Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria.¹⁵

Iran's involvement in Syria is not surprising. Iran maintains a number of strategic interests that have been affected by the ongoing crisis, and the centrality of Syria to Iran's regional objectives has necessitated an integrated effort. Syria has long been Iran's closest state ally and provided crucial access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as Hamas in Gaza, and Islamic Jihad in the West Bank. Iran has used Syria as a hub to finance and transport personnel and weapons to these groups. Furthermore, Iran has invested in Syria as a strategic partner as part of its deterrence strategy vis-à-

vis Israel and as an Arab ally in its rivalry with Turkey and the Persian Gulf states. Iran is, therefore, implementing a two-track strategy in Syria, undertaking efforts to both preserve the Assad regime for as long as possible while working to create a permissive operational environment in post-Assad Syria.¹⁶

This effort has been led primarily by the Quds Force, which has deployed senior personnel into Syria in order to arm, train, and advise elements of Assad's security forces.¹⁷ The assassination of senior Quds Force commander Brigadier General Hassan Shateri in Syria last month is evidence of ongoing Quds Force activity directed at the highest levels.¹⁸ Iran's efforts have also increasingly involved Lebanese Hezbollah. The Quds Force and Hezbollah have cooperated in ensuring the passage of Iranian arms shipments to Syria since at least 2012.¹⁹ They have also cooperated to train pro-Assad forces inside Syria.²⁰

Hezbollah has recently increased its direct combat role in Syria. Hezbollah forces launched an attack in February 2013 in coordination with Assad's forces against rebel-held villages near al Qusayr, Syria.²¹ The January 2013 Israeli strike on a Hezbollah military convoy transporting SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles revealed that the organization was working to move more sophisticated weaponry out of Syria into Lebanon.²² The emergence of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade in Syria, a conglomerate of Syrian and foreign Shia fighters, including members of Hezbollah and Iraqi militia groups which purports to protect the Shia Sayyeda Zeinab shrine and surrounding neighborhood in Damascus, could provide Iran and the Quds Force another avenue to both assist Assad militarily and influence the conflict after regime collapse.²³

The extent of Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in Syria reflects the centrality of Syria to both. The loss of Syria as a state ally will significantly impact Iran's ability to deter Israel, project power in the Levant, and supply its proxies.

Iran may achieve some success with this two-track strategy, prolonging the conflict and creating conditions whereby it can retain some of its operational capacity in the Levant. The loss of Syria as a state ally, however, will significantly limit Iran's strategic depth. A rump Alawite state cannot provide Iran with the same level of deterrence, or political and economic support as Assad's Syria. Moreover, a rump Alawite state cannot be sustained indefinitely.²⁴ Iran's efforts in this regard offer only a temporary solution to a much greater problem.

Iran is certainly aware that the loss of Syria will significantly degrade its ability to project power in the Levant and has planned for such a contingency. In order to compensate for this loss and continue to present an effective deterrence force, Iran may look to expand its activities in other countries and regions. The interception earlier this month of an Iranian weapons shipment containing sophisticated Chinese-made anti-aircraft missiles, and large quantities of arms, ammunition, and explosive material destined for al Houthi rebels in Yemen suggests that, in at least one area, Iran has ramped up its support for militants elsewhere.²⁵

The Quds Force's recent escalation of global activity over the past two years, including a plot to conduct a mass-casualty attack in Washington D.C., a mixed bag of failure and success in its terrorist

plots against Israeli interests in Georgia, India, and Azerbaijan, and plans to carry out attacks in Bahrain, Kenya, and Nigeria, indicate that Iran is growing and operationalizing its global force projection network.²⁶ This is likely an effort on Iran's part to demonstrate that it, indeed, has a robust deterrent and retaliatory force in place. As the conflict in Syria stretches on, Damascus slips from Assad's control, and Iran sees its strategic depth continually eroded, we are likely to see not just increasing Iranian military activity in Syria but a more risk-prone Iranian regional and global strategy.

Notes

¹ “tahlili bar zarourat-e tashkil-e sepah dar seh bod-e ideolozhi, siyasi, nezami” [An Analysis of the Necessity of Establishing the Guards in the Three Dimensions of Ideology, Politics, and Military], *Payam-e Enqelab* (Tehran), March 19, 1980, p. 32. Translation from: Ali Alfoneh. *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, forthcoming).

² “dafa’ az enghelab-e eslami mohemtarin mamuriyat-e sepah” [Defending the Islamic Revolution is the Sepah’s Most Important Mission], *Bultan*, December 13, 2012. Available in Persian: <http://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/114985/%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87>

³ Will Fulton, “IRGC Command Network: Formal Structures and Informal Influence,” *AEI Critical Threats Project*, October 10, 2012. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-irgc-command-network-october-10-2012>

⁴ “baraye hezf-e Israel yek bahaneh va 24 sa’at vaght lazem darim” [We only need an excuse and 24 hours to destroy Israel], *Jahan News*, September 29, 2012. Available in Persian: <http://jahannews.com/vdcbgzb5grhba8p.uiur.html>

⁵ “Two Men Charged in Alleged Plot to Assassinate Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States,” U.S. Department of Justice, October 11, 2011. Available: <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/October/11-ag-1339.html>

⁶ “farmandeh-ye jedid-e sepah-e mohammad rasoulallah kist?” [Who is the new IRGC Mohammad Rasoul Allah Commander?], *Tabnak*, November 12, 2009. Available in Persian: <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/72683/%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%84%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%9F>

⁷ “Hizbullah,” National Counterterrorism Center: Counterterrorism 2013 Calendar. Available: <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/hizballah.html>

⁸ “Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Fueling Violence in Iraq,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 16, 2008. Available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1141.aspx>

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⁹ “Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals Tied to Iranian Plot to Assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 11, 2011. Available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1320.aspx>

¹⁰ “Iran Arming, Training, Directing Terror Groups in Iraq, U.S. Official Says,” U.S. Department of Defense, July 2, 2007. Available: <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=46606>

¹¹ “Iraq releases suspected Hezbollah operative Daqduq,” *Reuters*, November 16, 2012. Available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/16/us-iraq-daqduq-release-idUSBRE8AF0SS20121116>

¹² “Iraqi PM cites lack of evidence in release of man wanted by US in killings of soldiers,” *CNN*, November 19, 2012. Available: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/17/world/meast/iraq-us-militant-charges>

¹³ Sudarsan Raghavan and Robin Wright, “Iraq Expels 2 Iranians Detained by U.S.,” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2012. Available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/29/AR2006122901510_pf.html

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 16, 2012. Available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>

¹⁶ Joseph Holliday, Will Fulton, Sam Wyer, “Iranian Strategy in Syria,” Institute for the Study of War and AEI Critical Threats Project, forthcoming.

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¹⁷ “Administration Takes Additional Steps to Hold the Government of Syria Accountable for Violent Repression Against the Syrian People,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, May 18, 2011. Available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1181.aspx>

¹⁸ Will Fulton, “The Assassination of Iranian Quds Force General Hassan Shateri in Syria,” *AEI Critical Threats*, February 28, 2013. Available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-assassination-iranian-quds-force-general-hassan-shateri-syria-february-28-2013>

¹⁹ “Treasury Targets Iranian Arms Shipments,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 27, 2012. Available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx>

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²⁰ “Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusrah Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 11, 2012. Available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1797.aspx>

²¹ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, Laila Bassam, “Hezbollah fighter, five Syrian rebels killed on border,” *Reuters*, February 17, 2013. Available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/17/us-syria-crisis-hezbollah-idUSBRE91G0CX20130217>

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²⁵ Robert F. Worth and C.J. Chivers, "Seized Chinese Weapons Raise Concerns on Iran," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2013. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/world/middleeast/seized-arms-off-yemen-raise-alarm-over-iran.html>

²⁶ "Bahrain convicts six of plotting with Iran," *Reuters*, May 27, 2012. Available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/27/us-bahrain-plot-trial-idUSBRE84Q08P20120527>
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