IRANIAN BACKED MILITIAS: DESTABILIZING THE MIDDLE EAST

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, NONPROLIFERATION, AND TRADE

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

OCTOBER 4, 2017

Serial No. 115–64

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Affairs

Available via the World Wide Web: http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/ or http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

27–062PDF WASHINGTON : 2017

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Publishing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512–1800; DC area (202) 512–1800
Fax: (202) 512–2104 Mail: Stop IDCC, Washington, DC 20402–0001

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

EDWARD R. ROYCE, California, *Chairman*

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, New Jersey
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN, Florida
DANA ROHRABACHER, California
STEVE CHABOT, Ohio
JOE WILSON, South Carolina
MICHAEL T. MCCAUL, Texas
TED POE, Texas
DARRELL E. ISSA, California
TOM MARINO, Pennsylvania
JEFF DUNCAN, South Carolina
MO BROOKS, Alabama
PAUL COOK, California
SCOTT PERRY, Pennsylvania
RON DESANTIS, Florida
MARK MEADOWS, North Carolina
TED S. YOHO, Florida
ADAM KINZINGER, Illinois
LEE M. ZELDIN, New York
DANIEL M. DONOVAN, JR., New York
F. JAMES SENSENBRENNER, JR., Wisconsin
ANN WAGNER, Missouri
BRIAN J. MAST, Florida
FRANCIS ROONEY, Florida
BRIAN K. FITZPATRICK, Pennsylvania
THOMAS A. GARRETT, JR., Virginia

ELIOT L. ENGEL, New York
BRAD SHERMAN, California
GREGORY W. MEEKS, New York
ALBIO SIRES, New Jersey
GERALD E. CONNOLLY, Virginia
THEODORE E. DEUTCH, Florida
KAREN BASS, California
WILLIAM R. KEATING, Massachusetts
DAVID N. CICILLINE, Rhode Island
AMI BERA, California
LOIS FRANKEL, Florida
TULSI GABBARD, Hawaii
JOAQUIN CASTRO, Texas
ROBIN L. KELLY, Illinois
BRENDAN F. BOYLE, Pennsylvania
DINA TITUS, Nevada
NORMA J. TORRES, California
BRADLEY SCOTT SCHNEIDER, Illinois
THOMAS R. SUOZZI, New York
ADRIANO ESPAILLAT, New York
TED LIEU, California

AMY PORTER, *Chief of Staff* THOMAS SHEEHY, *Staff Director*
JASON STEINBAUM, *Democratic Staff Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, NONPROLIFERATION, AND TRADE

TED POE, Texas, *Chairman*

JOE WILSON, South Carolina
DARRELL E. ISSA, California
PAUL COOK, California
SCOTT PERRY, Pennsylvania
LEE M. ZELDIN, New York
BRIAN J. MAST, Florida
THOMAS A. GARRETT, JR., Virginia

WILLIAM R. KEATING, Massachusetts
LOIS FRANKEL, Florida
BRENDAN F. BOYLE, Pennsylvania
DINA TITUS, Nevada
NORMA J. TORRES, California
BRADLEY SCOTT SCHNEIDER, Illinois

CONTENTS

IRANIAN BACKED MILITIAS: DESTABILIZING THE MIDDLE EAST

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2017

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, NONPROLIFERATION, AND TRADE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m., in room 2200 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ted Poe (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. POE. The subcommittee will come to order.

Without objection, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, and extraneous materials for the record subject to the length limitation in the rules of the committee.

I will make my opening statement at this time.

The Middle East continues to pose some of the biggest challenges to United States national security. Where there is a threat to our interests in the region we can be sure that Iran and its proxy forces and militias are somewhere in the neighborhood.

From Yemen to Afghanistan, Iranian arms can be found in the hands of some of the most dangerous actors. This is part of a calculated strategy by the mullahs in Tehran to assert control over the entire region by expelling the United States.

The Iranians believe they are entitled to dominance over anybody else in the region. They provide weapons and support to sectarian individuals who commit atrocities and undermine legitimate government institutions.

In Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, and the Palestinian territories, Iran backs violent actors who either rule through brutality or aspire to seize power by eliminating political opposition.

Many of these groups have been household names for years. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the most prominent one. Nurtured by Tehran since the 1980s, Hezbollah has grown from a band of insurgents who perpetrated the 1983 Beirut Marine Corps barracks bombing to a well-armed and funded terrorist state-within-a-state that does Iran's bidding around the globe.

Its clever use of propaganda, civil service, and political participation have made Hezbollah the dominant force in Lebanon. Its power in the country undermines United States' relationship with Beirut and poses a significant threat to our friends in Israel.

Increasingly, we see Hezbollah operatives going beyond Lebanon and carrying out the will of its Iranian masters everywhere. From

training rebels in Yemen to directly contributing to the slaughter in Syria and preserving Assad's oppressive regime.

Now Iran has multiple "Hezbollahs" it can call on to kill and coerce throughout the region. Funded by sanctions relief granted to Iran under the JCPOA and enabled by America's retreat over the past 8 years, Iranian-backed groups are seizing territory, cajoling governments, and hindering our effort to defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Our troops and Foreign Service officers and intelligence personnel who are trying to help Iraqis, Syrians, and Kurds fight ISIS have been repeatedly threatened by Iran's many opportunities in Iraq and Syria.

In May, United States air strikes stopped an Iranian-backed militia that was advancing toward our troops in Syria. A month later, U.S. aircraft shot down two Iranian-made drones that tried to attack coalition forces.

It is important to remember why bloodshed in this part of the world continues to endure. It was Tehran's sectarian influence that poisoned the fledgling democracy in Iraq and propped up the Assad regime in Syria.

Because of this, Sunni extremists like al-Qaeda and ISIS that the U.S. had defeated are able to recruit among alienated communities and thrive.

In the chaos, Iran moves further. While we provide security assistance to governments to restore order, they forge new outlaw groups modeled after Hezbollah.

Iran's strategy is partly due to the weakness of its outdated military. In Syria, Iran has turned to recruiting from vulnerable communities to fight the war.

A report this week from Human Rights Watch shows that Iran is recruiting child soldiers from Afghanistan to help save the Assad regime in Syria.

By using foreign forces, Iran creates a grey zone where it can challenge rivals but deny its direct involvement. Using Hezbollah in Lebanon, it can wage war on Israel while never suffering retaliation.

In Yemen, the allies can fire missiles at U.S. warships—its allies can fire missiles at U.S. warships and our Gulf partners with impunity.

Tehran's ability to expand its power throughout the region and become a threat to us and our allies has gone on too long.

I applaud the recent legislation that cleared the Foreign Affairs Committee that targets Hezbollah. But more must be done.

Opposition to dangerous Iranian expansionism and support for terrorism is a bipartisan concern. Congress can lead further by developing a strategy to counter all of Iran's proxies.

There is more at stake than just surrendering the region to Iran. If we want to defeat ISIS and defend allies like Israel, we must stop the growth of Iranian-backed groups and their destabilizing behavior.

Iran's mobs have gone unchallenged. We are here today to find out from our four experts what the U.S. policy is toward all of this chaos and what it should be doing in the future.

And I will now turn to the ranking member, Mr. Keating, for my—I started to say Alabama but sorry—Massachusetts for his opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Poe follows:]

Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ted Poe (R-TX), Chairman**
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Hearing:
"Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East"
October 4, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

The Middle East continues to pose some of the greatest challenges to U.S. national security. Where there is our threat to our interests in the region – we can be sure that Iran's proxy forces and militias are not far behind. From Yemen to Afghanistan, Iranian arms can be found in the hands of some of the most dangerous actors.

This is part of a calculated strategy by the mullahs in Tehran to assert control over the region by expelling the United States and subjugating our allies. The Iranians believe they are entitled to dominance over the Mideast. They provide weapons and support to sectarian thugs who commit atrocities and undermine government institutions. In Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, and the Palestinian territories, Iran backs violent actors who either rule through brutality or aspire to seize power by eliminating political opposition.

Many of these groups have been household names for years. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the most prominent. Nurtured by Tehran since the 1980s, Hezbollah has grown from a band of insurgents who perpetrated the 1983 Beirut Marine Corps barracks bombing to a well-armed and funded terrorist state-within-a-state that does Iran's bidding around the globe. Its clever use propaganda, civil service, political participation, and militancy has made Hezbollah a dominant force in Lebanon. Its power in the country undermines the U.S. relationship with Beirut and poses a significant threat to our friends in Israel.

Increasing we see Hezbollah operatives going beyond Lebanon and carrying out the will of its Iranian masters elsewhere. From training Houthi rebels in Yemen to directly contributing to the slaughter in Syria and preserving Bashar al-Assad's oppressive regime. But now Iran has multiple "Hezbollahs" it can call on to kill and coerce throughout the region. Funded by sanctions relief granted to Iran under the JCPOA and enabled by America's retreat over the past 8 years, Iranian-backed groups are seizing territory, cajoling governments, and hindering our effort to defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Our brave troops, foreign service officers, and intelligence personnel who are trying to help Iraqis, Syrians, and Kurds fight ISIS have been repeatedly threatened by Iran's many thugs in Iraq and Syria. In May, U.S. airstrikes stopped an Iranian-backed militia that was advancing towards our troops in Syria. A month later U.S. aircraft shot-down two Iranian-made drones that tried to attack coalition forces. Iran and its proxies are also working hard to sow division with our partners by waging a propaganda campaign that claims the U.S. supports ISIS and that Iranian militias brought victory in places like Mosul. This is of course a lie.

It is important to remember why bloodshed in this part of the world continues to endure. It was Tehran's sectarian influence that poisoned the fledgling democracy in Iraq and propped-up the Assad regime in Syria. Because of this, Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS—that the U.S. had defeated—are able to recruit among alienated communities and thrive.

In the chaos, Iran moves in further. While we provide security assistance to governments to restore order, they forge new outlaw groups modeled after Hezbollah. Iran's strategy is partly due to the weakness of its outdated military. In Syria, Iran has turned to recruiting from vulnerable communities to

fight its war. A report this week from Human Rights Watch shows that Iran is recruiting child soldiers from Afghanistan to help save the Assad regime. But using foreign forces, Iran creates a grey zone where it can challenge rivals but deny its involvement. Using Hezbollah in Lebanon it can wage war on Israel while never suffering retaliation. In Yemen, its Houthi allies can fire missiles at U.S. warships and our Gulf partners with impunity.

Tehran's ability to expand its power throughout the region and become a threat to us and our allies has gone on for far too long. I applaud the recent legislation that cleared the Foreign Affairs Committee that targets Hezbollah. But more must be done. Opposition to dangerous Iranian expansionism and support for terrorism is a bipartisan concern. Congress can lead further by developing a strategy to counter all of Iran's proxies.

There is more at stake than just surrendering the region to Iran. If we want to truly defeat ISIS and defend allies like Israel, we must stop the growth of Iranian-backed groups and their destabilizing behavior. Iran and its thugs are not ten feet tall. They are armed mobs that have gone unchallenged. To turn this tide, America must be engaged and stand with its partners in the Middle East. And that's just the way it is.

Mr. KEATING. A little difference in the two states, I think.

Mr. POE. A little bit.

Mr. KEATING. That's all right. We are all one country.

Mr. Chairman, thank you and I apologize. I am going to be, at a certain point soon, going out for rollcalls within another one of my committees.

But I would like to thank you for holding this important hearing and talking about this important issue. Let's recall that prior to concluding negotiations with Iran around the nuclear deal, Iran could have just—actually was, without question, just months away from a nuclear weapon.

Just 5 years ago, the airwaves were dominated by concerns over whether we'd be facing a nuclear Iran. Today, we are debating next steps with the deal and we are making sure to conduct robust oversight of Iran's compliance.

What was once a major national security crisis is now also a problem that we can work with our problems and allies to solve.

That's why making our country safer is important and it's deals like this that make it look like that's a way that can yield progress—dealing with the reality of the threats we face, working hand in hand with our allies, and doing something about it.

Iran's destabilizing actions in foreign policy are indeed a serious and deeply troubling event because they threaten to undermine the security and stability of the region, not to mention the right of the people in those countries to establish legitimate effective governments and work toward safe and productive lives for themselves in their communities.

The United States should continue to be a global leader in promoting peace, the rule of law, and security for all. We must be meaningfully involved in addressing Iran's support for proxy groups, and violent nonstate actors.

There is a threat in front of us. So we must be clear-eyed about what it means to take that threat on and then pursue the most informed effective strategies we can to eliminate it.

The leadership of the State Department was pivotal in countering the nuclear threat from Iran and they will continue to be critical in addressing Iran's malign influence in the Middle East and around the world.

We have also cultivated deep partnerships with our many allies in Europe, the Middle East, and around the world. We can't forget that the nuclear deal was a product of global cooperation at the United Nations and among our closest allies.

Undermining Iran's destabilizing activities around the world is a global problem and it is unrealistic of us to assume that we could somehow take this one on by ourselves when every other threat of this nature has demanded consistent unwavering cooperation and collaboration with our friends and allies who share our vision for a more peaceful world.

Iran continues to threaten the security of the region through proxies and other destabilizing activities including in countries where the United States is actively working to promote security and establish a baseline of stability in Iraq, Yemen, Syria.

Countering Iran's influence, however, is not just about countering Iran. Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria, for ex-

ample, has strengthened Iran by sharing its burden in Syria and strengthening Iran's ability to continue funding its engagement abroad.

These proxy groups are not also wholly-owned entities of Iran. They are often independent groups that have been considered as threats on their own as well as in relation to their ties with Iran.

We have learned through decades of conflict that eliminating threats to security is not easy. Iran has been able to take advantage of instability and conflict and weak rule of law in order to gain influence beyond its borders through violence and undermining legitimate sovereign institutions.

We cannot unilaterally change Iran's behaviors. However, we can indeed and should influence the context in which Iran operates illegally.

We do have the ability to act upon these issues with other sanctions that we can impose outside of this agreement.

We must also advance a robust U.S. State Department with an adequate budget, by filling leadership positions across the State Department, by strengthening ties with our allies, not calling them into question, and by truly working to understand the complexities of the security and geopolitical challenges in the entire region.

That's why I appreciate the witnesses being here today to testify on this issue, to offer your insights and recommendations on how we can wrestle with the unfortunate realities we are working with on the ground but also testify to the resources we have available to us to eliminate the threat posed by Iran's actions throughout the Middle East and the world.

Thank you all. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. POE. I thank the gentleman from Massachusetts.

Without objection, the witnesses' prepared statements will be made part of this record. I would ask that the witnesses keep your presentation to no more than 5 minutes.

When you see the red light come on on that little thing in front of you, stop, or I'll encourage you to stop.

So we have your statements and all the committee members have that. I will introduce our witnesses and then give them time for their opening statements. After the statements, then the members of the subcommittee will ask you questions.

I do want to thank you for changing your schedule today to be here this afternoon. I know you were supposed to be here earlier, and you were. Thanks for waiting. I don't know what you did during that interim but thank you for being here.

Dr. Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East policy. Previously, he worked on capacity-building projects in Iraq, Yemen, and has published numerous works on the challenges of containing Iranian influence.

Mr. Aram Nerguizian is the senior associate and Burke Chair in strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He is frequently consulted by government and private sectors and has authored a number of books on the Middle East.

Dr. Kenneth Pollack is a resident scholar at American Enterprise Institute. Prior to this, Dr. Pollack was affiliated with the Brookings Institute and served on the National Security Council.

And Ms. Melissa Dalton is a senior fellow and deputy director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Previously, she served in a number of positions at the United States Department of Defense in the office of Under Secretary of Defense for policy.

Dr. Knights, we will start with you. You have 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL KNIGHTS, PH.D., LAFER FELLOW, THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY

Mr. KNIGHTS. Thank you. Thanks very much.

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and the distinguished committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing on Iranian-backed militias.

I am very proud to be giving testimony today to the House for the first time as a new American citizen, as an immigrant, and as an adopted son of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

We are here today because Iran and, particularly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—IRGC—is hesitant to risk its own people in its expansion across the region but it's quite happy to fight to the last Arab or to fight to the last Afghan to win these regional wars.

Iranian-backed militias give Iran the ability to threaten Israel in the Golan Heights, to fire ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia as far as Riyadh, to threaten Abu Dhabi with ballistic missile attack or to intimidate vital sea lanes without facing the direct consequences of taking such steps.

So reducing the scale of Iranian-backed militias will be a critical part of a new strategy to counter Iranian influence and I'd like to suggest six areas where we might move forward, and in the written testimony there is a lot of detailing on Iranian militia—backed militia activities in Iraq, in Yemen, in Bahrain, and in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

So, first, we need to compete with Iran in key spaces. Iran always fills a vacuum. It's very opportunistic.

The United States should openly adopt a strategic game of diminishing malign Iranian influence in any and all spaces where Iran could seek to expand.

This means publicly committing to the reduction of malign Iranian influence in a range of areas. For instance, there must be no significant Lebanese, Hezbollah, or Iraqi militia or Iranian forces in southern Syria adjacent to Israel, or along, let's say, the Iraq-Syria border. There must be no significant Lebanese, Hezbollah, or Iranian forces in Yemen.

Perfect success is less important than sending the right signal to regional allies than to the Iranian regime.

Second, we need to build and repair alliances. We need to back allies in effective states like the counterterrorism service in Iraq or the rebels in southern Syria. We need to fix rifts within the Gulf Cooperation Council, weave Iraq back into the Arab world, particularly its relationship with Saudi Arabia, and show Europe that the U.S. will not leave the nuclear accord before exhausting all other alternatives. The more we give, the more we will get.

Three, we need to divide Iran from potential proxies, not push them together. Iran's interest is rarely perfectly aligned with its proxies. But the proxies are often desperate for assistance and Iran is the only one making a credible offer.

By being present and active in the Middle East, the U.S. can work with allies to slowly drive a wedge between Iran and potential proxies while offering them better options.

For instance, in Iraq, we should quietly support a gradual disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program that reduces the threat posed by Iranian-backed militias operating within Iraq's well-funded popular mobilization forces.

In Yemen, the best way to peel the Houthis away from Iran is to push Saudi Arabia to reduce civilian casualties in the war and drive for a rapid peace process that will end the war with a sustainable decentralization-based solution.

In the Gulf States, we need to push Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to improve the political and religious freedom to protections of Shi'a minorities, which is the best way to split these potential proxies away from Iran instead of pushing them toward Iran.

Likewise, we need to interdict Iranian lines of communication. Much has been made of the so-called land bridge between Iran and Syria via Iraq, importantly. It is worth remembering that Iraq is the bridge so Iraq should remain to be very important for our policy, going forward.

But it is—it's worth remembering that Iranian sponsorship of Lebanese Hezbollah including its large missile force was achieved without a land bridge.

The U.S. needs to work to interdict land, air, and sea communications as well as financial and electronic between Iraq—between Iran and its proxies.

We should help places like Iraq to stem the flow of fighters out toward these places.

We also need to impose and exercise painful red lines on Iran and we need to demonstrate this credibility. We need to build credibility by always following through on our threats, even when they might be painful, even when they might open us up to the prospect of Iranian retaliation against our citizens abroad.

And finally, we should put somebody in charge of coordinating and rolling back Iranian-backed militias. On their side, they have Qasem Soleimani as the figure who owns this—the portfolio of building Shi'a militias and guiding that process.

We might ask, who is Qasem Soleimani. We need somebody who can bring together and employ all their tools of national power.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Knights follows:]

How to Contain and Roll Back Iranian-Backed Militias

Dr Michael Knights

Lafer Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony Submitted to the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, House Committee on Foreign Affairs

October 4, 2017

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and the distinguished committee members: Thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing on Iranian-backed militias. I'm proud to be giving testimony to the House for the first time as a new American citizen, an immigrant and an adopted son of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

We're here today because Iran is in the process of spreading its military and political influence across the Middle East to a greater extent than ever before. How is it achieving this?

Iran is investing heavily in the survival of the Assad regime in Syria, without doubt. But what makes the current situation so dangerous is that Iran has found an economical and sustainable means of resourcing its expansion – the so-called Iranian Foreign Legion comprised of Iran-backed militias.

This formula works for one simple reason: At little cost, Iran can take poor, enthusiastic young men from Arab countries and Afghanistan, and throw them into the meat-grinder of the region's wars.

In the past, we have seen that Iran is quite hesitant to risk its own people, particularly members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In Iraq, we saw Iran withdraw its IRGC operatives after just a few of them were detained by U.S. forces in 2007.[1]

Instead of risking its own people, Iran has hit on an alternative way of putting "boots on the ground." Iran can draw upon a deep well of volunteers and wage-seekers in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf States.

This will increasingly allow Iran to "fight to the last Arab" of "the last Afghan" in its regional wars, because these casualties bear no political repercussions in Iran.

This is a capability that cannot be allowed to develop any further because it is a potential war-winner – against America, our allies in Iraq and Yemen and Syria, and even against Israel.

Iran-backed militias in Iraq

Iran-backed militias were openly operating in Iraq from the very first days of the U.S.-led occupation in 2003. In fact, we accepted these forces as a natural part of the landscape because they had been operating against Saddam Hussein's regime for over two decades.[2]

The Badr Corps (today the Badr Organization, a political party with a 15,000-strong militia) worked alongside the U.S. in Iraq from 2003-2011, sometimes assisting U.S. initiatives but always taking its orders from the IRGC in Iran.[3]

The IRGC also held back parts of Badr to use as a separate "action arm" inside Iraq. The U.S.-designated terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah, led by U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, is one such faction.[4]

Aided by Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran began to further split off parts of Moqtada al-Sadr's nationalist-Islamist movement to form other stand-alone Iranian-backed "special groups" such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq.[5]

These forces were lumped together with other non-Iranian-backed Iraqi militias under the administrative umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq in June 2014, following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State.

The Iranian-backed militias are now a formal part of the Iraqi Security Forces, even including the U.S.-designated terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah.[6]

---

[1] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-worst-case-analysis-irans-likely-responses-to-an-israeli-preventive

[2] See my piece with Mike Eisenstadt for a background on Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mini-hizballahs-revolutionary-guard-knock-offs-and-the-future-of-irans-mili

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

Sympathizers of the Iranian–backed militias and even full members also work inside the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Security Forces (such as the Iraqi Army and Federal Police).[7]

The risks posed by Iranian-backed militias have thus become more serious and complex.

First, the Iranian-backed militias can now draw on a state budget ($1.96 billion in 2017) to defray the costs of running militias in Iraq.[8] Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an Iranian-backed militia commander, is the operational commander of the PMF and distributes its budget.

This situation could worsen in time. Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri is presently, according to reputable polling, Iraq's most popular Shia leader. And another Badr leader, Qassem al-Araji, is the Minister of Interior, running Iraq's largest ministry, despite having been in an orange jumpsuit at U.S. detention facilities for 26 months during the occupation period prior to 2011.[9] If Badr leaders continue to bow to Iranian pressure, an even larger share of Iraq's defense budget could end up in Iranian-backed hands.

Second, Iran can use covert financial aid and provision of weapons to bolster the Iranian-backed militias within the PMF, over and above what the Iraqi budget provides.

Third, Iran can hide its "fifth column" under the legal protections of being part of the PMF.[10]

Until the Iraqi government tightens its command and control of the Iranian-backed militias within the PMF, Iran can use the PMF umbrella to legitimize the running of training camps and the retention of heavy weapons (such as tanks) by the IRGC proxies inside Iraq.[11]

Fourth, Iran can use Iraq as a power projection hub for striking out into Syria (drawing on reinforcements from the PMF) or the Gulf States (using Bahraini, Kuwaiti and Saudi Shiites, trained and equipped at PMF bases in Iraq). This phenomenon is already unfolding.[12]

Iranian support to the Houthis in Yemen

The situation in Yemen is not nearly so bad but it deserves close attention.

I recently heard Iranian influence with the Houthi rebels in Yemen as "shallow-rooted," and I think this is an apt description.

The Houthis are desperate, having fought wars against the Saudi Arabian-backed Yemeni government from 2004-2014,[13] and then having over-reached by trying to seize the whole country in 2014-2015.

---

[6] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-iraqs-armed-forces
[7] Ibid.
[8] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tehran-seeks-to-consolidate-power-in-iraq-in-2018
[9] Ibid.
[10] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-popular-demobilisation
[11] Ibid.
[12] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/foreign-fighters-among-the-hashd-al-shaabi

However, the Houthis are not yet a full proxy like Lebanese Hezbollah, though they accept Iranian help.

The IRGC is providing niche support that has transformed the Houthi capacity to inflict pain on Saudi Arabia and to threaten sea-lanes of communication in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandab and Suez Canal areas.

Iranian support has enabled the Houthis -- tough mountain fighters but hardly NASA rocketeers -- to rebuild surface-to-air missiles into Burkan-1 and Burkan-2 missiles. [14]

These Burkan missiles have given the Houthis an ability to launch large surface-to-surface missiles as far out as Riyadh and to strike cities along the western coast of Saudi Arabia such as Taif, Jeddah and Yanbu.

Six missiles of the Burkan class have now landed more than 500km inside Saudi Arabia in the last year.[15]

The Houthis claim that they will next target Abu Dhabi,[16] another city packed with civilians, Western expatriates and U.S. military facilities.

Since Iran began supporting the Houthis, the rebels have been showing greater and greater technical sophistication.

They have used "suicide drones" to strike Saudi Arabian Patriot missile battery radars.[17] A few thousand dollars' worth of drone is capable of putting out of action U.S.-supplied radars that cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Since Iran began supporting the Houthis, the rebels have also developed "suicide drone boats"[18] that have crippled one Saudi Arabian warship (January 30, 2017) and which was used unsuccessfully to attack Saudi Arabian oil-loading terminals on the Red Sea (April 26, 2017).

Since Iran began providing support, the Houthis have fired multiple anti-shipping missiles at UAE and U.S. vessels in the Red Sea.[19] U.S. cruise missiles destroyed Houthi radar systems in October 2016.[20]

---

[13] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yemens-forever-war-the-houthi-rebellion
[14] https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/07/yemeni-houthis-release-video-of-missile-launch-on-saudi-oil-refinery.php
[15] http://www.janes.com/images/assets/330/72330/Yemeni_rebels_enhance_ballistic_missile_campaign.pdf
[16] http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/09/14/535158/UAE-not-safe-from-Yemens-Ansarullah-missiles
[17] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/03/22/houthi-forces-appear-to-be-using-iranian-made-drones-to-ram-saudi-air-defenses-in-yemen-report-says/?utm_term=.526216e2b23e
[18] https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/idex/2017/02/19/new-houthi-weapon-emerges-a-drone-boat/
[19] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/houthi-antishipping-attacks-in-the-bab-al-mandab-strait
[20] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/10/12/more-missiles-fired-from-rebel-held-territory-in-yemen-at-u-s-navy-ships/

In addition to these high-profile systems, Iran has been found by international arms trafficking specialists[21] to have imported advanced anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), sniper rifles, Rocket-Propelled Grenades, small arms and ammunition into Yemen, in violation of a UN arms embargo on Yemen's Houthis and in defiance of UN resolution 2231, which bans Iranian arms exports.[22]

Iranian-backed militias in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

I also want to highlight one additional area of concern that may not be fully covered by other witnesses. This is the slowly growing role of Iranian-backed militias in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Post-Revolution Iran has always employed its intelligence services and the IRGC to exploit tensions between the Sunni-led GCC states and their Shia minorities.

Since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, when Saudi Arabia and the UAE deployed military forces to underpin the Bahraini royal family, Iran has been increasing its support to militant proxies inside Bahrain.

The Washington Institute has been closely tracking the movement of advanced roadside bombing components into bomb-making workshops in Bahrain. [23]

The components have been shown to originate from smuggling boats that originated in Iraqi and Iranian waters. Personnel seized by the Bahraini security forces have stated that they were trained by Iran in bases in Iraq and Iran.[24]

Iranian-backed militants have begun to set up resistance cells that closely resemble the anti-U.S. insurgent cells established in Iraq between 2005 and 2011.

For example, on December 28, 2013, a speedboat was tracked by coastal radar and intercepted carrying large quantities of advanced bomb components, including thirty-one Claymore-type antipersonnel fragmentation mines and twelve armor-piercing explosively formed penetrator (EFP) charges, plus electronics to arm and fire the devices.[25]

This includes building whole houses over hidden bomb-making workshops containing multi-ton industrial presses.[26]

The result is that the number of lethal explosive devices being used by insurgents in Bahrain has sky-rocketed.

---

[21] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/responding-to-irans-arms-smuggling-in-yemen
[22] Ibid.
[23] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-efps-in-the-gulf-an-emerging-strategic-risk
[24] Ibid.
[25] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-backed-terrorism-in-bahrain-finding-a-sustainable-solution
[26] Ibid.

Prior to 2011, the island saw only a smattering of arson bombings and concussion-inducing "sound bombs," which almost never caused fatalities. Since 2012, however, at least 28 terrorist bombings have occurred, killing fifteen security personnel and maiming 65 others.[27]

In 2013, Iranian-backed militants began to send advanced armour-piercing bombs from Bahrain into Saudi Arabia. At least one shipment was intercepted, but we do not know how many got through.[28]

Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has witnessed increasing numbers of explosive devices used against its security forces.

In 2015, the security forces suffered four deaths in the Shia majority Eastern Province, which jumped to thirteen deaths in 2016 and nine already in 2017.

In 2017, there have already been four roadside bombing attacks on security forces and two Rocket-Propelled Grenade attacks. In May 2017, the security forces engaged militants inside Awamiyah, an Eastern Province town, with tank main-gun fire, causing heavy damage to the town and displacing all local civilians.

Kuwait has also seen signs of the extension of Iranian-backed militant networks. In July 2017, Kuwait expelled fifteen Iranian diplomats and accused Lebanese Hezbollah of training 21 Shia militants who were reinserted into Kuwait.[29]

On August 14, 2015, Kuwait uncovered a total of 19,000 kg in ammunition, 144 kg in explosives, 68 weapons, and 204 grenades smuggled across the border from Iraq. The incident led to the subsequent arrest of 26 Kuwaiti Shia linked to Iran and Hezbollah.[30]

If Iran-backed militias continue to grow, and continue to project power into the Gulf from an Iraq training base, then we may see destabilization of presently-secure areas of critical importance such as Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

Iranian-backed militias: Tehran's deniable power projection capability

The above material, which only focuses on a sub-set of Iranian-backed militias in five countries, shows that Iran is developing new power projection capabilities that allow Tehran a degree of deniability.

The testimony also shows that Iraq is being developed as a training base, manpower pool and land bridge for Iranian power projection.

In March 2017, an Iranian-backed Iraqi militias called Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (led by a former Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader, Akram Kabi, who fought U.S. forces prior to 2011) formed a "Golan Liberation Brigade" and threatened to attack Israel.[31]

---

[27] https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB224759/Saudi-Arabia-will-use-security-risks-to-manage-dissent
[28] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-efps-in-the-gulf-an-emerging-strategic-risk
[29] https://www.dawn.com/news/1346939

[30] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/foreign-fighters-among-the-hashd-al-shaabi

In the last year, Iran has used the Houthis to shower Saudi Arabia with ballistic missiles and to besiege the Red Sea maritime environment.

Since 2013, Iran has used militias to threaten to destabilize the oil-rich Eastern Province, containing the greatest concentration of oil wells, refineries and loading terminals anywhere in the world.

As long ago as December 2013, Kataib Hezbollah, another Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, fired rockets into Saudi Arabia.[32]

These are examples of that way Iran can now use Iraqis to threaten U.S. allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia without facing the direct consequences of such steps. This offers a form of impunity for Tehran.

How to Contain and Roll Back Iranian-Backed Militias

The United States will shortly announce its new strategy for countering Iran's destabilizing activities.

Within this strategy, the issue of containing and rolling back Iranian-backed militias will loom large.

I would like to suggest six areas in which the U.S. can get started on this long-term project.

1. Compete with Iran in key spaces

Iran always fills a vacuum: it is opportunistic. The reduced U.S. confidence and diminished role in the Middle East since 2013 has given Iran a free ride.

The United States must compete in any and all spaces where Iran could seek to expand.

This means rhetorically committing to the reduction of malign Iranian influence in a range of areas: Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and others.

Specifically, there must be no significant Lebanese Hezbollah or Iraqi militia or Iranian forces in southern Syria, adjacent to Israel.

There must be no significant Lebanese Hezbollah or Iraqi militia or Iranian forces on the Iraq-Syrian border.

There must be no significant Lebanese Hezbollah or Iranian forces in Yemen.

We are not certain to succeed in these difficulty tasks, not will success be quick, but we must not cede the IRGC or Iranian intelligence agencies an acceptable role in any of these areas. The United States

---

[31] https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/irgc-controlled-iraqi-militia-forms-golan-liberation-brigade.php

[32] http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-shells-border/iraq-militia-says-fires-mortar-bombs-at-saudi-as-warning-idUSBRE9AK0NJ20131121

should openly adopt a strategic aim of diminishing malign Iranian influence in all these spaces. This sends the right signal to regional allies and to the Iranian regime.

2. Build / repair and maintain alliances

Iran has sent the last four decades developing alliances and building up military allies such as Lebanese Hezbollah and a range of other Iranian-backed militias.

I don't typically give the Iranian regime praise but I will say this: they earned their current position by staying focused on their objective and investing in it for decades.

We now need to commit to a decades-spanning containment and roll back effort. Great powers do not tire, or lose interest. They endure and outlast their enemies.

The United States needs to intensify its direct and indirect support to allied forces or even neutral forces who may not love the U.S. but also don't like Iran either.

In Iraq, for instance, the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service is an example of the former, an allied force that can compete with Iranian-backed militias. U.S. security assistance must strongly back this force.

Moqtada al-Sadr's nationalist-Islamist movement is an example of a neutral that dislikes Iran as much as he dislikes the U.S. We may not have any ties to Moqtada's movement, but we should recognize that he is a key force, capable of frustrating Iran's consolidation of power in Iraq, and we must structure our actions so as not to undermine that possibility.

In light of the anti-Qatar blockade, we also need to repair as much of the damage done to the GCC as possible. This distracts the GCC at a critical moment.

Europe is also important in light of Counter-Threat Financing efforts against Lebanese Hezbollah, the Syria regime and other Iranian-backed elements. To get Europe on-side we need to avoid undermining our credibility: President Trump might de-certify the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) but we should not abrogate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). We need to provide Europe not only with proof of Iran's malign actions but also with proof that America understands Europe's concerns. This will secure more cooperation against Iran and Hezbollah.

3. Divide Iran from potential proxies, don't push them together

Iran's interests are rarely perfectly aligned with its proxies, but such proxies are often desperate for assistance and Iran is the only one making a credible offer.

For instance, Iraq did not necessarily wish to formalize the role of the Iranian-backed militias in 2014 but the fall of Mosul and the slowness of visible U.S. support to the defense of Baghdad panicked the

Iraqi system. Iran stepped in and (unfairly) gained credit for saving Baghdad, while its proxies gained a large state budget as a bonus.

By getting ahead of this kind of curve, the U.S. can work with allies to drive a wedge between Iran and potential proxies.

In Iraq the process will be hard, because the roots of malign Iranian influence run deep.

Demobilization of Iraq's PMF – likely to be a long process, not an event – is one opportunity. If there are enough good jobs inside Iraq in the formal security forces and the civilian economy, the number of potential recruits to Iranian-backed militias will drop. Quietly and through the international coalition, the U.S. should back a gradual disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process.[33]

U.S. policy needs to continue to strongly back Iraqi government interactions with other Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Jordan, and Egypt, plus Turkey. Situating Iraq more firmly in the Arab world is a great way to lessen the country's dependence on Iran.

In Yemen and the Gulf States, Iranian malign influence is more "shallow rooted" and the trick is to act quickly before deep relationships are formed.

Ending the destructive war in Yemen through dialogue, with the Houthis receiving a fair settlement (after more than ten years of victimization by the Sana'a government) is the best way to splinter the Houthis away from Tehran.[34]

Pushing Saudi Arabia to clean up its war effort in Yemen and reduce civilian casualties,[35] and pushing all the Gulf States to improve the conditions of Shia minorities are good examples of ways to split potential proxies from Iran instead of pushing them together.

4. Interdict Iranian lines of communication

Much has been made of the so-called "land bridge" between Iran and Syria (via Iraq) but it is worth noting that air and sea communications are just as important to Iran in supporting their militia proxies.

Land communications undoubtedly add resilience to Iranian connections to their proxies, but Iran's sponsorship of Lebanese Hezbollah, including its large missile force, was achieved without a land bridge.

The United States should instead focus on interdicting all kinds of Iranian communications with all militant proxies.

---

[33] http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73186
[34] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/escalation-in-yemen-risks-famine-collapse-iranian-entrapment
[35] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-2-the-air-war

On land, this will mean tightening U.S. relations with the Iraqi government (which controls the land bridge) and supporting rebel forces in southern and northeastern Syria.

The Gulf Coalition's aerial blockade has been very effective. In case it is one day needed, the U.S. needs to think about how a no-fly zone might be enforced in Syria or Lebanon, in the teeth of Russia-provided air defenses. Israel manages to operate in this airspace. Can America?

On the seas, one of the major successes of the Gulf Coalition in Yemen has been to make it very difficult for Iran to provide large military items (like accurate long-range missiles),[36] forcing the Houthis to rely on scavenging parts from surface-to-air missiles.

Naval interdictions of Iranian supply to Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas have also been successful.[37] The U.S. should put more effort into analyzing and deliberately interdicting all Iranian arms exports, in line with the expectations of UN Security Council Resolution 2231.[38]

At the same time, the U.S. should always ensure that blockading actions are carefully targeted: in Yemen, the Gulf Coalition gifted Iran many propaganda victories (which swell the ranks of its proxies) by overlooking the humanitarian costs of the blockade.[39]

As Israel does,[40] the U.S. should focus intelligence resources on Iranian efforts to help their proxies develop indigenous arms manufacturing capabilities: such as the local build of Burkan missiles in Yemen, the development of Hamas missiles in Gaza, or the fabrication of advanced roadside bombs in Bahrain.

Finally, the U.S. should work with regional allies to pressure places like Iraq to clamp down on the actions of their citizens in foreign wars, and the presence of non-Iraqi fighters in the PMF training camps. Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi claims to want to develop a neutral foreign policy and to keep Iraq out of regional wars,[41] so he should be receptive to insistent, gentle pressure to prevent Iranian-backed militias from dictating Iraqi foreign policy and getting Iraqis killed in foreign wars.

5. Impose and exercise painful "red lines" on Iran

The Israeli military strikes when Israel perceives that Tehran and Lebanese Hezbollah are crossing a "red line" with the importation or construction of a new weapon's system in Lebanon or Syria.[42]

---

[36] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/addressing-iranian-weapons-smuggling-and-the-humanitarian-situation-in-yeme
[37] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rethinking-u.s.-strategy-for-intercepting-iranian-arms-transfers
[38] Ibid.
[39] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/addressing-iranian-weapons-smuggling-and-the-humanitarian-situation-in-yeme
[40] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/opinion/how-to-understand-israels-strike-on-syria.html
[41] http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-usa/iraq-says-will-stay-clear-of-u-s-iran-tensions-idUSKBN15Q08D
[42] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/opinion/how-to-understand-israels-strike-on-syria.html

Iran is a bitter enemy, but it has a learned to respect this Israeli attitude and retaliation is selective.

Once upon a time, in Iraqi in 2007, Iran greatly lowered the presence of IRGC operatives inside Iraq because it feared that they would be targeted in raids and fall into U.S. captivity. Iran's sensitivity to the loss of senior advisors was notable.[43]

The U.S. needs to develop some intermediate "red lines" that represent the next steps we don't want Iran to take. Then we need to clearly communicate these red lines – perhaps using backchannel means.

If Iran breaks the rules – say, by trying to move inside agreed deconfliction zones in southern Syria – the U.S. should select a painful option from a set of pre-surveyed targets.

This will mean developing granular and constantly updated understanding of the Iranian advisors, Lebanese Hezbollah operatives, militia interlocutors, bank accounts, weapons systems, intelligence outposts, or other assets that Iran values the most.

Credibility will come from exercising the threat at the right time with no hesitation, and repeating the exercise as many times as necessary until the subject, the Iranian regime, accepts that we will not stop. Iran will test Washington's resolve by kidnapping American citizens in Iraq and elsewhere. Only further shows of U.S. resolution will deter such retaliatory steps.

6. Put someone in charge of containing and rolling back Iranian-backed militias

Iran has spent decades building up the Iranian-backed militias. The U.S. must commit to spending decades breaking down those same forces.

Many Iranian agencies are involved in their effort, but it is possible to point to one central figure who "owns" many of the processes required to support Iranian-backed militias. He is IRGC Qods Force Major General Qassem Soleimani.[44]

This begs the question: who is our Qassem Soleimani?

Clearly there is an intelligence part, a diplomatic part, a special operations part, and a sanctions part. But who draws all this together in a really focused effort that employs all the tools of national power?

We have experienced significant success by placing the anti-Islamic state campaign under the supervision of a special presidential envoy.[45] Perhaps the same should be done for the counter-Iranian influence portfolio.

---

[43] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-worst-case-analysis-irans-likely-responses-to-an-israeli-preventive
[44] http://time.com/collection/2017-time-100/4736337/qasem-soleimani/
[45] https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/biog/bureau/213058.htm

Mr. POE. Thank you, Mr. Knights.

We will now proceed to our next witness, Mr. Nerguizian. I apologize. Thank you, sir.

STATEMENT OF MR. ARAM NERGUIZIAN, SENIOR ASSOCIATE, BURKE CHAIR IN STRATEGY, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Lebanon and the challenges it faces in the wake of Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria and the Lebanese Armed Forces' August campaign against ISIS.

Hezbollah's decision to commit to offensive military operations inside Syria in concert with Assad's forces in a pre-emptive war——

Mr. POE. Is your microphone on?

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. It is, sir.

Mr. POE. Move it closer, please, sir. Thank you.

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. Better?

Mr. POE. Better.

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. Hezbollah's decision to commit to offensive military operations inside Syria in concert with Assad's forces in a preemptive war of choice reflects its own narrow set of overlapping regional and domestic priorities, preserving the resistance axis with Iran and Assad's Syria, the perceived need to contain militant Lebanese Sunni forces, and dealing with the communal fears of Lebanon's Shi'a community.

As a regional minority group, all serve as continued justification for Hezbollah to maintain strategic depth in Syria.

In 2017, Hezbollah's military priorities in Syria have shifted from an active combat role in and around Zabadani and the Qalamun mountain range to supporting a more expeditionary posture backing Assad and allied forces.

The 2011 to 2017 period has been a daunting challenge for Lebanon. Even Hezbollah has strained to simultaneously maintain its posture in south Lebanon, create metrics of stability in the north and the Bequaa and sustain a forward expeditionary footing in Syria.

In the face of these regional challenges, no national institution in Lebanon has contributed more to relative stability than the Lebanese Armed Forces, United States' principal institutional partner in the country.

Today, the LAF stands as a paradox. In a country with a clientelist sectarian system that abhors professional institutions, the LAF has emerged as one of the Arabic-speaking Middle East's only fighting militaries and one of the United States military's most effective regional counterterrorism partners.

With the clear and insulated theater-level chain of command in place, the LAF began the execution of its counter ISIS campaign against militants on the Lebanese side of the Syrian-Lebanese frontier and operation code name Dawn of the Jurds, loosely translated, was publicly announced on August 19, 2017.

Later that day, Hezbollah and the Syrian Arab army announced their own counter ISIS military campaign on the—on their side of the Syrian frontier.

For all the international concern of potential LAF Hezbollah coordination, the official start date of the operation is misleading. Well before August 19th, the LAF had already begun taking independent action against ISIS—ISIS ridge lines and positions.

The initial brunt of the operation was executed on August 14th. The LAF's superior battlefield awareness and targeted strike capability quickly demoralized ISIS forces in Lebanon.

As LAF regular and elite units took more ground and consolidated their new positions, the effective use of U.S.-supplied ISR targeted strike SOF and armoured mobility led to the description of Dawn of the Jurds by one U.S. military officer in Lebanon to me as 21st century manoeuver warfare by a modern military.

As the LAF prepared to free the last remaining pocket of territory held by ISIS, Hezbollah publicly announced that it was engaging in controversial negotiations with ISIS to secure the whereabouts of LAF military personnel captured by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra militants in August 2014.

This, in turn, forced a temporary resuspension of LAF military operations and on August 29th, 2017, in a deal brokered by Hezbollah, ISIS forces began preparations to depart Lebanon.

After Dawn of the Jurds, LAF commanders and their U.S. and U.K. counterparts are comfortable stating that the campaign was conducted with no coordination or cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah.

On the contrary, the LAF's solo campaign was so successful that elements close to Hezbollah sought to take credit retroactively for the LAF's successes and/or promote a narrative of secret coordination between the LAF, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime.

Dawn of the Jurds may have lasting implications for a stalled debate in Lebanon and national security. The LAF's rapid and professional execution of the counter ISIS campaign without anyone's help, including Hezbollah or the Assad regime, has shattered the narrative in the minds of some Lebanese that Hezbollah is Lebanon's sole preeminent national security actor.

Those who define Lebanon through the lens of Iran alone would fail to see the LAF as anything but an extension of Hezbollah.

However, as one senior Pentagon official noted to me, there are still many in the U.S. Government and Congress who believe that there is still a Lebanon and LAF worth saving. Being hawkish on Lebanon in U.S. policy terms has traditionally meant being tough on Hezbollah and other opponents of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

But when the LAF engaged ISIS militarily in August, being hawkish on Lebanon meant doubling down on the LAF because, in the end, a Lebanon with a weak LAF will be fertile terrain for Iran and its local and regional partners.

Choosing not to blink in the face of Lebanon's complexity and standing fast by the LAF as U.S. civilian and military leaders did this August only serves to strengthen the LAF's domestic and international military legitimacy.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Nerguizian follows:]

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade

"IRANIAN BACKED MILITIAS: DESTABILIZING THE MIDDLE EAST"

A Written Statement by:

Aram Nerguizian

Senior Associate, Burke Chair in Strategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

October 4, 2017
2172 Rayburn House Office Building

Executive Summary

On July 20, 2017, the Lebanese Shi'a militant group Hezbollah confirmed that it had put in motion a plan to dislodge Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) militants from Lebanon. The commencement of Hezbollah military operations preempted the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from putting in motion plans tied to clearing JAN and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants from Lebanese territory on its own. On July 27, 2017, Hezbollah announced that it and JAN had reached a tentative ceasefire as negotiations intensified to secure safe passage for remaining Nusra fighters to rebel-held areas in Syria.

Hezbollah's decision to take on JAN militants militarily placed the LAF in an all but untenable position. The LAF's leadership were uncomfortable that Hezbollah's campaign against JAN amounted to a media nightmare for the Government of Lebanon and the military. However, it must be said the LAF has had three years to plan, push for, and execute a military option to deal decisively with the presence of JAN and ISIS fighters in Lebanon, and missed several opportunities to do so.

While the LAF has done much to distance itself from the actions of Hezbollah along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, LAF inaction against ISIS was not an option. If the LAF failed to act against ISIS, it would have been accused of kowtowing to Hezbollah. Conversely, in committing to confronting the militants, it risked accusations of collusion with the Shi'a militant group at the expense of the fears and concerns of Lebanon's Sunni community. Through it all, the LAF would have to deconflict with Hezbollah at the level of LAF command, manage its own internal divisions, and maintain unity of command in the Arsal theater. This meant working to interdict if not avoid past situations where LAF active and retired personnel were accused of trying to liaise between the LAF and Hezbollah on the ground without authorization from LAF headquarters.

Successful and proactive steps by the LAF to shape the security dynamics of Lebanon's eastern frontier represented a moral turning point not unlike the LAF's hard-won 2007 battle against Fatah al-Islam militants in Tripoli's beleaguered Nahr El-Bared refugee camp. The United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) have stated clearly that as members of the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition, they stood ready to assist the LAF, should Lebanon and the LAF request it.

Having worked for weeks to get the necessary forces in position, and with a clear and insulated theater-level chain of command in place, the LAF began the execution of its counter-ISIS campaign against militants on the Lebanese side of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. The operation – code named "Dawn of the Jurds" – was publicly announced on August 19, 2017. Later that day, Hezbollah and the Syrian Arab Army announced their own counter-ISIS military campaign on the Syrian side of the frontier.

For all the international concern of potential LAF-Hezbollah coordination, the official start date of Dawn of the Jurds is misleading. Well before August 19th, the LAF had already begun taking independent action against ISIS positions and ridge lines east of Ras Baalbek, and the first major thrust of the LAF counter-ISIS operation was executed on August 14th, 2017.

The net effect of the LAF's superior battlefield awareness and targeted strike capability was the accelerated demoralization of ISIS forces in Lebanon. By the time elite units were poised to make a major eastward push on August 19, 2017 – the operation's official execution date – LAF senior commanders and battlefield planners felt confident that they, and not ISIS, would be shaping the battlefield and the tempo of the operation. As LAF regular and elite forces took more ground and

consolidated their new positions, the effective use of ISR, targeted strike, SOF and armored mobility led to the description of Dawn of the Jurds by one U.S. military officer in Lebanon as "21st century maneuver warfare by a modern military."

As the LAF prepared to free the last remaining pocket of territory held by ISIS, Hezbollah publicly announced that it was negotiating with ISIS militants directly to secure definitive information about the whereabouts of LAF military personnel captured by ISIS and JAN in August 2014. This in turn forced a temporary suspension of LAF military operations. A controversial agreement between Hezbollah and ISIS militants would lead to the release of Hezbollah and Iranian prisoners of war in Syria, and the coordinates of the bodies of the then-confirmed dead LAF personnel in ISIS controlled territory. In exchange, Hezbollah would grant the militants safe passage out of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. On August 29, 2017, ISIS forces began preparations to depart the battlefield. As a result, major LAF maneuver operations were suspended indefinitely.

There is no doubt that some, if not many, in the LAF felt an obligation to go the distance against ISIS and push the militants out or defeat them outright without leaving an option for them to withdraw. However, political maneuvering the final two days of the operations hardly constitute a "victory denied." In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF needed to accomplish three objectives in its counter-ISIS campaign: 1) the withdrawal of ISIS elements from Lebanese territory, 2) establish with certainty the fate of LAF service men held captive by ISIS since 2014, and 3) and complete the campaign on its own as Lebanon's principal legitimate national security actors.

As far as the LAF is concerned, it deems that it has more than accomplished what it set out to do. The LAF now sits on 120 square kilometers of formerly ISIS-held territory, and other LAF border units are poised to consolidate the military deployment along the quasi-totality of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier – an outcome that would have been political unheard of before Syria's civil war, and a first in Lebanon's post-Independence history.

Furthermore, for the first time since the Lebanese Civil War, the LAF successfully conducted a theater-level combined arms operation against an asymmetric enemy that had no choice but to integrate static defenses in its quickly-eroding order of battle. The LAF capitalized on more than 10 years of force development and modernization; this includes special forces by regional standards, some of the region's very best use of conventional ballistic artillery fire, and a targeted ground-to-ground and air-to-ground strike capability, and round-the-clock surveillance and tactical intelligence from ISR-capable aircraft and a fleet of UAVs.

After Dawn of the Jurds, LAF senior commanders and their U.S. and U.K. counterparts are more than comfortable stating that the campaign was conducted with no cooperation or coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah. On the contrary, the LAF's solo campaign was so successful, that elements close to Hezbollah sought to actively take credit retroactively for the LAF's successes, and/or promote a narrative of secret coordination between the LAF, Hezbollah and the Assad regime.

What happens after the operation is at least as important as winning the battle itself. With JAN and ISIS evicted from Lebanon, the LAF will now have to turn its attention towards providing Lebanon and its citizens with the level of security and stability it feels they need. This in turn entails permanently consolidating the LAF's defensive posture along the border with Syria. The LAF has already signaled its intent to hold the positions it has liberated indefinitely. There is no other group or faction that is either there or able to do it in the LAF's stead. The LAF will have to shape and maintain complete overwatch over the areas liberated by its troops from ISIS.

There are also important military and policy implications for Hezbollah. While Hezbollah has stated publicly that it intends to vacate what little remains of its limited border presence, the LAF's deployment and activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier complicates any hypothetical land-bridge linking Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. Because the LAF now actively polices and monitors much of the border with Syria, there is significant overlap between the LAF's preference not to coordinate with any Lebanese faction, and the need to actively interdict illicit activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

Over the last five years, the LAF has not shied away from stopping illicit materials, contraband and weapons from entering Lebanon. Hezbollah has actively worked to avoid using areas where the LAF is known to operate. However, as more LAF units are stood up, doing so has grown increasingly difficult. The real challenge will come if and when Hezbollah accepts or rejects curtailing what remains of its clandestine presence along Lebanon's still-porous border with Syria.

Lastly, Dawn of the Jurds may have lasting implications for a national security debate long-dominated by Hezbollah's military preeminence. The LAF's rapid and professional execution of the counter-ISIS campaign – without anyone's help, and certainly not with the help of the Syrians or Hezbollah – has shattered the narrative in the minds of many Lebanese that Hezbollah is Lebanon's sole preeminent national security actor. Presented with such a singular challenge to its self-styled resistance and national security narrative, Hezbollah needed a cease-fire agreement to hasten the withdrawal of ISIS from the Lebanese-Syrian frontier and to consolidate its own reputation. In short, the battle against ISIS in Lebanon may be over, but the war over Lebanon's national security narrative has only just begun.

The LAF and the Lebanese need countries like the U.S. and other donors and partners to maintain the current momentum of military assistance, especially as the LAF reorients itself and its mission sets after defeating ISIS in Lebanon. Within that, there are practical ways for the U.S. to play a critical supporting role and to ensure that the LAF dominates the battlefield:

- The U.S. Government needs to validate and qualify how it will maintain adequate levels of military assistance to the LAF. As serious questions are raised about plans to zero out Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to 42 out of 47 country recipients – including Lebanon – in 2018, it must be made abundantly clear: failing to support the LAF's efforts to consolidate its national security role will only serve to roll back unprecedented gains by a stabilizing and a moderating force in Lebanon and the region.

- The U.S. should not shy away from the scale of its commitment to – and presence in – Lebanon. The U.S. military currently maintains a larger special operations presence than most Arab countries with more than 70 SOCCENT trainers and support personnel in Lebanon at any one point in time. U.S. military personnel can and do go almost anywhere in Lebanon, and play a key role in bolstering the LAF's emerging capabilities. The U.S. should take a page out of Iran's playbook on Lebanon and take ownership of its close relationship with the LAF.

- As the LAF fought ISIS militants, logistical support and resupplies from the U.S. would have been critical in a sustained fight. The Lebanese military currently has the ability to draw on U.S. CENTCOM regional holdings. The U.S. should reaffirm this privileged status and do so publicly and work closely with LAF leadership and the theater commander to ensure that LAF stocks are adequate in any future asymmetric military engagement.

- Thanks to U.S. military assistance and persistent training, the LAF effectively conducted target designation to then direct unguided and guided fire on high value targets in real-time. Conducting "find, fix, and finish" with dozens if not hundreds of simultaneous targets on a dynamic battlefield was a challenge that presented a much higher degree of complexity. U.S. military leaders should continue to encourage CENTCOM and SOCCENT personnel in Lebanon and the broader Levant to work in

partnership with their LAF counterparts to strengthen their ability to sustain complex target acquisition and battle management.

- The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) has played a growing role in support of the LAF's efforts to adequately equip and link up its new land border forces. The LAF has proven itself to be a force for stability in the Levant and a military that takes its regional responsibilities seriously. The U.S. should continue to ensure adequate funding and programming in support of the LAF's long-term aspirations to secure Lebanon's land and maritime borders.

Through the Dawn of the Jurds operation, the LAF has proven that it can make excellent use of U.S. and other partners' lethal and technical security assistance. The operation also challenged the notion that Hezbollah is Lebanon's only credibly national security actor.

Over the 2005 to 2017 period, successive generations of LAF leadership have grown ever more confident and emboldened by the idea that the LAF can be Lebanon's preeminent national security actor. Still, the LAF has struggled time and again with what it sees as the false perceptions of LAF-Hezbollah collusion and the potential impact of U.S. policy choices that could hurt institutions like the LAF, all in a failed bid to counter Iranian influence in the Levant.

Inevitably, those who define Lebanon through the lens of Hezbollah will fail to see the LAF as anything but an extension of the militant group. At the same time, as one senior Pentagon official noted on background, one central narrative conveyed during the recent visit by Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Washington DC was that many in the U.S. government and Congress believe that "there is still a Lebanon and LAF worth saving." In the wake of the LAF's successful counter-ISIS campaign, there continues to be tremendous good will towards the LAF in U.S. military circles where the LAF is considered a key emerging military ally, and – paradoxically – one of the region's "fighting" militaries.

Being hawkish on Lebanon in U.S. policy terms has traditionally meant being tough on Hezbollah and other factions and institutions in Lebanon because of the presence of Hezbollah in the country. When the LAF engaged ISIS militarily in August 2017, being hawkish on Lebanon meant doubling down on supporting the LAF because, in the end, a Lebanon with a weak LAF will be fertile terrain for Iran and its local and regional partners. Conversely, supporting the LAF as U.S. civilian and military leaders did during Dawn of the Jurds only served to strengthen the LAF's domestic and international military legitimacy.

Given the optics and potential consequences – both for Lebanon and for the U.S. – the LAF's battle against ISIS was a confrontation that it had to win decisively. Failure, or the risk of it, would only bolster Hezbollah's argument that it and Iran are indispensable to Lebanon's stability. In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF met and exceeded local and international expectations. In particular, it kindled an additional layer of respect for its growing capabilities in the eye of many Lebanese. In the face of continued questions about the trajectory of future military aid, the U.S. and key partners such as the U.K. need to be bold in supporting a rare success in how they build partner capacity in countries like Lebanon, and on capitalizing on how an allied military like the LAF fights the common threat posed by ISIS Ultimately, supporting the LAF and the Government of Lebanon are the only credible ways to shape the U.S.'s preferred outcomes in Lebanon.

Table of Contents

Introduction

On July 20, 2017, the Lebanese Shi'a militant group Hezbollah confirmed that it had put in motion a plan to dislodge Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) militants from Lebanon. The commencement of Hezbollah military operations preempted the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) from putting in motion plans tied to clearing JAN and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militants from Lebanese territory on its own. On July 27, 2017, Hezbollah announced that it and JAN had reached a tentative ceasefire as negotiations intensified to secure safe passage for remaining Nusra fighters to rebel-held areas in Syria.

Hezbollah's decision to take on JAN militants militarily placed the LAF in an all but untenable position. The LAF's leadership were uncomfortable that Hezbollah's campaign against JAN amounted to a media nightmare for the Government of Lebanon and the military. However, it must be said the LAF has had three years to plan, push for, and execute a military option to deal decisively with the presence of JAN and ISIS fighters in Lebanon, and missed several opportunities to do so.

Since the accession of General Joseph Aoun to the post of LAF Commander, LAF-Hezbollah relations have remained largely civil – much like the LAF's relations with all of Lebanon's major political sectarian factions. However, below the surface, some of the LAF's recent key military personnel choices have annoyed Hezbollah. Despite that, the LAF is not in a position where it can be openly antagonistic towards Hezbollah – the preeminent faction in Lebanon's sectarian political landscape.

While the LAF has done much to distance itself from the actions of Hezbollah along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, LAF inaction against ISIS was not an option. If the LAF failed to act against ISIS, it would have been accused of kowtowing to Hezbollah. Conversely, in committing to confronting the militants, it risked accusations of collusion with the Shi'a militant group at the expense of the fears and concerns of Lebanon's Sunni community. Through it all, the LAF would have to deconflict with Hezbollah at the level of LAF command, manage its own internal divisions, and maintain unity of command in the Arsal theater. This meant working to interdict if not avoid past situations where LAF active and retired personnel were accused of trying to liaise between the LAF and Hezbollah on the ground without authorization from LAF headquarters.

Hezbollah has three key advantages over the LAF and the Lebanese state. Hezbollah has complete and coherent unity of command, the will to act decisively, and an unmatched ability to shape the narrative and optics of its actions. By contrast, the Government of Lebanon and the LAF have been chronically divided against themselves, and have struggled to take decisive action against the clear and present danger posed by JAN and ISIS. Lebanese civilian and military leaders also struggle to shape the optics of the LAF's objectives centered on defending villages along the border with Syria, and not enflaming already precarious tensions with Lebanon's Syrian refugee population.

The LAF's battle against ISIS was far more challenging than Hezbollah's very limited campaign against JAN. ISIS fighter were more likely to use suicide tactics, and the group was betting that the LAF would hesitate in in the face of mass casualties in the absence of large-scale close air support (CAS). However, failure to act would have been no different than past focal points in post-war and post-Syria Lebanon – such as the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war and the May 2008 Hezbollah takeover of west Beirut – when the LAF failed to act decisively or assert its institutional military preeminence.

By contrast, successful and proactive steps by the LAF to shape the security dynamics of Lebanon's eastern frontier represented a moral turning point not unlike the LAF's hard-won 2007 battle against Fatah al-Islam militants in Tripoli's beleaguered Nahr El-Bared refugee camp. The United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) have stated clearly that as members of the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition, they stood ready to assist the LAF, should Lebanon and the LAF request it.

In a world marked by change, Lebanon did not have the luxury of mismanaging how its armed forces acted to counter the threat from groups like JAN and ISIS. The U.S. and the U.K. – which have invested heavily in the LAF's military development over the last decade – have watched the Hezbollah campaign and Lebanon's civil-military incoherence with concern. At the same time, Hezbollah and its sponsor Iran benefited from any perceived wedge between the LAF and its principal military partners.

Despite these pressures, and thanks to the LAF's professional and independent execution of its counter-ISIS military operation, the dominant view in the U.S. is that Lebanon and the LAF are still worth supporting. Decisive military action by the LAF served to validate the view that doubling down on Lebanon's military was the right decision in order to strengthen the Lebanese state's military legitimacy, bolster stability and confidence in Lebanon, and to counter arguments justifying Hezbollah's military preeminence. The alternative is a fait accompli wherein Hezbollah plays an even larger role in shaping and defining Lebanon's national security environment.

The Divisive Politics of the Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus

Syria's civil war and the Lebanon-Syria insecurity nexus complicate and inform every aspect of sectarian and factional competition in Lebanon in ways that neither the Lebanese nor their regional and international allies seem to have fully accounted for. The conflict in Syria also defines how both the United States and Iran deal with their respective sets of interests, partners, and allies in Lebanon and the broader region.

Over the course of the conflict, competing Lebanese factions have adopted diametrically opposing views on Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Anecdotal data from polling and field work shows the continued prevalence of deep divisions along Sunni-Shi'a lines. A majority of Lebanon's Shi'a continue to view the Assad regime, Iran and Hezbollah favorably. Meanwhile, the country's Sunnis continue to maintain the opposite set of views relative to the country's Shi'a.

For much of Syria's civil war, fighters affiliated with JAN and Syria ISIS have been entrenched in the no man's land straddling the Lebanese-Syrian frontier east of the Bekaa border town of Arsal. In the wake of a joint JAN-ISIS armed incursion in Arsal in 2014, Lebanon's civilian and military leaders have debated when and how to neutralize the threat posed by JAN and ISIS. However, regional alignments and local sectarian politics have thwarted attempts at forging a cohesive Lebanese policy response to JAN and ISIS.

Meanwhile, the presence of Syrian refugees and displaced persons further complicate the politics of security and stability along Lebanon's frontier with Syria. **Figure 1** shows the number and distribution of Syrian refugees registered by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) as of June 30, 2017. Of the more than 1 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, some 118,000 were in the Baalbek-El Hermel governorate. While other governorates in Lebanon may have higher totals, the town of Arsal in Baalbek-El Hermel – with some 39,300 registered refugees – has the highest concentration of any municipality in Lebanon.

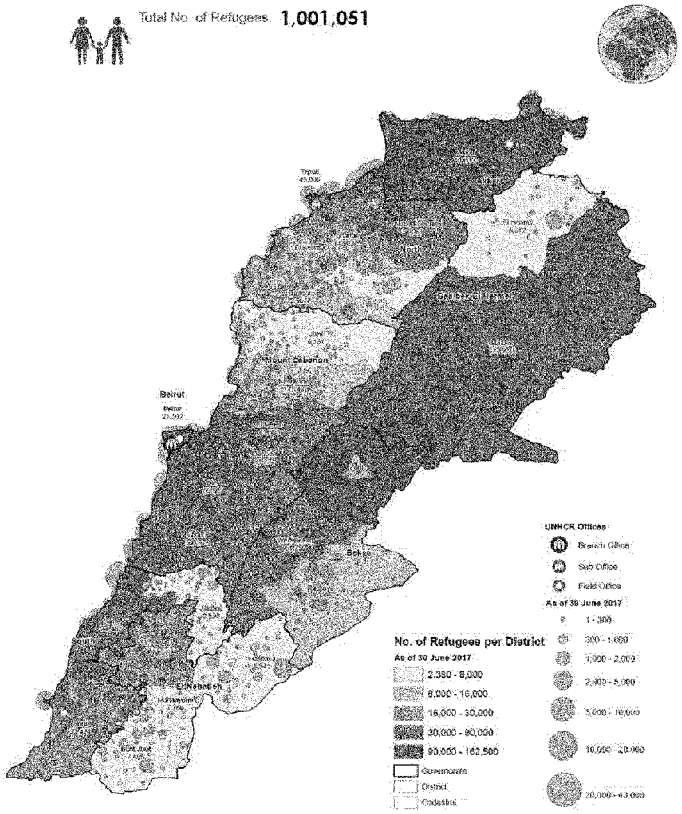
Figure 2 shows the deployment of LAF units in and around the Arsal AOR before the beginning of Hezbollah's campaign against JAN on June 20, 2017. Along with estimates of areas of control tied to Hezbollah, JAN and ISIS, **Figure 2** also shows the presence of a select pocket of displaced Syrians north-east of Arsal. Located east of LAF checkpoints and defensive positions, many of these tented settlements can be found in areas not unlike Wadi Hmayyed – one of a series of valleys that swoop across the frontier landscape. With more than 11,000 residents, the Syrian settlements shown in **Figure 2** overlapped with JAN-controlled territory, complicating an already complex civil-military challenge.

Over the 2014 to 2017 period, politicization and sectarian polarization – often along Sunni-Shi'a lines – have overridden calls for a resolution of the clear and present threat that groups like JAN and ISIS represent to every faction and sect in Lebanon. Political divisions have also complicated Lebanon's overall approach to its displaced Syrian population. Throughout this period, the LAF has been largely unable or unwilling to act on its own military priorities. Instead, the military deferred time and again to overlapping Lebanese, regional and international political pressures.

The LAF is intent on preserving Lebanon's hard-won stability in a region wracked by violence and uncertainty. By the same token, the LAF – supported by external partners such as the U.S. and U.K. – is hard-pressed to consolidate its growing national security credentials. In so doing, it will have to balance local and international expectations tied to the treatment of displaced Syrians,

while remaining cognizant of the fact that tented settlements have been used – and will likely be used again – by JAN and ISIS to bog down the LAF's counter-terrorism efforts.

Figure 1: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Syrian Refugees Registered in Lebanon – June 30, 2017.



Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from "Syria Refugee Response – Lebanon Syrian Refugees Registered." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 30, 2017, available at: http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122#

The 2014 Battle of Arsal & the Struggle for North-East Lebanon

For much of Lebanon's modern history, the Arab-Israeli conflict, civilian mistrust of the military, and objections by Damascus were obstacles to establishing an effective border regime along Lebanon's border with Syria. The August 2014 conflict with JAN and ISIS validated the LAF's assumption that its primary national security focus must be to stand up credible border security forces and to contain the effects of the Syria crisis. This has meant accelerating an effort that successive Lebanese governments have ignored since independence in 1943: consolidating a real-world security and border regime along the Lebanese-Syrian border.

In 2012, the United Kingdom began playing a critical role in supporting the LAF develop dedicated border security forces. The U.K.'s Rapid Land Border Security Assistance Project to assisted the LAF to mentor, equip and sustain newly formed land border regiments. The LAF's LBRs would be tasked to fulfill mission requirements Lebanese officers nicknamed "four Ds": detect, deter, defend, and deny the activities of illegal arms actors operating along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

Over the 2012-2014 period, the U.K.-backed effort provided observation, protection, mobility and communication equipment to the 1st and 2nd LBR. In addition, the U.K. effort assisted the LAF to establish a network of protector border observation posts (PBOPs), buttressed by a series of mobile observation towers. Each *Sangar*-style PBOP is equipped with day and night electro-optical surveillance systems, anti-RPG netting, protection from overlapping HESCO barriers, and other offensive and defensive countermeasures. The PBOPs were intended to be both defensible and to provide significant capability in terms of overlapping overwatch of the border and real-time command and control in support of other LAF units.

On August 2, 2014, JAN and ISIS militants conducted a coordinated attack against regular troops from the LAF's 8th Mechanized Infantry Brigade (MIB) in and near the town of Arsal. The 8th MIB was in the initial phase of a redeployment from South Lebanon to the Arsal AOR when the attack commenced and was quickly reinforced by elite special operational forces (SOF) personnel from the Ranger and Air Assault regiments.

The fight for Arsal was the first major engagement for the LAF's 2nd Land Border Regimen (LBR), where its protected border observation posts (PBOPs) foiled an ISIS breakout effort into the neighboring towns of Ras Baalbek and Qaa. The conflict saw the LAF use laser-guided missile fire from a fixed wing platform in combat for the first time. 2014 also marked the first major military confrontation wherein the LAF took advantage of its then-limited ability to "net" VHF, ISR and other data feeds in real time from the battlefield.

However, the LAF's response to the militant push in Arsal highlighted future challenges in bolstering unity of effort, resilience under fire of untested conventional units, and the LAF's continued reliance on reserve special operations forces. The LAF also had to take stock of the fact that JAN and ISIS used tented settlements in and around Arsal to mask and execute part of their offensive on the town. LAF planners will have to factor the vulnerability of the displaced Syrian population into any future military and counterterrorism operations against JAN and ISIS.

When the struggle for the town and its surrounding hilltops and valleys subsided on August 7, 2014, the fighting had left some 20 LAF personnel killed and 85 wounded in action, while some 100 militants were also killed. The short-lived conflict also led to the capture of 23 LAF and 17 Internal Security Forces (ISF) personnel. Three were subsequently executive by JAN, and as of July 25, 2017, at least 7 LAF personnel remain in ISIS captivity.

Since 2014, the LAF has stood up another two border regiments to supplement 1st and 2nd LBR, and with the aim of providing near-100% military coverage over the Lebanese-Syrian border by or before 2018. The LAF has also reallocated major regular units to bolster its four LBRs.

The LAF's Defense/Internal Offense Posture in 2017

Over the years 2014 to 2017, backed by an expanded U.K. Rapid Land Border Security Assistance Project and subsequent support from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), the LAF has significantly upgraded, expanded, and fortified its defensive line against JAN, ISIS and beyond. Meanwhile, training from U.S. and U.K. SOF personnel continue to build up the lethality and effectiveness of LAF frontline units in the field. **Figure 2** shows the mid-2017 deployment of LAF major units, JAN, ISIS and Hezbollah in the greater Arsal AOR. The LAF's current deployment is focused on frontier defense and – when necessary – conducting high intensity offensive operations within Lebanon's borders.

At present, the LAF's 2nd Land Border Regiment is manning six PBOPs and five forward operating bases (FOBs). These fortifications are further reinforced by the 14 FOBs manned by the 9th Mechanized Infantry Brigade, which are not shown in **Figure 2**. 2nd LBR has both been regularly targeted and has regularly repelled ISIS advances over the 2014-2017 period. 2nd LBR sharp shooters are class-leading by global standards, and have five confirmed kills at ranges in excess of 2,000 meters.

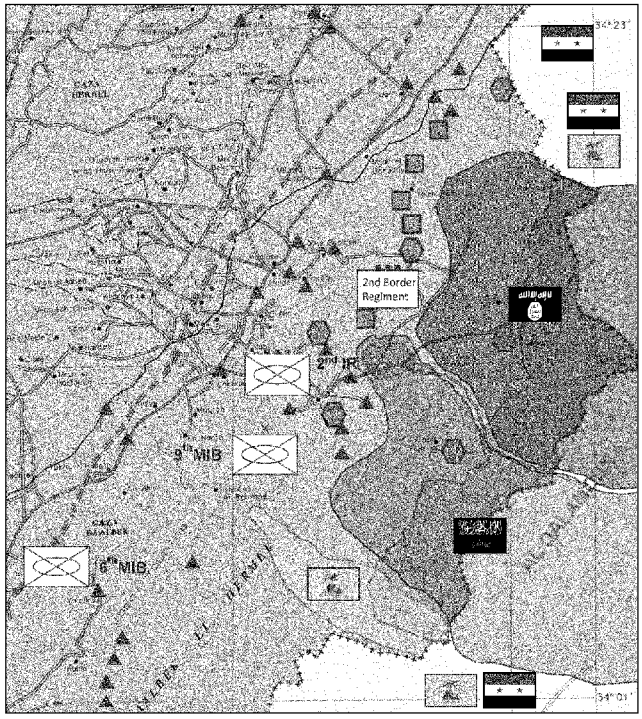
The 2nd Intervention Regiment is deployed near the town or Arsal itself, and the 6th Mechanized Infantry Brigade is deployed further south in the Baalbek AOR. Other Intervention Regiments deployed elsewhere in Lebanon regularly forward-deploy individual company formations to support mainline units in the Arsal AOR. At present, the 3rd and 4th IRs regularly swap companies forward to key positions near the town of Ras Baalbek northeast of Arsal.

Frontline LAF units are regularly reinforced by support units both within and beyond the Arsal AOR. The 1st and 2nd Artillery Regiments provide daily support in the form of unguided and guided 155mm artillery fire from LAF M-109 self-propelled and M-198 towed artillery units. **Figure 3** illustrates indirect and unguided artillery fire rates in the Arsal AOR in 2016. These in turn are supplemented by the added capability of the LAF's AC-208 Armed Caravans. Armed with multiple variants of the AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, LAF AC-208s provide a targeted strike capability that has effectively been used against difficult and high-value JAN and ISIS targets.

Other specialized units provide additional and decisive support to LAF units in the Arsal AOR. The LAF's elite Ranger Regiment and Air Assault Regiment are key SOF units that bring superior firepower and added lethality to regular ground forces. Both units have been engaged in support of LAF ground operations and both have played active combat roles in Arsal. Meanwhile, the 1st Armored Regiment provides LAF mechanized infantry brigades with addition armor and armored mobility, and buttress combined arms operations with LAF infantry personnel.

Over the same period, the LAF has conducted countless targeted missile and indirect fire strikes against both JAN and ISIS positions on the Lebanese side of the Qalamoun range. The LAF has also conducted multiple sorties by Lebanese SOF units to capture high-value militant targets, and to interdict planned attacks against nearby towns and villages. While JAN and ISIS have adapted multiple survival strategies to cope with regular LAF attacks across barren and rugged terrain, they both relied heavily on a network of caves and tunnels for protection against artillery barrages from either side of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

Figure 2: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Policing an Uncertain Border Region – July 20, 2017



LAF Protected Border Observation Posts (PBOP) with Towers/ISR

LAF Forward Operating Base (FOB)

LAF Checkpoint

Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Areas Controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)

Areas Controlled by Hezbollah

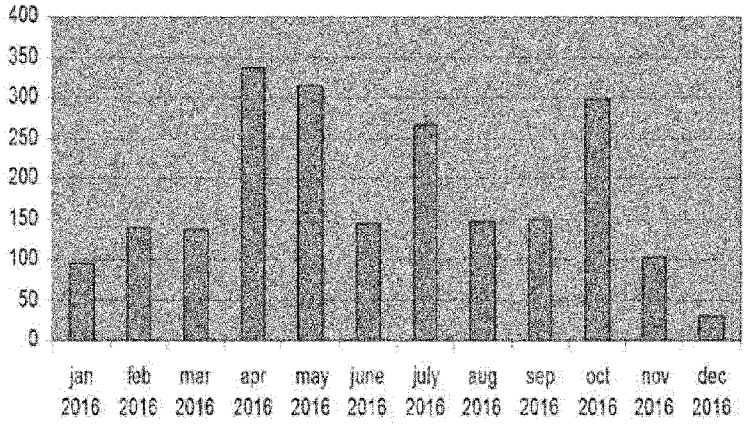
Select Displaced Syrian Population

Note: Areas marked in red are areas contested by Syria. Red hexagons are LAF planned PBOP sites currently in the control areas of ISIS or JAN. "MIB" stands for Mechanized Infantry Brigade. "IR" stands for Intervention Regiment.

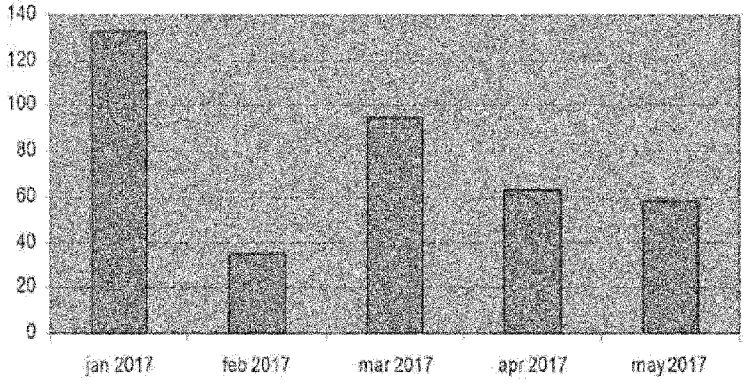
Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces experts, July 23, 2017.

Figure 3: LAF Indirect Artillery Support in the Arsal AOR 2016-2017

Monthly Artillery Fire Rates: 2016



Monthly Artillery Fire Rates: 2017



Note: Number of rounds per month varies according to weather conditions. Count does not include terminally-guided munitions.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces experts, June 12, 2017.

Hezbollah, the LAF and the Power of Perception

Hezbollah's military action against JAN in Lebanon cannot be viewed along in a vacuum. Though based in Lebanon, Hezbollah has been an expeditionary force in Syria for at least the last six years, and Iran has leveraged the group's effectiveness in Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere. Both Hezbollah and Tehran are acutely aware of the mix of forces they must mitigate to sustain their "resistance" narrative across the Middle East.

To Iran and Hezbollah, the LAF must be capable enough to maintain stability, but preferably not to the point of demanding a monopoly on the use of violence in Lebanon. In Syria, Hezbollah and Iran prefer to maintain an expeditionary deployment with a toehold on the Golan Heights, but without the military and political costs of a high intensity proxy civil war. Some challenges are harder to mitigate. As the group deepens its asymmetric train and equip role in Yemen, it has no clear path to return to the broader Arab fold; a stark contrast from its status during and after the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah conflict.

Possibly the most difficult challenges are the policy preferences of the U.S. and Russia in Syria. While diverging significantly, separately, both the U.S. and Russia have no preference that parts of Syria and its government become more closely integrated with Iran's "resistance" ideology, or its geopolitical preferences. Crucially, Russia's long-standing objective to transform the Syrian government and security apparatus in its own image clashes with Iran's preference of replicating the Hezbollah experience in Syria. As Syria's civil war becomes a less dynamic war of positions, Iran and their Hezbollah allies might increasingly find Syria – under Russian control to the west, and American preeminence to the east and south-east – to be increasingly inhospitable.

By taking preemptive military action against JAN, Hezbollah took the initiative away from the LAF and the Government of Lebanon. The operation began soon before Prime Minister Saad Hariri and other government officials were meant to travel to Washington. Meanwhile in Syria, JAN's main force took over much of Idlib province after forcing out Ahrar al-Sham – an Islamist group backed by Turkey. Furthermore, the day before Hezbollah's announcement, the Trump Administration confirmed that it was terminating a clandestine program to arm and train Syrian insurgents battling the Assad regime, including rebel groups in the Southern Front near the Syrian-Jordanian border.

The rationale for the timing of Hezbollah's attack against JAN is likely to be a source for persistent debate. Nonetheless, Hezbollah's actions are a source of embarrassment for both the Government and Lebanon's military. In the short to medium term, Hezbollah exhibited its usual flair for shaping the optics of its military campaign with significant emphasis on stagecraft and set pieces for public consumption. The militant group's media outlet released a daily stream of footage, along with maps showing the progression of Hezbollah forces conducting infantry maneuvers, how it utilized artillery, antiaircraft guns and unguided rockets; Hezbollah also highlighted its combat engineering, showcasing its armored bulldozers as fighters captured abandoned JAN positions.

Initially, Hezbollah had hoped that the LAF would grant it permission to conduct operations from the west, immediately adjacent to the LAF's frontline with JAN. The LAF refused, forcing Hezbollah to adopt a less than optimal strategy focusing on pushing north from its southern positions in Lebanon and from the east in coordination with the Syrian Arab Army. Meanwhile, the LAF focused exclusively on maintaining its defensive posture, utilizing artillery and smaller caliber fire when JAN personnel appeared to be approaching 2nd Land Border Regiment positions, damaging its image and reputation at home and abroad.

Much has been made of purported coordination or cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah, be it in 2017 in Arsal or in past military engagements. According to LAF leadership and field commanders, when it comes to Hezbollah, the LAF continues to abide by a strict deconfliction policy that is not unlike how U.S. and Russian military forces deconflict in Syria. At no point did the Lebanese military command, units or smaller formations coordinate LAF actions with Hezbollah. Instead, the LAF leverages its intelligence branch to maintain channels as needed to every major faction in Lebanon.

Figure 2 and **Figure 4** show the rapid progression of Hezbollah forces as they took position after position from JAN forces. Between July 21, 2017 and July 24, 2017, Hezbollah had taken over more than 60% of territory previously held by JAN. **Figure 5** shows what remains of the area controlled by Nusra fighter before the declaration of a tentative ceasefire on July 27, 2017. Estimates of the number of dead, wounded and captured in combat vary widely. *Reuters* reported that more than 20 Hezbollah fighters and 150 JAN militants were killed in combat.

In the weeks that followed the Hezbollah operation, there were growing questions as to whether losses incurred by the group occurred in the fight against JAN, or elsewhere in other battles in Syria. There were similar questions on the veracity of the fighting between Hezbollah and JAN, given that the Assad regime and Hezbollah appeared to be actively negotiating the withdrawal of JAN militants and their leaders well before Hezbollah's July 2017 counter-JAN operation in Lebanon.

As was discussed earlier, one of the long-standing concerns of the LAF in any potential engagement with JAN and ISIS was the challenge of how to address the presence of a large, tented settlement of more than 11,000 Syrian refugees. By chipping away rapidly at the territory controlled by JAN, Hezbollah's military campaign had heightened the risk that JAN fighters and their families – and possibly ISIS members further north – could have tried to melt away into the refugee population near Wadi Hmeyyed. Lebanese intelligence services were actively tracking the possibility of joint JAN-ISIS attacks against LAF positions utilizing suicide truck bombs. Conveniently, Hezbollah could likely have taken credit for there being no such attacks, while conversely restating the importance of its military role should such attacks have occured.

On August 2, 2017, buses carried some 8,000 JAN fighters and Syrian refugees to the JAN-held province of Idlib after JAN and Hezbollah exchange of prisoners. After a week of fighting, Hezbollah's most important victory is not defeating JAN. Before the ceasefire, JAN resistance grew markedly the closer Hezbollah fighters go to the tented settlement. Meanwhile, indiscriminate Syrian bombardment of the camps from Syrian side of the border threaten to undermine the narrative of a clean and swift campaign. Where Hezbollah truly succeeded is in shaping perception and the optics of itself, and by reciprocity effacing its long-term national security rival, the LAF. Hezbollah has little incentive to correct the perception that the LAF is either a non-player shaping the security politics of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, or colluding with its fighters.

Hezbollah has a track record of shaping optics in ways that only serve to sow doubt about the LAF and its intentions. Hezbollah liberally plagiarizes footage of LAF guided missile strikes as its own. In late 2016, Hezbollah paraded U.S.-made M113s it had captured from the South Lebanon Army (SLA) – a one-time Israeli proxy in South Lebanon – in the process raising doubts about the LAF's exemplary end use monitoring track record. In April 2017, the presence of Hezbollah fighters near the headquarters of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) during a tour of the

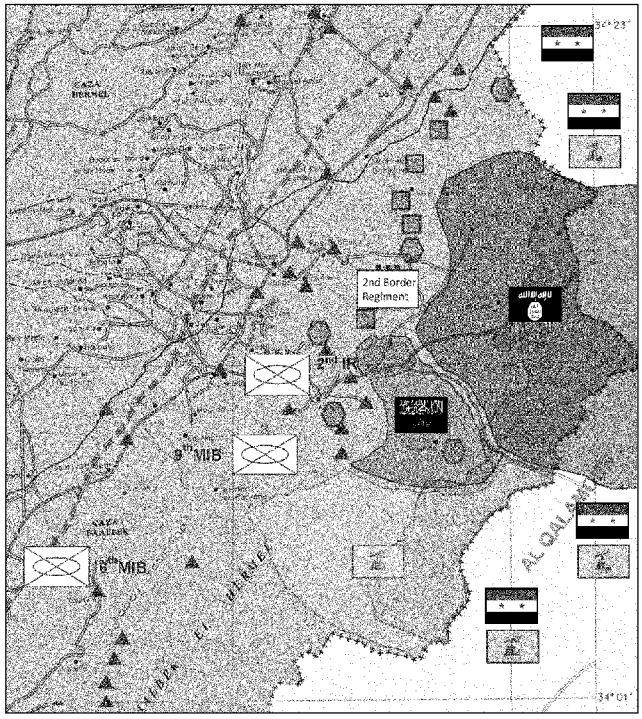
U.N. Blue Line separating Lebanon and Israel served to embarrass Government of Lebanon and LAF personnel on the ground.

Hezbollah's counter-JAN operation also raises questions on the importance of stagecraft over tradecraft. There were questions both during and after the operation that Hezbollah appeared to be making heavy use of combat camera, including staging footage of set piece actions against JAN militants. One can critically point out that Hezbollah fighters on film appeared to have inferior levels of training and readiness relative to comparable LAF forces. One western military observer went so far as to compare some of what he saw to "second year cadets at a military academy," while Lebanese military senior officers also appear skeptical of the breadth and scope of the Hezbollah operation. Be that as it may, the content circulated for domestic and international consumption must not belie the fact that Hezbollah has proven to be a significant and well-disciplined asymmetric force.

What matters is that many Lebanese and many more watching around the world took away the impression that Hezbollah wanted: its military commanders and fighters executing a clear plan to evict JAN, while Lebanon's competing factions postured and debated without providing the Lebanese military with a clear mandate to act. And now that Hezbollah has all-but ensured JAN's demise and withdrawal from Lebanon, their continued presence in the greater Arsal AOR threatens the pace and timing of planned LAF operations against ISIS.

After JAN militants and their families had withdrawn from Lebanon, the LAF needed Hezbollah to honor a public pledge to turn over the areas it now controls over to the LAF. Hezbollah failing to do so expeditiously undermined military planning efforts, delayed the timing and pace of a potential LAF campaign, and gave ISIS more time to fortify its positions and close gaps in their own asymmetric defensive line.

Figure 4: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Policing an Uncertain Border Region – July 24, 2017



LAF Protected Border Observation Posts (PBOP) with Towers/ISR

LAF Forward Operating Base (FOB)

LAF Checkpoint

Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Areas Controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)

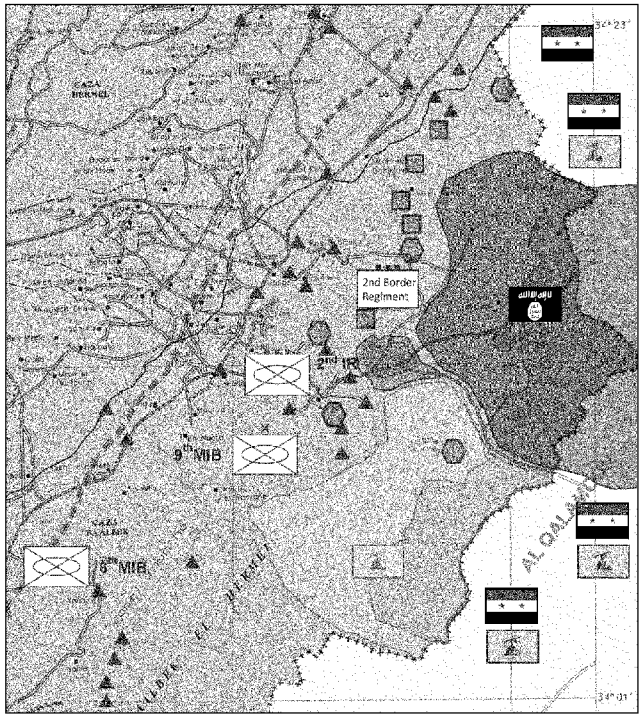
Areas Controlled by Hezbollah

Select Displaced Syrian Population

Note: Areas marked in red are areas contested by Syria. Red hexagons are LAF planned PBOP sites currently in the control areas of ISIS or JAN. "MIB" stands for Mechanized Infantry Brigade. "IR" stands for Intervention Regiment.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and United Nations experts, July 24, 2017.

Figure 5: The Lebanon-Syria Insecurity Nexus: Policing an Uncertain Border Region – July 27, 2017



LAF Protected Border Observation Posts (PBOP) with Towers/ISR

LAF Forward Operating Base (FOB)

LAF Checkpoint

Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Areas Controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)

Areas Controlled by Hezbollah

Select Displaced Syrian Population

Note: Areas marked in red are areas contested by Syria. Red hexagons are LAF planned PBOP sites currently in the control areas of ISIS or JAN. "MIB" stands for Mechanized Infantry Brigade. "IR" stands for Intervention Regiment

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces and United Nations experts, July 24, 2017.

The LAF and the Need to Defeat ISIS

Lebanon and its military missed a crucial window of opportunity to act first on defeating JAN. In many ways, this was a missed opportunity three years in the making. Lebanon's competing civilian leaders struggled between 2014 and 2017 to get past a persistent state of political paralysis and institutional decay.

Over the same period, the LAF's unity of effort was significantly compromised. Repeated end of service extensions for a select group of senior LAF officers – including LAF Commander General Jean Kahwaji – sapped military morale. Since General Kahwaji's first term extension in 2013, dozens of key general officers have retired from the LAF, many if not most of them before the retirement of a commanding general who was ten years their senior. With the departure of institutional change agents, recurring rumors that the then-Commander of the LAF had aspirations for higher political officer, and a loss of momentum in efforts to deal decisively with ISIS and JAN, once-motivated junior officers saw themselves as orphans of a military leadership crisis they could not hope to shape or influence.

The appointment of General Joseph Aoun as the new Commander of the LAF on March 8, 2017 served to significantly alleviate internal pressure and disaffection within both the LAF officer corps and among NCOs and enlisted personnel. With a new President, a new LAF Commander and a new government, the Government of Lebanon and the LAF appeared poised to action and address the presence of JAN and ISIS militants in Lebanon. However, as Lebanon's new political and military leadership sunk deeper in trying to manage the competing priorities of Lebanon's sectarian political factions, they failed to seize the opportunity and take decisive military action.

With JAN routed by Hezbollah's swift military intervention, the LAF could not afford to miss a closing window to defeat ISIS, and to do so even if the optics were difficult to shape. To that end, as **Figure 6** shows, key maneuver and combat support units were forward deployed to the Arsal and Ras Baalbek AOR, including the bulk of the elite Air Assault Regiment. Elements from the Directorate of Military Intelligence's (DMI) *Moukafaha* and Strike Force elite counter-terrorism units were also deployed. Much of the set piece shaping is also complete with the redeployment of the 1st Intervention Regiment (IR) from Tripoli to the Arsal and Ras Baalbek AOR. Combined with existing frontline units and additional troops as needed from the 4th LBR and the 6th IR, the LAF had a combined force of more than 8,500 men in the broader eastern Bekaa region.

This force level would be critical given key differences between the areas controlled by JAN and ISIS. While JAN held positions that were relatively inferior to those of ISIS, they had excellent supply lines through to the town of Arsal itself. Conversely, while ISIS may not have the best supply lines – often prompting them to raid JAN resupply convoys – they did hold on to far more defensible strategic ground, making it all the more likely that the battle against ISIS would be more challenging and resource-intensive.

The LAF had many combat capabilities that other armed factions in Lebanon – including Hezbollah – could not match. However, as the LAF fine-tuned its planning and resourcing effort, it needed to be honest with itself concerning prerequisites for success, its own capabilities and limitations, and whether it could effectively deal with and adapt to the threat from ISIS:

- Hezbollah had to cease all military operations and withdraw from the Arsal and Ras Baalbek AOR. The LAF could not afford even a lingering impression that it and the Shi'a militant group were working together to defeat ISIS. It also could not conduct operations so long as Hezbollah

continued to hold ground formerly held by JAN. The Government of Lebanon – of which Hezbollah is part – led by the President and the Prime Minister would have had to buttress the LAF to ensure that deconfliction was preserved.

- The LAF would have to carefully manage the presence of displaced Syrians east of its current frontline. As LAF units pressed east and northeast, the Government of Lebanon would have to work with the LAF to make it clear to camp residents that they were not the target of military operations, and that there was every intent to preserve their wellbeing in concert with international humanitarian organizations operating in Lebanon.

- Public diplomacy and messaging is a strong suit of Hezbollah's and the LAF needed to do far more to actively communicate its actions, intentions and preferred outcomes. This level of messaging also entailed a willingness to be self-critical and open to engagement from a wider mix of interest groups across Lebanon.

- While the LAF had far more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability than in 2014, there were real-world limits to how much the LAF could task its current mix of AC-208s and UAVs to provide adequate ISR coverage. The LAF needed to be ready to leverage the presence of key partner assets in Lebanon – chief among them the U.S. Central Command's Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) forward presence in Lebanon and the broader Levant.

- Not unlike ISR, the LAF had significantly expanded its ability to find, fix and finish targets in the Arsal and Ras Baalbek AOR. However, managing a larger mix of targets, or queuing and designating multiple targets simultaneously, is another area where the LAF could elect to leverage U.S. SOCCENT capabilities in Lebanon and the broader Levant.

The most important element in any campaign against ISIS would be the need to establish, sustain, and maintain unity of command in the theater of war. In 2012, when the LAF engaged in street clashes in the northern town of Tripoli, LAF headquarters assigned the commander of the LAF's northern region as head of operations at the theater level. This meant overseeing a complex force that included the 10th MIB, 4th IR, the Air Assault Regiment, and the Marine Commando Regiment. While managing the mix of leadership of frontline LAF regular and SOF units was challenging, the LAF ensured that the chain of command was respected, and unity of command maintained.

During the August 2014 clashes between the LAF and the mixed force comprised of JAN and ISIS fighters, the LAF once again sought to create unity of command in an AOR that included the 2nd LBR, element of the 8th MIB, and a relief force that included the 6th MIB and the elite Ranger Regiment. However, unlike in 2012, the LAF struggled to establish and maintain unity of command at the theater level. Not only did unit commanders clash over who was in command, LAF leadership at headquarters regularly circumvented the chain of command and communicated directly with junior officers and platoon leaders fighting Nusra and ISIS militants. It is important to caveat that even modern militaries would struggle to shape unity of command in a fast-paced defensive military action.

With the LAF poised to engage ISIS, the theater commander would have to coordinate a force larger than the troops committed to either the 2012 Tripoli clashes, or the 2014 counter-offensive against JAN and ISIS. The LAF expected to find itself in a far more challenging theater of war than the one faced by Hezbollah with complexities tied to civilians in the combat zone, the assumption that ISIS still had LAF servicemen in captivity, and the possibility that – unlike JAN – ISIS could make use of suicide tactics to bog down a LAF advance. The LAF would also have

to actively guard against wildcards not unlike past instances where LAF active and retired personnel were accused of liaising between the LAF and Hezbollah on the ground without authorization from LAF headquarters.

Establishing this level of unity of command started and ended with the LAF commander himself. Ultimately, the LAF was set on a course of action that supported a clear end-state: the removal of the ISIS threat from Lebanese territory. Once it committed, it needed to be ready to absorb losses, adapt its tactics quickly, and be relentless in its bid to achieve said end-state. The alternative would be the demoralization of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the loss of a unique opportunity to favorably shape the security politics of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier.

Figure 7: LAF Units in the Larger Arsal/Ras Baalbek Area of Responsibility – July-August 2017

Active Maneuver Forces in the Arsal/Ras Baalbek AOR

Unit Formation	Estimated Unit Strength
6th Mechanized Infantry Brigade	2,000
Air Assault Regiment	1,100
1st Intervention Regiment	1,000
4th Intervention Regiment (one company)	100
DMI* Special Forces (one company)	100

Combat Support Forces in the Arsal/Ras Baalbek AOR

Unit Formation	Estimated Unit Strength
9th Mechanized Infantry Brigade	2,000
6st Intervention Regiment (Rayak Air Base)	1,100
2nd Land Border Regiment	500
4th Land Border Regiment	450
4th Intervention Regiment (one company)	100
Combat Engineering Regiment (one company)	100
6th Mechanized Infantry Brigade (one artillery company)	18 155mm artillery pieces
1st Artillery Regiment (one company)	18 155mm artillery pieces
2n Artillery Regiment (one company)	MLRS*

Estimated Maneuver and Combat Support Forces in the Arsal/Ras Baalbek AOR

Unit Formation	Estimated Unit Strength
Maneuver Forces	4,300
Combat Support Forces	4,250
Total Force Strength	8,550

Note: Figures shown above are adapted from 2015 actual figures.
*: "DMI" refers to the LAF's Directorate of Military Intelligence. "MLRS" refers to multiple launch rocket system.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Lebanese Armed Forces experts, July 26, 2017, August 20, 2017.

The LAF's "Dawn of the Jurds" Operation Against ISIS

On August 12, 2017, Hezbollah forces withdrew to Syria from positions captured from JAN militants. **Figure 8** shows the LAF area of control adjacent to the pocket controlled by ISIS. As the map shows, the ISIS AOR is divided into three separate segments or "fassil" named from north to south "Bakr," "Ali, and "Oussama." **Figure 8** also shows the smaller pocket of terrain previously held by Hezbollah.

As stated earlier in this report, the LAF was confident that ISIS militants had every intention of inflicting the maximum possible level of attrition losses to the LAF, while trying to hold their ground long enough to force a favorable non-kinetic outcome. However, ISIS forces in Lebanon lacked air support, had no reliable heavy firepower, and had to manage limited stockpiles of ammunition. Furthermore, ISIS positions have been under persistent and sustained surveillance and attack over the 2014 to 2017 period, suffering slow but steady attrition due to LAF sniper fire, targeted *Hellfire* strikes, and LAF SOF incursions.

Having worked for weeks to get the necessary forces in position, and with a clear and insulated theater-level chain of command in place, the LAF began the execution of its counter-ISIS campaign against militants on the Lebanese side of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. The operation – code named "Dawn of the Jurds" – was publicly announced on August 19, 2017. Later that day, Hezbollah and the Syrian Arab Army announced their own counter-ISIS military campaign on the Syrian side of the frontier.

For all the international concern of potential LAF-Hezbollah coordination, the official start date of Dawn of the Jurds is misleading. Well before August 19th, the LAF had already begun taking independent action against ISIS positions and ridge lines east of Ras Baalbek. **Figure 9** shows in general terms the series of complex sets of maneuvers executed by LAF regular and special forces as they clawed away significant chunks of terrain from ISIS control. **Figure 9 also** shows that the first major thrust of the LAF counter-ISIS operation was executed on August 14th, 2017 by the 1st IR east of 2nd LBR positions east of Ras Baalbek – five days before the operation's official start date.

Both before and after LAF ground forces began to push into ISIS territory on August 14th, LAF AC-208 *Armed Caravans* and *ScanEagle* UAVs provided round-the-clock ISR capability in the Dawn of the Jurds AOR, finding and fixing any potential ground-to-ground and air-to-ground threats they could identify. As a result, LAF field and headquarters commanders had unprecedented situational awareness through access to accurate real-time telemetry from the battlefield.

Throughout this process, the LAF would go on to make liberal and ingenious use of its U.S.-supplied precision munitions such as the AGM114 *Hellfire* laser-guided air-to-ground missile and the M712 *Copperhead* 155mm cannon-launched, fin-stabilized, terminally laser-guided munitions. While not designed to work in concert with the LAF's AC208 laser designation capability, in a first for the *Copperhead*, LAF ISR, SOF, and artillery personnel would use the AC208 and the *Copperhead* together to rapidly find, fix, and finish high value ISIS targets. All-told, some 140 *Copperhead* rounds would go on to eliminate most ISIS high value targets. This included artillery positions, machine gun nests, ISIS logistics vehicles, sniping positions and munition depots – including anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs).

The net effect of the LAF's superior battlefield awareness and targeted strike capability was the accelerated demoralization of ISIS forces in Lebanon. With the 1st IR's second major push against ISIS positions on August 16, 2017, the LAF had all but broken ISIS' ability to hold critical terrain. At this point, LAF generals would have been forgiven for pressing their advantage. Instead, with each LAF thrust, frontline and combat support units worked to consolidate LAF gains. Also on August 16, the 9th MIB would move in concert with the 1st IR's push to fill the void left by Hezbollah forces on August 12, 2017, protecting the 1st IR's southern flank in the process. Combat engineers would work feverishly to dismantle ISIS mines and booby-traps. LAF D-9 bulldozers – up-armored locally – cut new roads as and where needed to avoid the most extensive of ISIS' minefields, enabling the LAF to sustain the relatively brisk pace of Dawn of the Jurds.

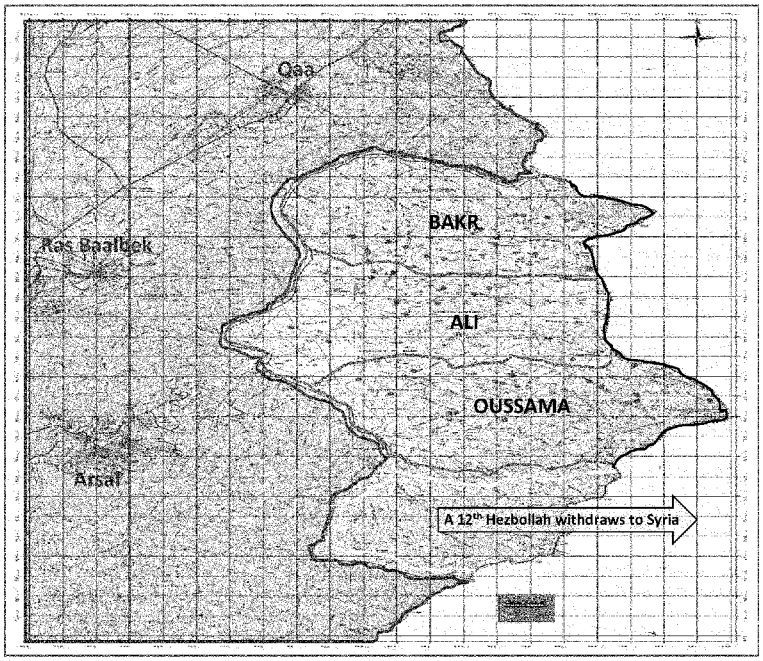
By the time the Air Assault Regiment (AAR) was poised to make its big eastward push north of positions held by the 1st IR on August 19, 2017 (the operation's official execution date), LAF senior commanders and battlefield planners felt confident that they would be shaping the battlefield and the tempo of the operation. As LAF regular and elite forces took more ground and consolidated their new positions, the effective use of ISR, targeted strike, SOF and armored mobility led to the description of Dawn of the Jurds by one U.S. military officer in Lebanon as "21st century maneuver warfare by a modern military."

Over the August 22 to August 25 period, LAF regular and SOF units continued to press ISIS forces into an ever-smaller pocket of territory east of the commanding heights of Khirbet Daoud. By August 27, 2017, LAF theater commanders were ready to make a decisive push against the remaining 20 square kilometers of territory still held by ISIS. After well-placed *Copperhead* strikes had pushed ISIS forces below 50 percent fighting strength, ISIS' local commander was reported to have secured permission to negotiate with the Lebanese state and the LAF for the militants' surrender.

As the LAF prepared to free the last remaining pocket of territory held by ISIS, Hezbollah publicly announced that it was negotiating with ISIS militants directly to secure definitive information about the whereabouts of LAF military personnel captured by ISIS and JAN in August 2014. This in turn forced a temporary suspension of LAF military operations. A controversial agreement between Hezbollah and ISIS militants would lead to the release of Hezbollah and Iranian prisoners of war in Syria, and the coordinates of the bodies of the then-confirmed dead LAF personnel in ISIS controlled territory. In exchange, Hezbollah would grant the militants safe passage out of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. On August 29, 2017, ISIS forces began preparations to depart the battlefield. As a result, major LAF maneuver operations were suspended indefinitely.

In the final count – and contrary to initial estimates – the LAF had 9 military personnel killed in action, most of them due to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines. Of the some 100 LAF personnel wounded, some 70 were deemed fit to return to the battlefield and most did so. Dawn of the Jurds lead to the death of more than 50 ISIS militants – though Lebanese authorities have yet to report official figures – and more than twice that figure are reported to have been wounded by LAF fire.

Figure 8: Defeating ISIS: the LAF and Operation "Dawn of the Jurds" – August 13, 2017



Areas Controlled by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)

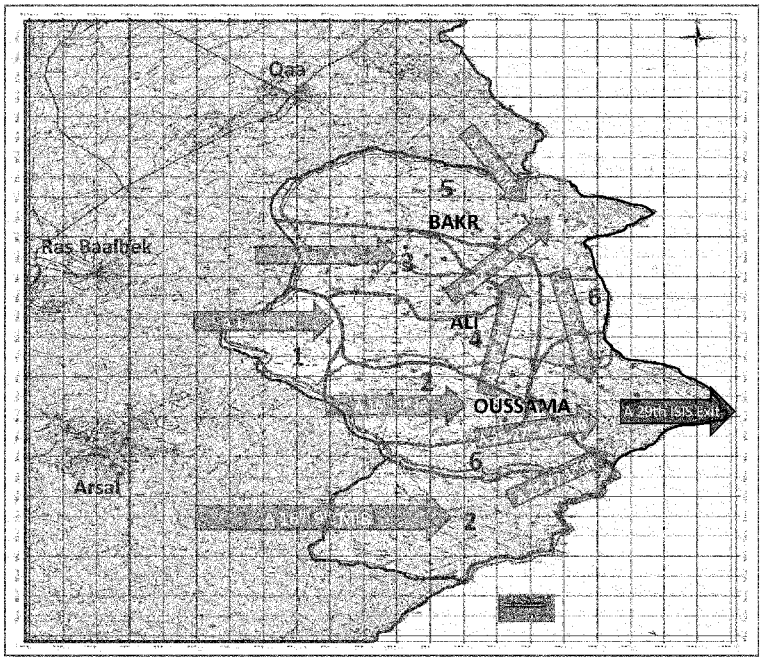
Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Select ISIS Positions

Note: This map does not shoe areas contested by Syria as shown in previous maps in this report.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Brigadier General (ret) Maroun Hitti and other Lebanese Armed Forces experts, September 20, 2017.

Figure 9: Defeating ISIS: the LAF and Operation "Dawn of the Jurds" – August 14-August 29, 2017



Areas Controlled by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)

Areas Controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Select ISIS Positions

Areas Recaptured by the LAF from ISIS

Note: This map does not shoe areas contested by Syria as shown in previous maps in this report, nor does it show the estimated position of Syrian Arab Army and Hezbollah positions in Syria. "A" stands for the months of August. "MIB" stands for Mechanized Infantry Brigade. "IR" stands for Intervention Regiment. "AAR" stands for Air Assault Regiment. "MK" stands for Moukafaha.

Source: Adapted by Aram Nerguizian from discussions with Brigadier General (ret) Maroun Hitti and other Lebanese Armed Forces experts, September 20, 2017.

Initial Implications of "Dawn of the Jurds"

There is no doubt that some, if not many, in the LAF felt an obligation to go the distance against ISIS and push the militants out or defeat them outright without leaving an option for them to withdraw. However, political maneuvering the final two days of the operations hardly constitute a "victory denied." In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF needed to accomplish three objectives in its counter-ISIS campaign: 1) the withdrawal of ISIS elements from Lebanese territory, 2) establish with certainty the fate of LAF service men held captive by ISIS since 2014, and 3) and complete the campaign on its own as Lebanon's principal legitimate national security actors.

As far as the LAF is concerned, it deems that it has more than accomplished what it set out to do. The LAF now sits on 120 square kilometers of formerly ISIS-held territory, and other LAF border units are poised to consolidate the military deployment along the quasi-totality of the Lebanese-Syrian frontier – an outcome that would have been political unheard of before Syria's civil war, and a first in Lebanon's post-Independence history.

Furthermore, for the first time since the Lebanese Civil War, the LAF successfully conducted a theater-level combined arms operation against an asymmetric enemy that had no choice but to integrate static defenses in its quickly-eroding order of battle. The LAF capitalized on more than 10 years of force development and modernization; this includes special forces by regional standards, some of the region's very best use of conventional ballistic artillery fire, and a targeted ground-to-ground and air-to-ground strike capability, and round-the-clock surveillance and tactical intelligence from ISR-capable aircraft and a fleet of UAVs.

Still, the operation was not without its risks or implications. The LAF has gone to great pains to articulate publicly what it feels it believes and upholds publicly: that it would not coordinate or cooperate its military operations with the Syrian military or Hezbollah. Intentions aside, the LAF had no ability to predict or shape what either of those belligerents did or did not chose to do in ways that could affect the LAF's concept of operations in the Arsal and Ras Baalbek AOR.

After Dawn of the Jurds, LAF senior commanders and their U.S. and U.K. counterparts are more than comfortable stating that the campaign was conducted with no cooperation or coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah. On the contrary, the LAF's solo campaign was so successful, that elements close to Hezbollah sought to actively take credit retroactively for the LAF's successes, and/or promote a narrative of secret coordination between the LAF, Hezbollah and the Assad regime.

What happens after the operation is at least as important as winning the battle itself. With JAN and ISIS evicted from Lebanon, the LAF will now have to turn its attention towards providing Lebanon and its citizens with the level of security and stability it feels they need. This in turn entails permanently consolidating the LAF's defensive posture along the border with Syria. The LAF has already signaled its intent to hold the positions it has liberated indefinitely. There is no other group or faction that is either there or able to do it in the LAF's stead. The LAF will have to shape and maintain complete overwatch over the areas liberated by its troops from ISIS.

There are also important military and policy implications for Hezbollah. While Hezbollah has stated publicly that it intends to vacate what little remains of its limited border presence, the LAF's deployment and activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier complicates any hypothetical land-bridge linking Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. Because the LAF now actively polices and monitors much of the border with Syria, there is significant overlap between the LAF's preference

not to coordinate with any Lebanese faction, and the need to actively interdict illicit activity along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. Over the last five years, the LAF has not shied away from stopping illicit materials, contraband and weapons from entering Lebanon. Hezbollah has actively worked to avoid using areas where the LAF is known to operate. However, as more LAF units are stood up, doing so has grown increasingly difficult. The real challenge will come if and when Hezbollah accepts or rejects curtailing what remains of its clandestine presence along Lebanon's still-porous border with Syria.

Lastly, Dawn of the Jurds may have lasting implications for a national security debate long-dominated by Hezbollah's military preeminence. The LAF's rapid and professional execution of the counter-ISIS campaign – without anyone's help, and certainly not with the help of the Syrians or Hezbollah – has shattered the narrative in the minds of many Lebanese that Hezbollah is Lebanon's sole preeminent national security actor. Presented with such a singular challenge to its self-styled resistance and national security narrative, Hezbollah needed a cease-fire agreement to hasten the withdrawal of ISIS from the Lebanese-Syrian frontier and to consolidate its own reputation. In short, the battle against ISIS in Lebanon may be over, but the war over Lebanon's national security narrative has only just begun.

U.S. Policy and the Need for Sustained Strategic Engagement

On the LAF's path toward sustainable military development, the support of the U.S. is second only to the support and trust of the Lebanese people themselves. Despite losing the initiative to Hezbollah in the fight against JAN, one cannot reiterate enough how far the LAF has come as a national security actor and as an international partner in the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition.

American policy towards Lebanon and the LAF is a function of far broader U.S. strategic imperatives in the Middle East, including the regional contest with Iran. How the U.S. goes about providing security assistance to its Lebanese allies is also dependent on, and held back by, this overarching top-down approach to security politics in the Levant.

At the level of the U.S. government, it was hoped that the LAF, which was popular across the country's sectarian divisions, could gradually take on an increasingly important national security role, largely at the expense of Iran's main non-state regional ally Hezbollah. Many in the U.S. Congress supported U.S. efforts to build up the LAF based on the hope that the military could one day confront Hezbollah and serve as a bulwark against Iranian influence along Israel's northern flank.

Over the 2005 to 2010 period, it became clear to successive U.S. administrations that supporting the LAF so that it might confront Hezbollah was unrealistic. In the wake of regional protests starting in 2011 and the outbreak of Syria's civil war, the U.S.-Lebanese bilateral relationship became increasingly defined by both countries' need to cooperate on regional security, intelligence sharing and dealing with emerging and common threats from militant groups inspired by Al-Qa'eda and ISIS with operational links to Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

The LAF and the Lebanese need countries like the U.S. and other donors and partners to maintain the current momentum of military assistance, especially as the LAF reorients itself and its mission sets after defeating ISIS in Lebanon. Within that, there are practical ways for the U.S. to play a critical supporting role and to ensure that the LAF dominates the battlefield:

- The U.S. Government needs to validate and qualify how it will maintain adequate levels of military assistance to the LAF. As serious questions are raised about plans to zero out Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to 42 out of 47 country recipients – including Lebanon – in 2018, it must be made abundantly clear: failing to support the LAF's efforts to consolidate its national security role will only serve to roll back unprecedented gains by a stabilizing and a moderating force in Lebanon and the region.

- The U.S. should not shy away from the scale of its commitment to – and presence in – Lebanon. The U.S. military currently maintains a larger special operations presence than most Arab countries with more than 70 SOCCENT trainers and support personnel in Lebanon at any one point in time. U.S. military personnel can and do go almost anywhere in Lebanon, and play a key role in bolstering the LAF's emerging capabilities. The U.S. should take a page out of Iran's playbook on Lebanon and take ownership of its close relationship with the LAF.

- As the LAF fought ISIS militants, logistical support and resupplies from the U.S. would have been critical in a sustained fight. The Lebanese military currently has the ability to draw on U.S. CENTCOM regional holdings. The U.S. should reaffirm this privileged status and do so publicly and work closely with LAF leadership and the theater commander to ensure that LAF stocks are adequate in any future asymmetric military engagement.

- Thanks to U.S. military assistance and persistent training, the LAF effectively conducted target designation to then direct unguided and guided fire on high value targets in real-time. Conducting "find, fix, and finish" with dozens if not hundreds of simultaneous targets on a dynamic battlefield was a challenge that presented a much higher degree of complexity. U.S. military leaders should continue to encourage CENTCOM and SOCCENT personnel in Lebanon and the broader Levant to work in partnership with their LAF counterparts to strengthen their ability to sustain complex target acquisition and battle management.

- The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) has played a growing role in support of the LAF's efforts to adequately equip and link up its new land border forces. The LAF has proven itself to be a force for stability in the Levant and a military that takes its regional responsibilities seriously. The U.S. should continue to ensure adequate funding and programming in support of the LAF's long-term aspirations to secure Lebanon's land and maritime borders.

Through the Dawn of the Jurds operation, the LAF has proven that it can make excellent use of U.S. and other partners' lethal and technical security assistance. The operation also challenged the notion that Hezbollah is Lebanon's only credibly national security actor.

Failing to adequately fund and support the LAF can only serve to strengthen Hezbollah's own narrative that the U.S. is not serious about supporting the LAF. It would also undermine testing positions Hezbollah has taken on the record, stating that they would only stand down their own military capabilities if and when the LAF is strong enough to provide security and stability in Lebanon.

A sustained and long-term effort to support the LAF is an objective that is espoused first and foremost by the LAF's U.S. military counterparts who have worked and trained alongside the LAF for more than a decade. In the short term, they will have to focus more narrowly on rapidly responding to the evolving needs of the LAF as they fight to dislodge ISIS from Lebanon. In the medium to long term, they and their civilian partners will have to carefully weigh the consequences of withholding military aid to an emerging regional military ally in a unique plural society in the Arabic-speaking Middle East.

Conclusion

Over the 2005 to 2017 period, successive generations of LAF leadership have grown ever more confident and emboldened by the idea that the LAF can be Lebanon's preeminent national security actor. Still, the LAF has struggled time and again with what it sees as the false perceptions of LAF-Hezbollah collusion and the potential impact of U.S. policy choices that could hurt institutions like the LAF, all in a failed bid to counter Iranian influence in the Levant.

Inevitably, those who define Lebanon through the lens of Hezbollah will fail to see the LAF as anything but an extension of the militant group. At the same time, as one senior Pentagon official noted on background, one central narrative conveyed during the recent visit by Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Washington DC was that many in the U.S. government and Congress believe that "there is still a Lebanon and LAF worth saving." In the wake of the LAF's successful counter-ISIS campaign, there continues to be tremendous good will towards the LAF in U.S. military circles where the LAF is considered a key emerging military ally, and – paradoxically – one of the region's "fighting" militaries.

Being hawkish on Lebanon in U.S. policy terms has traditionally meant being tough on Hezbollah and other factions and institutions in Lebanon because of the presence of Hezbollah in the country. When the LAF engaged ISIS militarily in August 2017, being hawkish on Lebanon meant doubling down on supporting the LAF because, in the end, a Lebanon with a weak LAF will be fertile terrain for Iran and its local and regional partners. Conversely, supporting the LAF as U.S. civilian and military leaders did during Dawn of the Jurds only served to strengthen the LAF's domestic and international military legitimacy.

Given the optics and potential consequences – both for Lebanon and for the U.S. – the LAF's battle against ISIS was a confrontation that it had to win decisively. Failure, or the risk of it, would only bolster Hezbollah's argument that it and Iran are indispensable to Lebanon's stability. In executing Dawn of the Jurds, the LAF met and exceeded local and international expectations. In particular, it kindled an additional layer of respect for its growing capabilities in the eye of many Lebanese. In the face of continued questions about the trajectory of future military aid, the U.S. and key partners such as the U.K. need to be bold in supporting a rare success in how they build partner capacity in countries like Lebanon, and on capitalizing on how an allied military like the LAF fights the common threat posed by ISIS Ultimately, supporting the LAF and the Government of Lebanon are the only credible ways to shape the U.S.'s preferred outcomes in Lebanon.

Mr. POE. Dr. Pollack.

STATEMENT OF KENNETH POLLACK, PH.D., RESIDENT SCHOLAR, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Mr. POLLACK. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, distinguished members of the committee. It is a great privilege to be here before you.

This topic that you've raised of Iranian support to militant groups across the region and the role that they play in Iran's regional policy is an extremely important one and I just want to make three overarching points on this.

First, in the military realm, there is nothing special, nothing magical about Iran's willingness or desire to support these groups, how it has done so, or the success that it has enjoyed in doing so.

Iran backs these groups because it is politically and strategically constrained from using its own forces to project power.

The support it provides is entirely conventional and not meaningfully different from the kinds of support that the United States has provided to countless groups during our history, ranging from UNITA to the Afghan mujahadeen to the current Syrian democratic forces.

What's more, the militant groups that Iran has helped to sponsor and back are not terribly capable. They are mostly extremely mediocre forces.

Their successes, to the extent that they have enjoyed them, are largely attributable to very conventional sources and are not exceptional in any way.

Even Hezbollah has proven itself relatively far more capable than other Arab militaries. But it is not the match for any modern capable military. It is not a match for the United States military, for the Israeli Defense Forces, or any other in that category.

Ultimately, there is nothing that the Iranians or Hezbollah has to teach in the military realm to the United States Armed Forces or to the CIA.

Second, where they do have something to teach it is in the political, economic, and social support that are core elements of what we call their Hezbollah model.

There, what the Iranians have hit upon is that the political, economic, and social services that they use to build up these forces, to root them in their communities are critical to the success of these groups.

They provide them with a great deal of popular support and legitimacy, which, in turn, translates to cover and concealment, greater intelligence, better ability to recruit and to secure financial resources and, ultimately, as we see in the case of Lebanon, political power, all of which advance their aims in these critical but ultimately nonmilitary spheres that nevertheless impinge upon the military and upon the battlefield.

It should remind us that we cannot prevail against Iran nor can we stabilize the Middle East or help the countries of the region to do so by military means alone.

Third, and along similar lines, Iran is not 10 feet tall. They are not fools. They are quite capable. But at the end of the day, Iran is not the source of the problems of the Middle East.

Iran simply exacerbates those problems and exploits them. Ultimately, the best way to prevent Iran from making further gains in the Middle East is to address the underlying economic, political, and social problems which are roiling the entire region, which are creating weak governments, failed states, civil wars, and insurgencies.

That is what Iran goes looking for, and we find that time and time again when the fissures in Middle Eastern societies create opportunities, the Iranians are Johnny-on-the-spot to take advantage of them, and they use their support and they use every means that they can to try to pry those states apart.

And, ultimately, if our goal is to prevent the Iranians from expanding their influence, from building up their support, from recruiting new members of this coalition that they have tried to craft all across the region, ultimately to overturn the regional status quo and to remake it in their own interests, the most important thing that the United States can do is to help the countries of the region to address these underlying problems.

It is absolutely critical that we do so. We are not going to be able to fight the Iranians piece by piece, matching them on the battlefield time and again. They are not going to stop. They are infinitely patient and they will keep coming back.

But what we have seen from our own hard experience is that when we help the people of the region to address their problems in governance, economics, and social issues, they will push back on the Iranians more effectively than we ever could.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Pollack follows:]

Statement before the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
On Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East

Facing the Iranian Challenge in the Middle East: *The Role of Iranian-Backed Militias*

Kenneth M. Pollack
Resident Scholar

10/4/2017

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss the role of Iranian-backed militias and insurgents in Tehran's regional strategy. It is an issue that has become of great importance to the Middle East and one that is likely to grow further still because of the successes they have experienced.

The primary point that I hope to impress upon you, is that there is nothing special about these militias or Tehran's support for them. Defeating them, and the regional policy of which they are an instrument, is eminently practical. However, it will require the United States to commit itself to doing so in ways that we simply have not been willing over the past decade.

A Necessary Caveat

For many years, I have assured people that it is easy to be an expert on Iran because there are really only two answers to any question you could ever be asked about it: "I don't know" and "it depends." While glib, this point is unfortunately accurate. Iran's political system is highly opaque. Its inner workings and decision-making processes are shrouded in mystery and rarely conform to its nominal organization or to what an outsider might predict.

Moreover, while there are aspects of pluralism in the Iranian system and many players who seem to have some role in its foreign policy, it is ultimately all about the Supreme Leader, 'Ali Khamene'i. Having followed Iranian affairs for nearly 30 years, both within the U.S. government and without, I must admit that it is extremely rare that outsiders—or even other Iranians—ever know when Khamene'i makes a decision, or if he does, what he has opted to do. Although Khamene'i typically seeks to take into account the views and interests of other Iranian actors, it is impossible for anyone to know what is inside his head. Likewise, when he makes a decision, it is exceptionally difficult for outsiders and insiders alike to know whose counsel (if any) Khamene'i sought, let alone heeded, to reach his conclusions.

As a result, what follows is merely my best guess at Tehran's thinking about the role of proxy and allied militant groups (including Hizballah) in its regional strategy. The viewpoint conforms to the available evidence, particularly Iranian behavior across the Middle East over the years. However, it may be completely wrong. Someday we may learn Iran's true rationale and it may have nothing to do with anything that the United States or the West believes today. This is an inherent problem when dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran, but it does not relieve us of the need to make decisions to safeguard our own interests and address the challenge Iran poses to the United States in the Middle East.

Iranian Regional Goals and Strategy

Understanding the role that foreign militant groups play in Iran's regional strategy requires understanding Iran's regional strategy itself and the goals that lie behind it. Like all nations, Iran's national goals can be best understood as a hierarchy ranging from a vital minimum to an aspirational maximum, somewhat akin to Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs for individuals.

Inevitably, the first and foremost goals of the Iranian leadership are the survival of the Iranian nation and the continued rule of its theocratic regime. Everything else is secondary to these most basic requirements. It is particularly acute because many Iranians believe that for two hundred years, their country has been subjected to endless political interference, invasion, and occupation by Western powers. Although this narrative tends to be exaggerated, it is not necessarily wrong. Consequently, many Iranians insist that they must work actively to ensure these minimal requirements because their freedom and self-determination are constantly in jeopardy.

Beyond mere survival, Iran seeks to dominate its neighborhood, particularly the Arab world to its west. There appear to be both defensive and expansionist motives for this and it is impossible to say which is more compelling. The answer appears to vary from Iranian to Iranian. In the defensive realm, a great deal of the paranoia inspired by the Iranian narrative of two centuries of invasion and interference is translated into a desire to control the countries around Iran to prevent threats from emerging there. Iranians can point to Saddam Husayn's invasion of Iran in 1980, the devastating Iran-Iraq war that followed, the emergence of a Taliban state in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, and the establishment of American military bases across the Persian Gulf in the 1990s as tangible examples of the kind of threats that Iran faces from its neighborhood.

That said, the vast majority or Iranians also seem to believe that their nation rightfully ought to dominate the Middle East and parts of south Asia because it always has. They hearken back to the Achaemenid, Persian, Parthian, and Sassanian empires, all of which ruled most or all of the ancient Middle East. They are often disdainful, even contemptuous of the Arabs, regarding them as incapable of ruling themselves—a demeanor that drives Arabs to distraction. Indeed, a great many Iranians want to be the hegemonic power in the Middle East again, and many Iranian actions over the years have been impossible to explain without recourse to this thirst for regional dominance. Try as one might, it is hard to ascribe defensive motives to Iran's heavy involvement in the Levant, for instance.

Then there is the religious or ideological component. Today, 38 years after the Iranian revolution, it is hard to know just how important Ayatollah Khomeini's philosophy remains as a guiding force in Iranian policy. However, if only because it does mesh with both Iran's defensive and expansionist agendas, it does appear to be part of the mix. Khomeini promulgated a philosophy of theocratic governance that he believed should be adopted by all Muslim nations, if not the entire world. Since the fall of the Shah, his minions have sought to export this ideology to other countries, to help them spark "Islamic" revolutions of their own, and adopt Khomeini's system of governance. At some level, at least some Iranian leaders do seem to want to try to spread their system of government to other countries and are most comfortable with groups who embrace it, like Hizballah and some other regional militias.

Of course, for much of the rest of the Muslim world, Khomeini's doctrine was threatening not only because it sought to overthrow their governments, but because it was identified with Shi'a Islam—although that was not how Khomeini envisioned it. And indeed, Shi'a solidarity is yet another element of Iranian regional strategy. However, it is not nearly as important as others make it out to be. The Iranians have certainly capitalized on the sympathy of different Shi'a groups for one another whenever they could. Because Shi'a are a minority in the Muslim world generally, and are oppressed in many countries even where they are a majority (like Bahrain and Saddam's Iraq), Iran has always sought to be the protector of the Shi'a to build

regional support. It is also no doubt true that Iran's paranoia also motivates Tehran to cultivate allies among the Shi'a to help protect itself from attack by the wider Sunni world.

Yet it is important to recognize that Iran is far more ecumenical when it comes to regional politics than it is often given credit for. Iran has eagerly supported the militantly secular PKK, the Sunni Islamists of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and even Salafi extremists like al-Qa'ida and Ansar al-Islam, who see the Shi'a as apostates who should be killed. Iran does so because its greater goal is to overturn the regional status quo, which is the only way it sees to secure its defensive agenda of protecting the regime and serve its expansionist agenda of dominating the Middle East, spreading Khomeini's ideology, and improving the position of its fellow Shi'a more broadly. All of this, of course is interlocking and self-serving.

For the past fifty years, the primary obstacle to Iran reasserting its dominance over the Middle East has been the United States, which reluctantly took on the hegemonic role when Britain withdrew from East of Suez in 1971. It is worth noting that the Shah, while always professing to be a lifelong friend of the United States, had every intention of displacing the U.S. in the region, and was attempting to build up his military to just that end. In other words, this anti-status quo tenet has been an element of Iranian policy since before the Islamic revolution. The Islamists merely put their own spin on it. And from their perspective, achieving this traditional Iranian aim got harder when they took power, because the revolution itself galvanized most of the nations of the Middle East to ally with the United States against Iran. By 2010, only Asad's Syria and Hizballah-controlled Lebanon were allies of Iran, whereas the United States could count on nearly every other country in the region, including key regional actors like Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE.

As a result, for most of the past several decades, Iran has believed it essential to reshuffle the regional status quo. Iran wants to be the regional hegemon and have all of the countries of the region bend to its wishes. However, it has been the United States that enjoyed that status and part of Iran's strategy of reversing this state of affairs has been to try to oppose, subvert, weaken, fight, and overthrow virtually every other state in the Middle East.

On top of all of these previous points, for ideological, historical, and political reasons, the regime that has ruled Iran since 1979 has defined the United States as its primary, eternal, and unflagging enemy. A pervasive belief in Western determination to oppress Iran; American ties to the Shah; CIA participation in the coup that ultimately toppled Iran's popular prime minister, Mohamed Mossadegh, in 1953; American backing of Saddam Husayn during the Iran-Iraq War (although that was entirely a product of Iran's aggressive actions toward the United States); American support for regional governments that opposed Tehran rather than kowtowing to it; and America's domination of the lands Iran perceived as rightfully its demesne, have all been mixed into Tehran's image of the United States as "the Great Satan," Iran's implacable foe. This self-perpetuating animosity toward the United States is made all the more pointed because Iran's national self-absorption leads even many sophisticated Iranians to believe that American actions entirely unintended for Tehran are insidious plots against them. For years after 9/11, for instance, Iranians were convinced that the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were really about creating bases for an invasion of Iran.

Nevertheless, Iran's mostly anti-status quo approach to the Middle East has been tempered by an important leavening of defensive motives since the Arab Spring of 2011. Those events threatened the Asad regime's hold on power in Syria and, in a more indirect fashion, Hizballah's control over Lebanon. Iran rushed to their defense out of a desire to preserve at least these elements of the status quo. Thus, Iran has mostly sought change in its near abroad,

particularly the Middle East, over the past 38 years, and has therefore emphasized an offensive strategy to try to bring about transformation—revolution, insurgency, civil war, and regime change. However, in recent years, it has been forced to pursue defensive strategies to snuff out revolutions, insurgencies, civil war, and regime change in parts of the Middle East already in its camp.

The Role of Militant Groups in Iran's Regional Strategy: The Military Tool

There is nothing novel about Iran's support for various militant groups across the Middle East. It is a tried and true method of power projection and examples can be found dating back to the times of Herodotus and Thucydides. Iran has an active and ambitious foreign policy and few allied countries willing to help it. Iran recognizes that, especially in the chaos of the Middle East, force is a useful (if not necessary) tool in achieving its foreign policy goals. However, Iran has been reticent to commit its own military forces, both because doing so might provoke a counterintervention by more powerful rivals like the U.S. and Israel, and because Tehran has not wanted to test the commitment of its own populace, which remains deeply scarred by the carnage of the Iran-Iraq war.

Of necessity, Tehran turns instead to non-state actors like political opposition movements, terrorist groups, insurgencies, and militias to help it prosecute its foreign policy agenda, as long as those groups are serving its purposes. Iran understands from hard experience that many of these groups are just as cynical in accepting Iran's aid as Tehran is in giving it, and that most have interests that diverge from Iran's in important ways. In part for that reason, Iran tries to emplace its own personnel—and those of Hizballah, the one quasi-state ally that truly does hew to the Iranian line—with those groups not just to strengthen them, but to control them.

In other words, Iran does not rely on these groups because it wants to or believes them to be ideal military forces. It turns to them because it must. Its reliance on foreign, irregular militant groups bolstered by Iranian advisers reflects its own limitations, political and military. Such groups are the weapons of the constrained, not the free. No one relies on them if they could instead rely on their own military forces. That includes the United States, which has backed a range of similar groups throughout its history, from UNITA to the Nicraguan Contras, from the Afghan Mujahideen to the Syrian Democratic Forces. And like the United States, Iran turns to them because, for various political reasons, it feels that it cannot employ its own military forces.

Neither is there anything militarily special about the various militant groups that Iran has backed across the region. They are not a magic weapon. Iran has not discovered a secret method of projecting power with these groups better than the United States or anyone else.

Indeed, most of them are utterly mediocre military forces. They do bring some useful features to battle, but nothing terribly unusual, let alone revolutionary. At best, they have proven better than their opponents in a number of circumstances for specific (and very ordinary) military reasons. Iraq's Hashd ash-Shaabi were able to hold Baghdad in the spring of 2014, but against a Da'ish army that had shot its bolt and had never expected to conquer as much as it did. Moreover, after that, they proved incapable of retaking towns from Da'ish on their own, failing miserably at Bayji, Tikrit and Fallujah, before U.S.-backed Iraqi government formations moved in to get those jobs done. In Syria, Iran's foreign Shi'a militias are used largely to man trench lines in defensive operations and as cannon fodder on the offensive. Critical battles are typically fought by elite Hizballah or Syrian Army formations, and increasingly in recent years rely on Russian firepower to prevail. Even in Yemen, the Houthis made impressive gains against a weak

government considered illegitimate by large parts of the populace, whose military had splintered, and that had alienated important tribes (which are the key to political power and security in Yemen). The Houthis too were stopped cold when they faced a small, well-equipped but only moderately-competent Emirati force at Aden, and since then have been forced onto the defensive.

All of these forces have brought with them some military strengths, but none of them is magical or novel and all are very modest. All of them have some training from Iran and/or Hizballah, but the vast majority of accounts suggest that this is rudimentary. A few weeks training on basic soldiering skills, weapons handling, and the most rudimentary small-unit tactics, seems to be the norm. That is better than many other regional militias, which often have none at all, but it isn't much.

Some of them benefit from strong motivation, particularly a sense of Shi'a solidarity and Shi'a survival, that contributes to above average morale and unit cohesion. That can be very helpful in militia fights that are typically waged by incompetent forces on both sides that just keep shooting at each other (poorly) until one side breaks and flees. A greater willingness to hold together and keep fighting—as well as a willingness to advance against fire—are often all that is necessary to produce tactical victories that can cumulate over time. This was a key element of Hizballah's success during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980s.

Some also have unique military attributes of their own. The Houthis have a high degree of cohesiveness and military experience from a decade of regular military campaigns against the Yemeni central government. And it is worth noting that the Houthis had little or no support from Iran in these earlier campaigns when they enjoyed their most notable battlefield victories. In contrast, Houthi fortunes have actually declined since Iran stepped its military support to them. That is <u>not</u> to suggest that Iranian support is counterproductive. Just to point out that it has not been the key to Houthis successes.

Finally, in Syria, the Iranian-backed militias have been able to benefit from Iranian command and control, some heavy weapons support from the leftovers of Asad's army, and since 2015, fire support from Russian aircraft and artillery. Against ISIS and other poorly-armed and trained Syrian opposition groups, that constitutes a very significant set of advantages. But they are entirely conventional advantages. There is nothing novel either about what Iran has provided them, or what they have been able to do with it.

Hizballah

In truth, even Hizballah did not perform that much better than its adversaries. It enjoys an outsize reputation for military competence in the Middle East derived from its relative successes in Lebanon in 1985-2000 and again in 2006, and in Syria since the end of the civil war. The reputation it earned was not unwarranted, but it was exaggerated. And it is a key element of Hizballah's current, critical role in Iran's regional policy.

Hizballah enjoyed relative successes in its own wars for several reasons. The first was simply the weakness of many of its adversaries. AMAL and the other Lebanese militias that Hizballah fought from 1985 to 1991 were largely ill-trained militias—and Hizballah did not do as well fighting more disciplined forces, like the Druse, or those with heavier firepower, like the Syrian army. Indeed, Syria was only prevented from wiping out Hizballah in 1987 because Tehran prevailed on Damascus to show restraint. Meanwhile, the Israel Defense Forces were not in any shape to take on Hizballah in 2006 and had no business invading southern Lebanon. Israeli forces turned in arguably the worst performance of their entire history, and yet they still

scored a lopsided military victory, albeit one that proved an embarrassing political defeat. While some of the Syrian opposition groups have demonstrated limited capabilities during the Syrian civil war, none have proven to be highly competent. Ultimately, the best adversary Hizballah ever fought was the IDF from 1985 to 2000, where it ultimately prevailed, but it did so simply by inflicting casualties on the Israelis, and even this it did at an overall 4:1 disadvantage in casualties. Hizballah learned to fight better against the Israelis than any other Arab army except perhaps the Jordanians in 1948. That is still high praise, but only in a very relative sense.

Hizballah's second strength has been zeal. In every war that it has fought, Hizballah fighters have been uniformly described as extremely committed to the fight. During the Lebanese Civil War, this was one of the only advantages that Hizballah possessed over other militias. Of course, in civil wars where most of the combatants are untrained militiamen, having greater dedication to the fight is often all that is needed to win out. In the 1990s and again in 2006, Israeli soldiers and officers marveled at the determination, bravery, and self-sacrifice of Hizballah fighters, as well as the strong unit cohesion of Hizballah formations. That has also been part of Hizballah's success in Syria since 2012.

Iran's generous backing and extensive training of Hizballah is clearly another reason for its superior performance. The Iranians have been devoted and highly-motivated trainers, in everything from guerrilla warfare to conventional operations, and from actual combat skills to logistics, communications, and other forms of combat service support. They have trained Hizballahis in Lebanon, in Iran, and in Syria. Iran unquestionably helped Hizballah learn and refine the various skills that it has employed against other Lebanese groups, Syrian opposition groups, and especially against Israel.

However, we should not pin too much on Iranian training. Iran was probably more devoted to Hizballah and worked harder with it than most foreign services working with most Arab armed forces, but it still begs the question of why Hizballah actually learned from the Iranians when (A) the Iranians aren't terrific themselves, and (B) so many other Arab militaries—including other non-state militaries—have been unable to improve under the tutelage of other foreign militaries including Iran. Is Iran truly a better trainer—or its doctrine truly superior—to American, British, Russian, and French training and doctrine? Did Iran really do a better job training Hizballah than the United States has done training the Iraqi armed forces since 2007? And if so, why didn't Iranian training turn the Iraqi Hashd ash-Shaabi or the Syrian Shabiha into the equals of Hizballah?

About the only real advantage that Iran brought was that, although not Arabs, their Persian (and Azeri, and other) trainers were more culturally and linguistically compatible with Hizballah's Lebanese Arabs than Americans, Russians, Brits, or Frenchmen. That's about it. Iranian military doctrine is not terrific, nor have the Iranians proven themselves to be great conventional warriors. We should remember that Iranian forces eked out costly victories over utterly inept Iraqi formations from 1981 to 1987 only to be crushed by Iraq's new approach to warfare in 1988—which itself was effortlessly crushed by the U.S. military in 1991.

Instead, Hizballah has some other innate strengths that appear far more important than Iranian training and are the last piece in the puzzle of their military prominence. Simply put, Hizballah employs a non-traditional organization, much flatter and more decentralized than the vast majority of Arab militaries. It is derived from their origins as a terrorist organization, and may benefit from Shi'a perspectives on behavior within a hierarchy. In part for this reason, and in part because it was what they had to do to survive both in the Lebanese civil war and the fighting against Israel (where many other groups were snuffed out), Hizballah is a competent

learning organization. It has devised new tactics, responded to its enemy's countermoves, and come up with novel approaches to circumstances. Indeed, in battle, Hizballah formations have shown higher quality tactical leadership than most Arab armies, including a willingness to counterattack, react to unexpected threats, and employ some combined arms operations.

Nevertheless, Hizballah has hardly been the Wehrmacht. In the 2006 fighting against Israel in Lebanon, its marksmanship with small arms was generally atrocious, and even its vaunted ATGM teams had a terrible hit rate overall—possibly as low as 8 percent—and most had to use volley fire to compensate. To the extent that Hizballah employed maneuver and counterattacks, these were not consistent and typically at no more than squad or platoon level. Moreover, only one of the Hizballah counterattacks succeeded. Most Hizballah forces kept to static defensive operations and reserve movements were small-scale when they happened at all. Its combined arms cooperation was similarly limited. They did use ATGMs, machine guns and small arms simultaneously, but almost never combined these direct fire weaponry with indirect fire from mortars or rockets.

Ultimately, Israel suffered 119 killed in the Second Lebanon War, while Hizballah lost 650-750 killed. In other words, the loss ratio was 6:1 or 7:1 in Israel's favor. In any other set of circumstances other than an Arab military fighting Israel, that would have been considered a horrific defeat, not a relative victory. Similarly, between 1985 and 2000, while Hizballah waged an insurgency to drive Israeli forces out of Lebanon, 300 Israelis were killed in Lebanon. That's really not a lot of people, even by Israeli standards. It was simply too high a price for the Israeli public.

Likewise, Hizballah's performance in the Syrian civil war has been good, but not flawless. There is no question that Hizballah forces have proven considerably better than Arab state militaries (including the Syrian regime's own forces) at employing tactical maneuver and combined arms operations. They have shown considerably better tactical initiative, discipline and commitment to the fight and there are numerous reports of the disdain Hizballah evinces for the incompetence of the Syrian army.

Yet neither has Hizballah proven invincible. Initially, in Qusayr and Damascus, Hizballah forces fought well, in large part because they were mostly veterans of the 2006 war against Israel. They still took heavy casualties, and when these high quality troops were rotated out, Hizballah formations did not enjoy the same kind of success—for instance in the fighting for Aleppo in late 2013 and 2014. Since then, Hizballah's battlefield fortunes have waxed as it has committed more and more troops to Lebanon and these have survived the Darwinian process of combat in which it is learn or die. As a result, they have improved and are now considered one of the keys to the slow success of the regime (along with Iranian advisors, Russian firepower and foreign Shi'a manpower), but that remains a relative standard in Syria's clumsy militia brawls.

Why Involve Hizballah?

If there's nothing magical or particularly impressive about Iran's various proxy militias across the Middle East, and Hizballah has proven itself well above the average of Arab armed forces but hardly the equal of a competent, 21st Century military, neither is there anything mysterious about Iran's rationale for involving Hizballah in this effort. First, Hizballah's leadership is wholly devoted to Iran. They too are a theocratically-governed Shi'a movement, but unlike most, many Hizballah leaders were disciples of Ayatollah Khomeini and even adopted his political philosophy of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurisprudent). They explicitly accept

Ayatollah Khamane'i as their supreme leader. This is a bond with Iran much tighter than that of any other group.

Second, Hizballah is an Arab organization. It is made up of Shi'a Lebanese Arabs who speak Arabic fluently. Most Iranian Revolutionary Guards do not. This makes Hizballah the ideal and obvious trainer for Arab groups. It also makes them useful combat advisors, where linguistic and cultural fluency are very valuable.

Finally, Hizballah has a great deal of combat experience—more recent than the Iranians—and it now has a great deal of experience training other groups in terrorist, guerrilla warfare, and conventional military tactics. All of these reasons make Hizballah superb surrogates for Iran, in many cases more qualified for the task than the Iranians themselves.

The Role of Militant Groups in Iran's Regional Strategy: The Political Tool

In truth, the ingenious aspect of Iran's support for regional militant groups has been its *non-military* aspects. We now speak of a "Hizballah model" which is noteworthy because of the economic, political, and social aspects which anchor the militiamen, terrorists, and/or insurgents in a larger populace. The degree of societal support this affords the fighters makes them far more formidable adversaries in the clumsy warfare common to these conflicts. It makes it easier for them to recruit, hide among the populace, supply themselves, and control territory. It makes them more resilient defensively and more dangerous offensively.

As the name implies, this began with Hizballah in Lebanon. In the early 1970s and on into the 1980s, Lebanon's Shi'a were the poorest and worst enfranchised of Lebanon's communities. While the Maronites and Sunnis fought for control of the Lebanese government, and largely divided Lebanon's political power and economic wealth between them, the Shi'a had little to none of either. Hizballah's rise and eventual success in gaining control over the Lebanese Shi'a community came in large part because they and their Iranian allies diligently tended to the non-military needs of their community. They provided social services like schools, hospitals, child care, and the like. They provided jobs, money, medicine, food, infrastructure repair, and all manner of basic economic assistance, all of which was desperately needed by the Lebanese Shi'a and never provided by the Lebanese government (or their better-off Sunni cousins). Hizballah also constructed a top-to-bottom political system and, perhaps of greatest importance, ensured that it governed justly and with virtually no corruption. They built a functional community that helped lift Lebanon's Shi'a out of their prior state of misery and gave them better lives, both individually and collectively.

All of this was remarkable for any community in the Arab world, and especially remarkable for a militia. It stood in contrast to the venality of both typical Middle Eastern militias and typical Arab governments. Aa such, it inspired tremendous loyalty among Lebanon's Shi'a, buttressing their support for Hizballah's military missions of securing the community in the maelstrom of civil war and driving Israel out of Lebanon. It brought a new strength to Hizballah's military arm and a cohesiveness to the Shi'a community. And what was even more exceptional was that this functional society was explicitly wedded to the goals and implementation of Iranian foreign policy.

Not surprisingly, Iran attempts to replicate this model wherever it can in the Middle East and South Asia. From Hamas in the Palestinian Territories to Jaysh al-Mehdi in Iraq, Iranian-backed militant groups have attempted the same approach. The rationale is obvious. The more that the militias can aid their community, as Hizballah did, the more cohesive and prosperous the community will be. That breeds loyalty to the fighting wing and to Iran, which in turn means a

stronger fighting force and greater willingness to ally with Iran and serve its agenda. It enables Tehran to use its military assistance to engineer political transformations that have a positive impact on their circumstances much farther into the future than would the provision of military aid alone.

Consequently, from the perspective of both the groups themselves and the Iranians, there is no downside to trying to employ the Hizballah model. Of course, it doesn't always work.

Defeating the Hizballah Model

As I hope that I demonstrated above, there is nothing magical about Iranian support to Middle Eastern militant groups. The support that they provide is not terribly different from what other countries, including the United States, have furnished to other groups and countries—and are currently providing to a number of militant groups and warring factions in the same region. Moreover, Iran's allied and proxy militia are generally no more capable than those backed by other countries, including the United States. Indeed, in Iraq, the U.S.-backed ISF has shown itself to be considerably more powerful than the Iranian-backed elements of the Hashd ash-Shaabi.

Even in those arenas where we have not had as much success so far, militarily defeating the Iranian-backed groups there would be a straightforward military problem. It is all about time, energy, and resources, and our willingness to devote them to each fight. Where the United States is willing to do so, the U.S. military and the CIA have all the know-how that they need to build up opposing forces that could defeat Iran's proxies. America has provided the same kinds of support in the past to groups like UNITA, the Nicaraguan Contras, the Peshmerga, the Croat and Bosniak armies, the Kosovo Liberation Army, the Afghan Mujahidin, and today's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It is no different from what Iran provides its irregular proxies, and the American versions have proven quite successful in battle. There are no special tricks in the military realm that the Iranians (and Hizballah) know that we don't.

It is instead in the non-military realm, where the United States has a lot to learn from Iran. Americans now know to routinely intone that the wars of the Middle East will not be solved by military victory alone and will require extensive political, economic, and social change as well. Unfortunately, we have not made any effort to put that into practice since the Surge in Iraq. That is the lesson that the Iranians not only understand, but implement on a routine basis. And that is the area where we need to do better and learn from the Iranians if we are to compete with them and eventually defeat them.

What should be understood about the Hizballah model is that it is Iran's solution to the political-economic-social problems that both spark and fuel the conflicts that continue to spread across the Middle East. The Hizballah model furnishes a simple, ready-made way to address the underlying political-economic-social problems that plague these communities, and in many cases pushed them to embrace violence in the first place. Providing basic services, good governance, real justice, and local security to a Middle Eastern community is fairly straightforward, relatively cheap, and enormously beneficial in terms of building support for Iran and its military proxy.

Of course, it also has its limitations. Applying the model uniformly across an entire country can get very expensive, especially if the country is bigger than Lebanon. Moreover, it is really about providing good *local* governance, addressing *immediate* economic needs, and developing *simple* loyalties. Where the model is challenged is in taking its benefits to the national level to build a functional bureaucracy, political system, economy, and social services

that can deliver enduring security and prosperity in a community much bigger and more complicated than a village or a mountain valley.

It is worth noting the limitations that both Hizballah and Hamas have had in taking their highly successful local level experiences and using them to build functional nations. An integrated national economy, political system, or bureaucracy cannot merely be a bigger version of what worked at the local level. They are different creatures altogether. A national bureaucracy performs different functions, a national political system must accommodate a much wider range of individual and community differences, and a national economy must accommodate a much broader set of needs than their counterparts at a local, municipal level. That is especially true if the country as a whole includes various communities, some of which may not share the same needs as that of the community that turned to this model, or that may not share that community's loyalty to Iran. Thus, the Hizballah model is great at building local support and at getting an Iranian-backed militia a foothold—which may be all that is needed to help secure a military victory depending on the circumstances. Where it breaks down is in the far more challenging circumstances of governance, reconstruction and development post-military victory.

Despite our own protestations to the contrary, it is in that realm where the United States and its allies have a huge advantage over Iran. The problem is that we are so rarely willing to employ it. From the Marshall Plan to the reconstruction of Japan to Plan Columbia to the Surge in Iraq and American assistance to Latin America and Eastern Europe after the Cold War, the United States knows far more about how to help countries build functional societies. We are hardly omniscient, but we have huge advantages over Iran. We have much greater access to economic assistance, whether it be our own capital markets and foreign aid budget, our political clout with wealthy allies, or our influence with international financial institutions. We have people with a much better understanding of what a workable political system would look like, and we can call on the expertise of an army of non-governmental organizations and international organizations. Iran can't do any of this.

While our track record is unquestionably uneven and have had helped cause some catastrophic blunders, we also have a number of successes to our credit. Iran has none. This is not what they are good at and have never really even tried. They lack both the expertise and the access to resources and pools of know how that the United States boasts. The trick for the United States is to actually use them.

Fill the Vacuums that Iran Exploits

Were the United States willing to do so, there are important ways that we could push back on Iran's expanding influence across the Middle East and thwart its strategy of employing proxy militant groups.

Without question, the best way to defeat the Hizballah model is to deny it the soil it needs to take root. The Hizballah model won't work just anywhere, not even in the Middle East. If they tried it in Germany, Israel, India, South Korea or Canada it would fail miserably. It is an approach that takes advantage of a sense of extreme threat on the part of a community. That threat must have a major security component. The community must fear largescale violence being used against it, by its own government or by another community, one which may control the government. That provides the incentive for the group to create or embrace a military force, which we call an insurgency if the threat is from the government, a militia if it is from another community. The model works even better when that community is also under economic threat. When it is poor and underdeveloped, especially compared to other parts of the country. If it lacks a functional political system—and is not part of a larger political system that offers a realistic prospect of peacefully addressing the security threat and economic problems facing the community—then the Hizballah model is a virtual shoe-in.

The best way then to "defeat" the Hizballah model, is to prevent it from every taking root by ensuring that these circumstances don't occur. As always, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

As formidable as Iran has proven to be as a regional troublemaker, it's power is ultimately very limited. In particular, Iran cannot manufacture the basic problems of the Middle East. It has never successfully overthrown a foreign government, although it has tried on a number of occasions. It has never started a civil war in the Middle East, or even created an insurgency. All of the terrorism, insurgency, civil war, and even popular unrest in the Middle East ultimately stems from the deep economic, political, and social problems of the states of the region. It is those problems that create the opportunities for Iran to employ the Hizballah model, by creating threats to many different Middle Eastern communities that then make them amenable to the solutions offered by the Hizballah model.

Thus, Iran is not the source of the many problems of the Middle East, just one of the principal beneficiaries of those problems. What Iran does—all Iran does—is to try to exacerbate those problems and then take advantage of them as best it can.

In this vein, we should acknowledge that many of Iran's gains in recent years have had less to do with their skill than with the breakdown of the Arab state system (and America's own mistakes, like invading Iraq and failing to plan for its reconstruction, and then abandoning it eight years later). However, at a more basic level, the political, economic and social system of the Arab states that emerged after World War II has been falling apart over the past 20 years. That, in turn, has led to state weakness and state failures, which have spawned insurgencies and civil wars.

Iran has regularly applauded these collapses and sought to enflame the situation by supporting whichever groups it felt would best serve its interests, or else merely amp up the mayhem to further erode the pro-American status quo. And wherever it has been able, it has tried to employ the Hizballah model as part of that support.

Iran has certainly backed a range of Shi'a groups in these fights because the Shi'a naturally gravitate to Iran as their only potential foreign backer. But Iran is just as glad to support secular, Sunni, Sufi, or even Christian groups when it suits their purposes. Just as long

as the group receiving its support is trying to wreck the status quo. But the critical point to keep in mind is that in every case, Iran is merely taking advantage of existing fissures in a Middle Eastern states.

Iran did not manufacture the internal problems itself, despite the claims of many of our Arab allies. Iran did not create the Houthis, nor the Bahraini opposition, nor the militant Shi'a militias of Iraq. Those groups emerged because of the internal problems of their countries which devolved eventually into internal conflict. The Iranians simply took advantage of the conflicts to make them worse and to secure allies among the competing groups in hope of eventually helping their allies gain control of the country and so bring it into the Iranian camp.

Consequently, the best way to keep the Iranians from gaining a foothold in other countries of the region and stoking unrest is to eliminate the causes of the unrest in the first place. The more unhappy the populace, the more willing they are to listen to Iran and its agents in the region. The happier they are, the more likely they will be to tell Iran and its allies to get lost. The more violent and chaotic the situation, the more that groups will desire Iranian weapons, money, and military training. The more peaceful and cooperative, the more likely that they will push the Iranians out as foreign troublemakers—exactly what happened in Iraq during and after the Surge.

Thus, a critical element of containing Iran in the future will be addressing the messes in the region as best we can. It is an important motive for the United States to help those Arab states trying to transform their political, economic and social systems—especially Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. It should be an equally compelling rationale to press those nations that haven't to start, soon. That is the best, probably the only way, to prevent the emergence of new failed states, new civil wars, and new insurgencies for Iran to exploit.

It also makes it no less important for the United States and its allies to exert itself to end the civil wars currently raging across the region. As the fights in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq make plain, these are the best veins for Iran to mine. Moreover, while it is considered common wisdom that you can't end someone else's civil war, it is also completely wrong. Over the past hundred years, over 20 percent of all civil wars (roughly 150 of them) have been ended relatively quickly by a third-party intervention leading to a mediated settlement. That number has risen to 40 percent since 1991 as the international community has learned how best to resolve civil wars. While it is not easy or cost-free, it is entirely plausible for the United States and its allies to do so.[*]

Iraq is a situation tailor made for this approach. The U.S.-led international Coalition proved instrumental in defeating ISIS and ending this latest round of civil war. All of Iraq's rival factions now agree on the need to retain an American military presence in the country and the desirability of securing economic, political, bureaucratic, and societal assistance from the United States and its allies. Providing such aid would enable the United States to eliminate the security vacuum, political alienation, and economic disenfranchisement that produced the last two rounds of civil war. Of greatest importance, as we saw in 2008, doing so would enable Iraq's Arab populace to unify, and once that rift was healed, they would drive out the Iranians and their proxies. The problem of the Hashd ash-Shaabi militias might not disappear entirely, but it would suddenly become infinitely easier to address. All that the world is waiting for is a commitment by President Trump that he is not going to make the same mistake as President Obama—a terrible mistake that Trump was absolutely correct to criticize throughout the election campaign.

---

[*] For more on this, see Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer 2015), pp. 29-46.

In stark contrast, I confess that I cannot understand the Trump Administration's decision to stop supporting the Syrian opposition in Western Syria, and to abandon Syria to the Russians and Iranians after the defeat of ISIS. While an Iranian-backed victory in Syria cannot be directly attributed to the Hizballah model, across the region it will be seen as a sign of Iran's rise. Thus, other groups are likely to go looking to Iran for support and Iran will be viewed as being more powerful and having a better way of handling military problems than is accurate or, potentially, than the United States. Moreover, it will be very hard to limit Iranian influence and mischief making if we leave Syria to them. Tehran will then have a new base of operations and greater access to Syrian resources, while it will no longer be bogged down and squandering resources to save its Syrian ally. Iran will be free to concentrate on new opportunities.

The Middle East is always cooking up new problems for itself and new threats to American interests. It may seem impossible to stay ahead of it, let alone to end its exer-expanding conflicts. While Iran may not have started the fire, it likes to feed the flame, and is constantly throwing new ingredients into the boiling pot. Its reliance on Middle Eastern militant groups as proxies and its development of the Hizballah model are both examples of its contributions. Yet there is nothing extraordinary about them. They are merely smart Iranian responses to their circumstances. Neither is there anything exceptional or impossible about the steps necessary to defeat them. We know the answers to the problems and we have the tools to combat them (and allies willing to help). The only question is whether we have the will to take up the task.

Mr. POE. Thank you, Dr. Pollack.
Ms. Dalton.

STATEMENT OF MS. MELISSA DALTON, SENIOR FELLOW AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Ms. DALTON. Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you today on the challenge of Iranian-backed militias alongside my excellent colleagues.

Several goals drive Iran's approach to the region including ensuring survival of the Islamic Republic, deterring adversaries, enhancing its regional power and influence, and securing a place of political and economic importance within the international community.

Iran is aware of its conventional military inferiority that Ken just described versus its adversaries. It views its strategy as a type of self-reliant deterrence against adversaries bent on keeping it weak.

It leverages a range of unconventional and conventional capabilities in concepts of operation including proxy forces to achieve its objectives.

This approach also encompasses other activities including missile development, engaging in provocative maritime operations, exploiting cyber vulnerabilities, and employing information operations.

It ensures that any escalations against the United States and its regional partners fall short of large-scale warfare where we have the advantage.

Through this approach, Iran can pursue its goals while avoiding kinetic consequences, enjoy plausible deniability while using its proxies, subvert regional rivals and deter them from taking actions that could trigger a potential backlash from the proxy groups, and infiltrate and influence state institutions incrementally in countries with weak governance.

Moreover, the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have provided fertile ground for the growth of Iranian proxies and supported groups. They also have broader implications. Russia has reemerged as a regional player following its Syrian intervention allied with Iran in support of Bashar al-Assad, raising the geopolitical stakes for the United States and Syria and possibly the greater region.

Israel may take greater unilateral and proactive steps in Syria to protect its security. Iran's support for Houthi rebels in Yemen provoked a Saudi-led intervention, embroiling a U.S. partner in a controversial and protracted war.

Iran's approach also presents vulnerabilities. Through its destabilizing regional activities, Iran's image as an international pariah remains in many ways the same, impairing its economic development.

Iran is also hindered by a principal agent problem versus its proxies, which do not always act in accordance with Iranian interests.

Not all proxies are created equal. Some receive more support from Iran and are ideologically closer to Iran than others, such as differences between Lebanese Hezbollah and some Iraqi Shi'ite groups.

Yet, the United States has largely been unable to deter Iran's incremental extension of regional power and threshold testing across a range of military and paramilitary activities.

Indeed, in the last 5 years, Iran's threat network has grown. Policy makers face a dilemma when it comes to Iran. If Iran's hostile actions elicit conciliatory responses, Iran can deem its actions as successful. It's coercive in shaping strategy is working.

But if Iran's hostile actions elicit punitive responses, Iran can feel even greater incentive to act asymmetrically where its strengths are.

Thus, a sequence combination of both sticks and carrots and leveraging a range of nonmilitary and military tools ourselves is the best way to disrupt this cycle.

Iran is not a unitary actor. A punishment or incentive for some factions in Iran may be perceived differently by others. Good intelligence, negotiations and track two dialogues can illuminate these nuances and be pursued in parallel with a sharpened strategy to address Iran's destabilizing behavior.

Working in coordination with allies and partners, the United States can take several steps to limit the reach and growth of Iranian proxy activities.

These measures include ratcheting up direct and indirect operations to disrupt IRGC activity and interdict support for proxies calibrated for U.S. and Iranian red lines; conduct cyber disruption of proxy activities; avoid inflating Iranian capabilities and intentions; expose Iranian-backed groups, front companies, and financial activities outside its borders to discourage Iranian coercive interference; exploit nationalist sentiment in the region that bristles at Iranian interference through amplified information operations; sustain financial pressure on IRGC and proxy activities; negotiate an end to the Syrian and Yemenese civil wars that minimizes the presence of foreign forces; constrict the space that the IRGC can exploit in the region by building the capabilities of regional partner security forces, and supporting governance and resiliency initiatives in countries vulnerable to Iranian penetration.

Even a U.S. strategy that seeks to amplify pressure on Iran cannot be purely punitive or it will prove escalatory and have its limits in changing Iran's behavior.

The United States should link possible incentives to changes that Iran makes first such that they are synchronized as one move.

Congress and the U.S. administration have an opportunity to chart a pathway forward on Iran policy. I hope that today's hearing can inform that process.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Dalton follows:]

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Statement Before the

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

"Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East"

A Testimony by:

Melissa G. Dalton

Senior Fellow and Deputy Director

International Security Program

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

October 4, 2017

2172 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: it is an honor to testify before you today with my excellent colleagues Michael Knights, Aram Nerguizian, and Ken Pollack on the destabilizing activities of Iranian-backed militias.

This testimony is informed in part by a CSIS study, "Deterring Iran After the Nuclear Deal.[1]"

Iran's Strategic Orientation and Use of Proxies

The primary factors driving Iran's approach to the region are domestic survival and primacy of the Islamic Republic, an increase in Iran's power and influence in the Middle East, achieving a place of political and economic importance within the international community, and maintaining the ability to deter adversaries from posing an existential threat.

Iran is aware of its conventional military inferiority versus its adversaries, particularly the United States and Israel, and to a lesser extent the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Thus, Iran employs a hybrid strategic approach towards achieving its interests, leveraging a range of unconventional and conventional capabilities and concepts of operation, including proxy forces. It ensures that any escalations against the United States and its regional partners fall short of large-scale warfare. This approach encompasses a range of coercive activities, from developing missiles and engaging in provocative maritime activities, to supporting proxies and terrorist groups, and exploiting cyber vulnerabilities while exercising psychological and information operations.

Operating in the "gray zone" between war and peace, Iran exercises threshold avoidance by incrementally antagonizing the United States and its regional partners in the maritime sphere and through the gradual progression of its missile development program. The use of non-military coercive tools — cyber, psychological, and information operations — also allows Iran operating space to target its adversaries without provoking significant retaliation. Additionally, Iran's exploitation of ambiguity, particularly through its use of proxy groups in the Middle East, enables the country to indirectly attack its adversaries and counter Sunni influence in the region. Through its information operations playing on Sunni government's fears and grievances, Iran creates a specter of its regional influence extending to political groups and militias throughout the region, reaching beyond what it actually controls. These activities, employed in the pursuit of Iran's interests, accrue gains as well as costs to Tehran, all the while exacerbating tensions with its adversaries.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) oversees and directs Iran's proxy activities as an extension of Iran's power and influence. It has been particularly successful in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, in growing groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, the Badr Corps, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asa'ib ahl al-Haq. The GCC countries have largely resisted Iranian penetration of their Shi`a populations through intelligence and security measures, but they remain highly concerned about the potential for Iran to deepen its influence in their territory. Not all of Iran's proxies are created equal. Some groups possess more sophisticated paramilitary and intelligence capabilities and

[1] Kathleen H. Hicks and Melissa G. Dalton, *Deterring Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2017, https://www.csis.org/analysis/deterring-iran-after-nuclear-deal

receive more training, funding, and equipment from Iran than others; these groups also tend to be more ideologically and politically connected to Iran and its agenda, such as Lebanese Hezbollah. Others, such as the followers of Iraqi Shi`a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, have links to but receive less support from Iran.

Where Iran Has the Advantage

By operating below the threshold of large-scale warfare, Iran can act boldly and make significant gains towards its goals without provoking a conventional war against the United States or its regional partners. Supporting sub-state proxy groups such as Hezbollah in the Levant and the Houthis in Yemen in a variety of ways allows Iran to pursue its goals of increased influence in the Middle East, while avoiding kinetic consequences. Iran enjoys a significant measure of plausible deniability with this pillar of its strategic approach. As it is not directly implicated in any acts carried out by these proxy groups, Tehran benefits from its ability to subvert its regional rivals, and deter them from taking anti-Iranian actions that could trigger a potential backlash from the proxy groups.[2] While the United States and its allies and partners must operate within international norms, Iran is able to leverage its capabilities and asymmetric activities without playing by international rules.

Additionally, Iran's approach of leveraging proxies constrains its adversaries' options, as the United States, Israel, and the GCC countries must calculate their responses to Iranian actions based on the potential for conflict escalation and the risks of causing civilian casualties, disrupting economic activity, and disabling critical infrastructure. For example, Lebanese Hezbollah's penetration of southern Lebanon serves as a deterrent against Israel, as the group has embedded effectively in Lebanese localities and civilian structures. It has also used the cover of reconstruction in post-war Lebanon to entrench in local communities. A similar pattern of behavior may follow in Syria reconstruction efforts, as a way for an Iranian-backed Assad regime to recover lost territory and influence.

Besides deterring adversaries' actions, Iran also leverages its proxy relationships to incrementally infiltrate and influence state institutions in countries with weak governance, such as Lebanon and Iraq, while promoting Iranian ideology among local recruits. Through its proxies, Iran provides services that would normally be provided by the state, taking advantage of local grievances, particularly among Shi`a populations. Over time, these groups gain popular support and legitimacy, providing a hedge against the state's government or may even form part of a governing coalition, as seen in Lebanon and Iraq.

Moreover, the wars in Syria and Iraq have provided fertile ground for the growth of Iranian proxies and supported groups. Iran likely has made these investments in part out of true concern for the instability and fragmentation of both countries, which do not serve its interests. Iran wants a pliable government but a functioning state in both Syria and Iraq. Yet, in this chaos, the IRGC may see opportunities for tactical advantages versus the United States and the GCC countries by shaping and supporting local actors and proxies. Iran has mobilized up to 115,000 fighters in Syria to bolster President Bashar al-Assad's regime, comprised of Lebanese

[2] J. Matthew McInnis, *Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolutions*, American Enterprise Institute, May 2015, P. 20.

Hezbollah, Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani recruits, and overseen by IRGC-Qods Force personnel. It is unclear whether some contingent of this expeditionary force will remain in Syria over the long-term to preserve Assad's hold on the strategic territory necessary for Iran to sustain its supply and command and control lines to Lebanese Hezbollah. Coupled with Russia's armed support, Iran has largely achieved its objectives in ensuring Assad's survival and territorial control over most of the strategically important population and economic centers in Syria.

Indeed, Russia's intervention in 2015 has enabled the Syrian government to reinforce its positions, retake territory from Syrian rebels, and regain Aleppo, using brutal tactics against Syrian civilians and civilian targets including hospitals and schools. Based upon data released by Russia's Central Election Commission there are approximately 4,000 to 5,000 Russian troops in Syria. However, this does not include Russian special forces and other similar personnel, which would increase this estimate.[3] The geopolitical consequences of the conflict in Syria have grown, with Russia reinserting its presence in the region and prompting a reappraisal of the U.S. approach in Syria, including operational risk and escalation concerns but also implications for stabilization and the political end game. The reverberations of Russia's intervention in Syria may also have effects on broader U.S. Middle East regional strategy and force posture in ways that the United States has not been accustomed to over the last three decades.

With Russian and Iranian support, Assad's coalition is currently making a dash for the oil and gas-rich eastern Syrian province of Deir Ez-Zour. Interestingly, Iran has pulled units and officers out of its conventional forces to buttress IRGC operations in Syria.[4] This development may be in part due to the priority Iran assigns to Syria, an overstretch of its IRGC capacity, and perhaps even an evolution in Iran's use of its paramilitary and military units. The prospect of a "land bridge" connecting Iranian-backed groups stretching from Lebanon through Syria into Iraq is tenuous, given that Israel would likely disrupt any overt plans to solidify such logistical and command and control connections overland. Indeed, Israel has been quite open about its intent to counter Iran's dominance in Syria, including its proxy networks and reported efforts to produce advanced, precision weapons in Syria and Lebanon.[5] Nevertheless, Iran may ably exploit the inevitable shortfalls in stabilization and governance once the Islamic State is cleared from eastern Syria, taking advantage of local grievances and opportunities for smuggling and resupply across the Syria-Iraq border to the benefit of its militias and proxies.

While Syria remains an existential priority for Iran and its regional strategy, Yemen is an opportunity for Iran to provoke and undermine Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, Iran deepened its influence in the Houthi rebel movement beginning in 2015, following the failure of Yemen's government and opposition to reconcile around a constitution from the National Dialogue process. Iran, along with China and Russia, established stronger ties with Houthi leaders,

---

[3] "Commission Inadvertently Reveals Russian Troop Numbers in Syria." *The Moscow Times*. September 22, 2016.
[4] Jeff Seldin, "Indications Iran Doubling Down on Use of Proxy Forces," *Voice of America*, May 31, 2017, https://www.voanews.com/a/indications-iran-doubling-down-on-use-of-proxy-forces/3878748.html
[5] Jonathan Spyer, "Israel Is Going to War in Syria to Fight Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/28/israel-is-going-to-war-in-syria-to-fight-iran/; Isabel Kershner, "Iran Building Weapons Factories in Lebanon and Syria, Israel Says," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/29/world/middleeast/iran-missiles-lebanon-israel-.html

providing economic and military support to Houthi rebels.[6] The Saudi-led intervention into Yemen to counter the Houthi rebellion has been costly and has eroded Saudi Arabia's international credibility regarding its use of force in civilian areas and in the face of the escalating humanitarian and health crisis.

Through its support for the Houthi rebels, Iran has also increasingly sought to signal its ability to challenge access to the Bab al-Mandeb, the narrow waterway between the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In effect, it is becoming another strategic chokepoint for international shipping, reflecting Iran's similar tactics in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has provided cruise missiles to Yemen's Houthis, which the Houthis have in turn launched at U.S. and partner vessels transiting the Red Sea. In addition, Houthi rebels have used Iranian-supplied drones in a kamikaze-style tactic to damage U.S.-made Patriot surface-to-air batteries manned by Saudi Arabia.[7] Just this week, Houthi rebels shot down a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone in Yemen.[8] Nevertheless, although Iran's support for the Houthi rebels has evolved, the scale of Iran's commitment and political and ideological alignment in Yemen will not approach that of its involvement in Syria — or Lebanon or Iraq. Yemen is a relatively low-cost way for Iran to weaken its regional rival Saudi Arabia.

Vulnerabilities in Iran's Approach

Iranian activities in the pursuit of its strategic goals have, in some instances, backfired and imposed unintended costs on the regime. By testing the limits of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) through its missile tests, continuing its naval provocations in the Gulf and the Bab al-Mandeb, and its support for terrorist groups in the region, Iran's image as an international pariah remains in many ways the same. Unilateral U.S. sanctions on Iran for its ballistic missile program remain intact, as do sanctions for Iranian human rights violations and its support for proxy terrorist groups.[9]

Iran is also disadvantaged by a principal-agent problem versus its proxies, which no not always act in accordance with Iranian interests. This dynamic is currently most visible in Iraq among some armed Shi`a groups that receive Iranian support and can secure territory but can also survive without an Iraqi government. This poses a challenge for Iran, as it does not desire the complete fragmentation of Iraqi state governance; it wants an Iraqi government in control that can be pliable to Iranian interests, while continuing to support Iraqi Shia militias that can keep the Iraqi government in check.

---

[6] Katherine Zimmerman, "Pushing Back on Iran: Policy Options in Yemen," American Enterprise Institute, February 7, 2017, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/pushing-back-on-iran-policy-options-in-yemen

[7] Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Houthi Forces Appear to Be Using Iranian-Made Drones to Ram Saudi Air Defenses in Yemen, Report Says," The Washington Post, March 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/03/22/houthi-forces-appear-to-be-using-iranian-made-drones-to-ram-saudi-air-defenses-in-yemen-report-says/?utm_term=.0524a56f023f

8 Shawn Snow, "US MQ-9 Drone Shot Down in Yemen," *Military Times,* October 2, 2017, https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2017/10/02/us-mq-9-drone-shot-down-in-yemen/

[9] Carol Morello and Karen DeYoung, "International sanctions against Iran lifted," *The Washington Post,* January 16, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/world-leaders-gathered-in-anticipation-of-iran-sanctions-being-lifted/2016/01/16/72b8295e-babf-11e5-99f3-184bc379b12d_story.html

Additionally, the economic repercussions — due to isolation and sanctions — of Iran's strategic approach, further eroded by the persistence of low oil prices, have limited its ability to invest in and modernize its military. From 2007 to 2016, Iranian military expenditure decreased from approximately $13 billion per year to $12 billion per year, with a low of about $10 billion in 2013–2014. Despite an uptick following sanctions relief, the current level of spending is unlikely to change significantly in the near term given continued U.S. sanctions and international hesitation to invest in Iran.[10] Limited cash flow also inhibits Iran's ability to fund proxies in the Middle East. Then-acting U.S. Treasury Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Adam Szubin asserted in a May 2016 congressional testimony that because of U.S. sanctions on Iran for its support of Hezbollah, "the group is in its worst financial shape in decades."[11] The Gulf countries' backlash against coercive Iranian activities also hampers Iran's security interests. Reacting to Iranian empowerment of Shiite proxy groups in the region, some Gulf countries have empowered anti-Iranian Sunni proxies of their own, particularly in Syria. Saudi funding for Salafist groups in Syria directly counters Iran's efforts to increase its influence in the region, and poses a security threat to Iranian interests. The Gulf countries are also bolstering their conventional capabilities, with Saudi Arabia looking to become the world's fifth-largest arms buyer in the next five years, with a budget upward of $60 billion per year.[12] Despite its best efforts, Iran will be unable to keep up with that level of military spending.

Implications

Absent ideological changes in the Iranian government, the United States will not be able to change Iran's reasoning for supporting proxy groups in general or its use of proxy groups to deter U.S. and regional actions specifically. A solely hardline and uncalibrated U.S. response may prompt Iran to reassess its commitment to the JCPOA, due to backlash among some Iranian factions toward policies of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, especially if the United States imposes new terrorism related sanctions that mimic prior nuclear ones. U.S. or allied action against Iranian proxies could be perceived a serious act of aggression, if not calibrated to mitigate blowback while maximizing effect. Iran is likely to respond with kinetic attacks, information operations, and cyberattacks on U.S., allied, and partner personnel and economic interests in the region via its proxies. The United States should employ asymmetric responses and application of pressure in response.

U.S. actions need to be calibrated to prompt behavior-changing results and send a message that certain groups, interests, and assets are off limits. The United States will have to determine internally what its redlines are with respect to Iranian proxy activity, perhaps by tiering threats to U.S., allied, and partner interests, and broadly destabilizing activities. The U.S. must then take concrete action when the threshold is tested; it must determine when to make its counterterrorism actions known and when the action and message should be telegraphed privately (or to let it speak for itself).

---

[10] "Data for All Countries from 1988–2015 in Constant USD," SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-constant-USD.pdf.

[11] Ron Kampeas, "Hezbollah in 'Worst Financial Shape in Decades,' Says Top Sanctions Official," Jerusalem Post, May 27, 2016, http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Hezbollah-is-broke-thanks-to-US-sanctions-says-White-House-official-455199

[12] Alia Chughtai, "GCC Military Spending Spree," *Al Jazeera,* June 4, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/08/gcc-military-spending-spree-150808120255563.html.

Yet, policymakers face a dilemma in crafting a strategy for addressing Iran's destabilizing behavior. If Iran's hostile actions elicit *conciliatory* responses, Iran can deem its actions as successful — its coercive and shaping strategy is working. If Iran's hostile actions elicit *punitive* responses, Iran can feel even greater incentive to act asymmetrically — where its strengths are. The challenge for policymakers is to determine how best to break this cycle. A sequenced combination of both sticks and carrots is the best way to disrupt this pattern of behavior.

Recommendations

Iran will continue to rely on its network of proxies to shape the region, increase its influence, and constrain actions by the United States and its regional partners. However, there are steps that the United States, working in coordination with allies and partners, can take to limit the reach of Iranian proxy activities and stem further growth of proxies in the region. These measures include:

- Ratchet up direct and indirect, targeted and calibrated operations to disrupt IRGC activity and interdict support for proxies, based on an intelligence and operational assessment of U.S. and Iranian red lines for action;
- Conduct cyber disruption of proxy activities;
- Avoid inflating Iranian capabilities and intentions, but at the same time, be prepared to respond strongly to Iranian provocations across the spectrum of its coercive activities;
- Expose Iranian-backed groups, front companies, and financial activities outside its borders to delegitimize and discourage Iranian coercive interference;
- Exploit national sentiment in the region that bristles at Iranian interference through amplified information operations;
  - Leverage information operations to highlight inconsistencies and ulterior motives of the Iranian approach to reduce local support;
  - Debunk exaggerated Iranian claims to assure partners and deter further Iranian action by insinuating U.S. and regional partner activities;
- Sustain U.S. and international financial pressure on IRGC and proxy activities, learning and "following the money" from previous sanctions efforts to adjust and tighten sanctions pressure to maximize effect;
- Negotiate an end to the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars that minimizes the presence of foreign forces;
- Minimize the space that the IRGC can exploit in the region by:

- Building the capabilities of and regularly exercising with regional partner security forces, including through the employment of scenario-based exercises focused on Iran and its proxy groups to plan for risk mitigation strategies and determine how far to escalate with Iran; and

- Providing training, advising, and funding for governance initiatives in countries vulnerable to Iranian penetration.

Possible Incentives Linked to Changes Iran Makes First

Even a U.S. strategic approach that seeks to significantly amplify pressure on Iran cannot be purely punitive, or it will prove escalatory and feed the Iranian narrative that the United States' sole objective is to undermine Iran's stability. Iran has an ideological aversion to engagement with the United States. Thus, the United States should consider a range and combination of incentives to test for areas of constructive Iranian behavior that are linked to changes that Iran makes first, such that they are synchronized as one move.

Iran is not a unitary actor; certain incentives may appeal to one faction but not to others. Through Track 2 dialogues and negotiations, U.S. interlocutors can better understand what motivates and incentivizes a range of Iranian leaders and determine what positive steps could be taken in return for changes in regional tactics that Iran makes first.

Possible incentives could include:

- Pursue economic incentives through third party countries, particularly in Asia, while retaining pressure through U.S. and European sanctions;

- Attempt more commercial sales from the United States and Europe, if Iranian behavior improves and sanctions relief is possible (e.g., the Boeing/Airbus licenses);

- Continue to include Iran in political negotiations on Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, in the context of a broader strategy created by the United States and its Arab regional partners;

- Allow conventional arms sales to Iran to resume tacitly when the JCPOA-ban on conventional weapons trading with Iran expires in 2020;

    - Iran has yet to define its offensive military investment plans into the 2020s. There is an opportunity to shape this development through a combination of pressure and incentives, over which the United States and its allies and partners wield considerable influence.

    - Conventional capability development could diversify Iran's military investments, perhaps with less emphasis on its unconventional capabilities that have proven among the most destabilizing to U.S. and regional interests in the past 35 years.

    - Such conventional capability development must remain in the bounds of the regional military balance of power so as not undermine U.S. allies and partner's security.

- The United States should assure Israel and Gulf partners that this development is linked to additional capability development, arms sales, and financial incentives for Israel and the Gulf countries to preserve their primacy.

- Buttress people-to-people dialogue and educational exchanges.

Mr. POE. Thank you, Ms. Dalton. The Chair will reserve its time until later and allow members to ask questions.

At this time, also for the record, without objection, the map that you have in front of you that's on the board that shows Iran and then the countries that we have mentioned where their proxies are will be made part of the record.

The Chair will recognize the gentleman from California, Colonel Cook, for his opening—or his questions.

Mr. COOK. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Knights, I want to talk to you about Soleimani, and I know you referred to him and everything else but—and I think you described him as—he's kind of a multiple threat player and the reports that I've read and the conversations about Soleimani being all over, just how much power does he have in this government?

It almost seems like he's almost unchecked. He goes to meet with Putin in Moscow. He meets with certain groups that we have described as terrorists. It just seems like he has got tremendous power and influence in that country, and if you could elaborate on that I would appreciate that.

Mr. KNIGHTS. Thanks very much.

There are other people who can add to what I will say. But he's—Soleimani is a powerful propaganda figure. He's become a symbol of Iran's expansion in the region. He's a dedicated soldier who seems to want to stay out of politics. He's trusted by the senior leadership within Iran including the Supreme Leader.

He has relationships with individuals across all of the affected countries where Iran is expanding its influence and he's a capable tactician.

But, as Ken said, he's not 10 feet tall. He has faced setbacks, most recently, for instance, when he tried to stop the Iraqi Kurds from holding their referendum and they resisted his power.

So even when he's trying very hard, regional states can still resist as long as they—or at least a number of regional states can resist, especially if they have U.S. backing. His power is not endless.

Mr. COOK. Thank you.

I want to switch gears a little bit.

Dr. Pollack, you talked about Hezbollah or however you want to pronounce it, and it almost made it seem like they are—I think they are still a formidable military force. And I think that some of my colleagues in Israel would attest to that were they to change their strategy, particularly their engagements in '06, particularly the damage that was done to their Thanks and APCs and everything like that.

And I still think they are very, very powerful. They adjusted. They did very well from a military standpoint. I'm not addressing the economic and social aspects of it.

But and maybe my—being on the House Armed Services Committee I get a different take on it. I still think they're a very powerful factor variable in Lebanon and on the northern border of Israel and Syria.

Does anyone have anything to contribute to that or—I know it's kind of slanting more military but I—I still think they are still a terrorist organization and they've gotten more and more equipment

including the Russian Kornet anti-tank missiles, which have proven very, very effective. And the same thing has been used against the Saudis in Yemen.

Mr. POLLACK. Congressman, I will be the first to answer that. First, I want to be specific—the point that I was trying to make in my opening remarks was that Hezbollah is not something extraordinary or exceptional. We shouldn't see them as some kind of a magical force that has capabilities that we can't match in any way, shape, or form.

Second point—I would certainly agree with you, and I believe I at least made this point briefly in my opening remarks, that Hezbollah is exceptional within the Arab world. They are far superior to any current Arab military in terms of their unit by unit capability.

I mean, if you simply look at their combat performance I think it's a fair assessment that they are probably the most able Arab military that we have seen since the Jordanians in 1948.

Now, that's an important point, and on the battlefield in particular in Syria, what we have seen is that Hezbollah units have functioned very well, better than most.

Mr. COOK. They're going to cut me off here pretty soon. But I did want to—I noticed that one thing was not covered and that's the difference between the Shi'ites and the Sunni, which is a, obviously, a big problem with Saudi Arabia and, obviously, Arabs versus Persian, and that big difference there—how much do you think that contributes to some of these difficulties that we have? And I'm out of time so——

Mr. POLLACK. I'll pick up again.

I think there is no question that the Sunni-Shi'a split is out there and it's something that the Iranians have been able to exploit to a certain extent.

We should recognize that in many ways it's also a disadvantage for them, something they're acutely aware of, because the Muslim world is overwhelmingly Sunni, not Shi'a, and the Iranians have in the past tried as much as they could to support Sunni groups and other non-Shi'a groups. It's just that they mostly get purchase with the Shi'a groups.

The last point, as you point out, there is—you know, there are good ways to counter this and one of them is the Arab-Persian split that you mentioned, and we've seen time and again, especially in Iraq, is that Iraqi Shi'a, when given the opportunity, identify themselves as Arabs before Shi'a. They need that opportunity.

Mr. COOK. Good point. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. POE. I thank the gentleman from California.

The Chair recognizes the gentlelady from Florida, Ms. Frankel.

Ms. FRANKEL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for this hearing.

Let's see, I have four questions. See if you can remember that. I might have five but I don't know if I will get past four.

My first question is, there has been some talk by some in the administration of the United States pulling out of the JCPOA. I would like your opinion of that.

I would like to hear your opinion of how the proposed reduction—one-third reduction in the State Department budget and especially

USAID, how you think that affects the discussion that we are having here today.

And relative to that, one of you talked about how Hezbollah or some of the Iranian proxies offer more than a military presence, and I would like you to expand on that.

My fourth question, if you get to it, is where do you see Russia fitting in to all of this.

Mr. POE. You have 5 minutes. [Laughter.]

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. Ms. Frankel, if you don't mind, I will take only two of those four.

On your second question on aid, we have to factor in that Hezbollah is the byproduct of 30-plus years of unfettered focussed asymmetric security systems by Iran.

It's no surprise that they are as capable as they are. In countries like Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, you have a mix of different relationships with militaries.

But many of those are starting to bear fruit now, as I pointed out in my testimony. I think that there needs to be a serious consideration to what the impact will be of not just curtailing security systems programs under FMF to countries in the Middle East, but the 40-plus countries around the world that would be affected.

This, basically, impacts how the United States can shape and mentor emerging partners in the Middle East, especially fighting militaries like the one I described.

I would even challenge Ken a little bit on the analysis in part because Hezbollah's key strengths are its unity of effort, its cohesive decision making, and the will to act.

Most militaries in the region have that but don't have a fight worth fighting. In the case of Lebanon with ISIS, you had a unique opportunity for one military to show that it has broken the mold.

On the issue of Russia, ultimately, there are—there are still a lot of intangibles. There are countries where it's far more difficult for Russia to cement its role and its influence.

We don't see that in places like Lebanon in any credible fashion. They understand the complexities of engaging in a country like Jordan where the U.S. has lasting long-term equities.

And even in Syria, they, I think, are very much aware that they can certainly float the Assad regime. But they don't have the resources or the wherewithal to manage or micromanage the complexities of a divided society like Syria, let alone the enormous reconstruction costs.

At some point, other countries will have to step in and there will be a vital U.S. role.

Ms. FRANKEL. Does somebody else want to answer any of the questions? How about the—how about the—leaving the JCPOA and the reduction of the USAID and the State Department?

Ms. DALTON. Ma'am, I'd be happy to answer both of those.

In my opinion, walking away from the JCPOA is not in the national security interests of the United States. It is absolutely in the interest of the U.S. to stay with the nuclear agreement.

If you take the JCPOA off the table, you reintroduce the nuclear dimension to this issue set that we've been describing, which makes it incredibly more dangerous and escalatory for all parties in the region, for our presence there, for the potential for an Israeli

preventive strike to prevent the Iranians from achieving a nuclear weapon.

So it is absolutely important that we uphold the deal. That said, there are some concerns about the sunset clauses in terms of missile development. But I believe that those issues should be negotiated——

Ms. FRANKEL. Can you just answer—I'm sorry—get to the USAID question because we are running out of time.

Ms. DALTON. Absolutely.

Ms. FRANKEL. Yes.

Ms. DALTON. When it comes to the State Department and USAID, I believe that we need to reinforce the resourcing for both department and agency.

They are absolutely critical institutions to addressing the governance and resiliency gaps in the Arab world that Iran is very ably exploiting and into which it is able to insert its proxy elements.

Mr. POE. Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Mast.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, Chairman.

So I want to start with some of the broader implications that were mentioned here. I think that was a great word to use. And so I'd just start with maybe a—not yes or no but a quick short opinion from each one of you.

Do you think that Iran sees these as colonies? Sees their proxies as colonies? Do you think maybe we are using the wrong word?

Mr. KNIGHTS. Speaking for Iraq, yes. I mean, they have economically colonized parts of the Iraqi economy. They are a bit like the East India Company, once upon a time.

They are actually a moneymaking venture as well as a military intelligence venture.

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. In the case of Lebanon, they're going to run up against the wall that no single faction and no single community, as in the case of Lebanon's divided political landscape, has ever been able to take preeminence.

As powerful as Hezbollah is, it can't take over Lebanon, and Lebanon can't become a colony state of Iran.

What you have is a country where they are just going to try to maintain a strategic posture to deterrence.

Mr. MAST. What about any other place they have proxies? For you.

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. In the case of Yemen, there comes a point where you have buyer's remorse. There is no reason why a country like Iran is going to sustain a level of engagement with countries like Yemen where you have far—a far more expeditionary footprint, where they own the problems of the region.

And in a place like Iraq, it's far more complex than I think a lot of the Iranian leadership expected, given the—given their own challenges of managing Sunni-Shi'a tensions in a place like Iraq.

Mr. MAST. But you did just point out as well that they have a very long-term view. Hezbollah, you pointed out, 30 years in the making—I mean, they very clearly have an ability to look down the road quite a long ways.

Dr. Pollack and Ms. Dalton.

Mr. POLLACK. I will just say I think it runs the gamut, Congressman. There are groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which are clear proxies of Iran. Then the Houthis, who I described as allies.

And even within a place like Iraq, you know, you have a range from the Badr Corps to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq to Kata'ib Hezbollah running a range of how tied in they are to Iran—how much Iran can control them—how much they have their own interests.

Ms. DALTON. I think the Houthis are a really good example of a group that is on perhaps the other end of the spectrum in terms of a way for Iran to, in a low-cost fashion, disrupt one of their key adversaries in the region, which is Saudi Arabia.

But the Houthis are not a true proxy in the sense—or colony in the sense that perhaps Lebanese Hezbollah, some of the groups in Iraq are. So, again, to the point not all proxies are created equal.

Mr. MAST. Certainly not.

Switching gears but sticking with the theme of broader implications, a general question—I'd love to, again, have the opinion from all four of you.

It certainly hasn't been lack of desire to develop nuclear weapons. What has prevented Iran from developing nuclear systems, something that we developed in the 1940s?

We mastered it by the 1950s and '60s. The delivery systems for them, whether it be via submarine, dropping it out of an aeroplane or firing it out of a silo, we developed that—you know, mastered by, you know, '60s and '70s for sure.

What has prevented them from developing that? We did it in the '40s. How come they haven't been able to?

Mr. POLLACK. Congressman, that's a big question that deserves a better answer than I can give you. But I will say that it is a combination of different factors, starting with the fact that their scientific establishment isn't as good as ours.

But adding to that the fact that we didn't have a much bigger, more powerful country like the United States and allies like Israel, the Europeans, Saudi Arabia, et cetera, all working as hard as they could to prevent Iran from acquiring the scientific know-how, the technology, and the resources to do so.

Mr. MAST. What do you think is most important to get scientific know-how and technology? I would say resources.

Mr. POLLACK. That would be a very good start. I mean, as we've seen with other countries, if the resources are there, the scientific know-how may follow.

Mr. MAST. So if we have potential colonization of the Middle East and an Iranian empire that has much greater access to the world economy, do we have access to much more resources in Iran?

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. At the end of the day, Mr. Mast, we are still living in a dollarized economy. And one of the problems that Iran is continuing to struggle with is its ambitions are constantly curtailed by the fact that it has to work in a dollar economy.

That's why the mix of sanctions not only on Iran but its proxies in the region, if not carefully calibrated—and they are, in many ways—they can have a detrimental effect on moving Iran outside the dollar economy.

In many ways, that is one of the most powerful weapons that a country like the United States can deploy to limit the ambitions and the ability to amass the resources you described.

Mr. MAST. We had Dr. Knights mention that he thought there was resources coming in as a result of what I would point toward as colonization.

In your opinion, do you think that there are more resources now post-JCPOA or less post-JCPOA?

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. Frankly, I could not make an informed statement to that effect without having the adequate knowledge on that.

Mr. KNIGHTS. Some of the actions that they undertake out in the environments where the Iranian-backed militias are active are just to self-finance those projects so that they're less of a drain on the Iranian military and economy.

But, yeah, the opening of Iran to international investment is going to put a massive shot in the arm of the entire system.

Mr. MAST. My time has expired. I thank you for your answers.

Mr. POE. I thank the gentleman from Florida.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from New York, Mr. Zeldin.

Mr. ZELDIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Knights, I had a question, going back to your opening statement.

You had a couple of consecutive lines. I just want you to clarify so I can understand. One line was about staying in the nuclear deal. The next line was the more we give, the more we get.

What were you referring to when you were saying that?

Mr. KNIGHTS. What I was referring to is that we want the Europeans on side. The best we ever did with Iran was when we had numerous European countries and the international court of world opinion on our side. That's when we brought really crippling sanctions into place.

Thus, as we are looking to do things like counter threat financing against Hezbollah networks, for instance, or bringing more pressure on Iran about missiles, what we really want to be doing is attracting European partners, not by being soft on Iran in the nuclear deal but by approaching—by doing a step-by-step process, first, perhaps decertify INARA which I think is a good step, but then hold out the threat of further additional sanctions or stopping waivers to try and—a step-by-step process of trying to gain European support. Failing that, threatening something that they don't want to happen.

Mr. ZELDIN. Thank you.

Ms. Dalton, gave a—started to give a strong defense of the nuclear deal. Did you support the nuclear deal originally?

Ms. DALTON. Yes.

Mr. ZELDIN. Okay. And just several factors that are important, I guess, to understand.

First off, are you aware that we didn't even ask Iran for its signature on the JCPOA?

Ms. DALTON. Yes.

Mr. ZELDIN. Have you read the verification agreement between the IAEA and Iran?

Ms. DALTON. Not in detail. I'm not a nonproliferation expert. But not in detail.

Mr. ZELDIN. Okay. You probably haven't read it at all, right?

Ms. DALTON. I have—I understand the basic frame of it.

Mr. ZELDIN. Okay. Well, when we were at a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing and Secretary Kerry was testifying, he admitted that he hadn't even read it because—and no one here in Congress has read it yet either because none of us had it.

So defending how it's a strong unprecedented verification regime, it's important to note that no one knows what the verification regime is. It still hasn't been provided.

I'm sure one of the reasons why you'd be supported of the nuclear deal is that uranium was taken out of the country?

Ms. DALTON. That is my understanding of one of the key provisions.

Mr. ZELDIN. Do you know where the uranium is?

Ms. DALTON. Again, this is not my issue area but I would welcome your insight.

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, you are here testifying in strong defense of the nuclear deal and these are just important factors to consider.

You're aware that U.S. weapons inspectors are not allowed on any of the inspection teams, correct?

Ms. DALTON. Again, I—this is not my particular area of expertise. But as the JCPOA pertains to a broader approach for Iran, I am—I am supportive of the deal.

Mr. ZELDIN. Okay. And Iran is responsible for collecting some of their own soil samples, inspecting some of their own nuclear sites.

This regime gets praised for how in Iran they elected the most moderate candidates. Oftentimes, as you see that in the American media or in conversations amongst the American public in the international community, they negate the fact that the 12,000 most moderate candidates weren't even granted access to the—to the ballot.

I actually believe that the Iran nuclear deal is more so a blueprint for how Iran gets to a nuclear weapon than a blueprint for preventing them from having a nuclear weapon.

But putting the nuclear piece aside, there is a shared concern here, obviously, all four of you with the bad activities Iran has been engaging in in the region and the leverage that brought the Iranians to the table.

They were desperate for that sanctions relief by us not involving any of Iran's other bad activities, and negotiating the sanctions relief, unfortunately, has put us in a position where we do not have the leverage to deal with Iran's other bad activities.

So we have to figure out what more we can do with placing leverage back on the table in ways that we don't have right now.

I would also suggest that we are propping up the wrong regime in Iran, and in 2009 when millions of Iranians took to the streets to protest an undemocratic election, millions of Iranians, we said it was none of our business.

And it very much was. The next time that this happens—the fact is, it's a very different dynamic in Iran, it seems, than North Korea. North Korea, if you have a tour guide taking you around Pyongyang and you walk inside an elevator, the tour guide will stop.

The face—the demeanor will change and he'll say, Kim Jong-un was once on this elevator. They have this awe of their leader in North Korea, and there's an information effort that's needed there in Iran.

You have millions of Iranians who want to lead their country in a better way, and I think that's something else to consider not just with Iran's activities in other countries but the ways that Iran, I think, is ready to change their behavior from within.

Next time that opportunity comes for us to weigh in and possibly help influence that, hopefully it has a different outcome for the other Iranians who want to lead their country in a much better direction.

I yield back.

Mr. POE. I thank the gentleman.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from California, Mr. Rohrabacher.

Mr. ROHRABACHER Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I apologize for being a little bit late to the hearing. We've got double billings all the time. So if I ask something that's redundant, please feel free to say, we already answered that.

But I'm taking a look at what I was handed about the Iran and the different influences it has in different parts of that part of the world.

Do you think—did the fact that we have freed up over a $100 billion to this regime—has that increased at all the level of activity in these other areas that seem to be in turmoil?

Mr. KNIGHTS. So just to kick off, some of the Iranian-backed militia operations are very economical. In Iraq, it is run on an absolute shoestring.

So in Iraq, I wouldn't say money is the major factor there but it may play a role in the 2018 elections in Iraq where they can——

Mr. ROHRABACHER But has the money gone—has the extra money that Iran has impacted on the pro, let's say, the Shi'ite military movements in Iraq?

Mr. KNIGHTS. That's what I'm saying. I don't think it has had an impact there. They're not playing with money there.

But in Syria, I think it's had a critical impact because Syria is a very expensive operation for Iran, which my colleagues might be able to detail a little more.

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. My comment would be narrowly in the context of Hezbollah and Lebanon.

You have an organization that has relied on a sustained network around the world for its financing operations. It does not need a massive infusion of funding from Iran.

Iran can choose to——

Mr. ROHRABACHER I'm not asking about a massive infusion. I'm saying that when somebody gets $100 billion in their hands and they are in touch with people who are engaged in conflicts, have the Iranians then used that money in those conflicts with their—the friends that in conflict?

Mr. KNIGHTS. Precisely that's why they won't use it in a place like Lebanon. You have so much already invested over——

Mr. ROHRABACHER Okay. So they're not doing it in Lebanon?

Mr. KNIGHTS. They don't need to, sir.

Mr. ROHRABACHER They—when you see that they're—your colleague there suggested they're doing that in however——

Mr. KNIGHTS. In Syria, certainly.

Mr. ROHRABACHER With Syria, we are talking about. Now, what about——

Mr. KNIGHTS. I would agree with Dr. Knights on that. That is the one area where, frankly, there needs to be—if you're Iran, if there are areas where you need to focus your financial resources beyond your own economy——

Mr. ROHRABACHER Okay. The others could get a chance to—is that money being used—$100 billion, we've given to a regime that basically thinks they are getting their direction from God and that the rest of us are infidels and they came to power chanting, "Death to America"?

Mr. POLLACK. Congressman, I think the reason that we are all having difficulty with it is that the Iranian budget is large enough and the costs of these kinds of operations is small enough that we can't say specifically that the Iranians would use any money that they got as a result of the JCPOA for this versus that, right. We don't have access to the Iranian budget.

Mr. ROHRABACHER Money is fungible, right. If you——

Mr. POLLACK. Exactly.

Mr. ROHRABACHER [continuing]. Give somebody $100 billion or free up $100 billion that they now have to use, if they're using now some other money to murder people or to give support to organizations that go out and use violence and force and murder to, basically, push their agenda, well, then you have actually financed that even though the money didn't come directly—the dollar bills weren't the same dollar bills.

Mr. POLLACK. Again, we are experts. We are called to give you the truth as best we understand it. I think we are all reticent to say that yes, literally, this dollar went to this source as opposed to that source.

But there certainly has been an increase in Iranian support over the last 2 years for various groups around the region. As my colleagues have pointed out——

Mr. ROHRABACHER Let me—various armed groups——

Mr. POLLACK. Correct.

Mr. ROHRABACHER [continuing]. Around the region. Okay. Now, let me—and before we go on, because I know I only got a couple minutes here—40 seconds. All right.

Well, instead of that, let me just say there are Azaris in Iran who are not Persians and they are—and there are Baluch and there are Kurds—there are more Kurds, I understand, in Iran than there are in Iraq, for example.

Doesn't it—for those of us who really want peace in Iran, doesn't it behove us not to just give—free up $100 billion for the regime that oppresses its people, but instead to try to help those interest—those various nationality groups that don't like the mullahs?

Shouldn't we be, instead of—and how do you say, giving the mullahs more, shouldn't we actually be spending more time and effort trying to help those who oppose the mullahs like the groups I just mentioned?

Mr. POLLACK. I'll say, Congressman, those are clearly areas of great sensitivity to the Iranian regime. And if the United States is looking for ways to put pressure on Iran, those are things that would certainly constitute real pressure points for them.

Mr. ROHRABACHER We could do it——

Mr. POE. Gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. ROHRABACHER That's the bottom line of it. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. POE. Gentleman's time has expired. Thank you, Mr. Rohrabacher.

The Chair recognizes itself for 5 minutes, and I thank you all for being here.

I want to try to summarize some of the things that all the other members have already pointed out.

Before I do that, though, I want to recognize here in the audience Nazeen Hamamada, who is a Syrian refugee who has been tortured by the Syrian Government for over 15 months and is now here in the United States. Thank you for being here today.

The ayatollah has made it clear that it's his goal to destroy Israel and then destroy the United States by any means necessary.

Do any of you disagree that that is his goal? I believe him when he says that. Do any of you think oh, he's just making that up?

Okay. I take it by your silence that most of you agree with that philosophy.

The United States is involved in a lot of places, as has been pointed out, trying to, in essence, thwart the Iranian influence. The land bridge—some say that that land bridge is important to Iran because they then have a land route to Israel. That may or may not be true.

Secretary Tillerson testified at a hearing in the Foreign Affairs Committee and I asked him the question, if it were the policy of the United States to have a regime change in Iran and he indicated in the affirmative, that it was the goal.

He didn't say how. He just said regime change. I personally think that is the answer as well, as Mr. Zeldin pointed out.

The people of Iran, in my opinion. Would like to control their own government and not be dictated by the mullahs and the ayatollah. That's the safest—safest way for there to be peace is in the regime change in Iran with the people getting to make those decisions.

Why should the United States even be involved in thwarting Iranian influence in the Middle East? Why should it not just be our policy that's their problem—the Middle East? That's the Saudis' problem. That's the people in the Middle East—that's their problem.

Except for Israel. Set that issue aside in our ally, Israel. Set that aside. Why should we be involved in any of these efforts?

Dr. Knights, do you want to answer that question?

Mr. KNIGHTS. It's always been the case that you may not be interested in the Middle East, but the Middle East becomes interested in you at some point.

Whether it's terrorism coming out of the Middle East, whether it's nuclear weapons, whether it's proliferation of nuclear weapons between our allies, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and maybe one day

Egypt getting nuclear weapons, too—whether it's the energy resources coming out of the Middle East, these are all things that can affect America directly and have affected America directly, whether we wanted them to or not, and that'll continue to be the case.

Mr. POE. Anybody else want to weigh in on that? Dr. Pollack.

Mr. POLLACK. Simply echo Mike's points, and in particular, I want to emphasize the point that none of us likes to talk about, which is the region's energy resources and use the dirty word oil.

While we now are exporting more than we import, the simple fact is that the global economy floats on a sea of oil, and as long as our critical trading partners remain dependent on oil and as long as the global oil market has an enormous component of Middle Eastern oil, we are going to have to care about the Middle East because it is going to affect our economy.

We need to remember that whether we like it or not, our worst economic crises since the second World War had typically been preceded by some major fluctuation in the price of oil.

Mr. POE. Well, we are energy independent because we in Texas have more oil than we know what to do with and we sell it to anybody that'll buy it.

But anyway, not to be lighthearted, I personally think that there are many reasons why the United States needs to be involved in the Middle East.

I would just hope that the people—other countries in the Middle East would recognize that they have a responsibility because it's their region to, in a peaceful way, stabilize the region, not just for now but in the future as well.

I mean, it's been—since '48 or before has been a powder keg, and I think there are a lot of economic reasons and political reasons why we should be involved there and thwart whatever influence we—thwart the influence of Iran, especially with its proxy groups. Some are better than others but at the end of the day we have to come to the conclusion, I think, the realization that Iran means it when they say they want to destroy us.

And the long-term answer I don't think is a military one. But we have to figure out a way to solve this very complex massive and getting more difficult every day issue.

I want to recognize the—Mr. Schneider as well. But I do need to excuse myself for another meeting as well, and Colonel Cook will take over in his military way as the chair in the subcommittee.

So Mr. Schneider, the Chair recognizes you for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Chairman Poe, and I apologize for not being here for your public statements. I have reviewed your submitted statements and I appreciate very much what you've said, how you've said it, and have probably 4 to 5 hours of questions. I will try to squeeze them into 5 minutes.

But, Dr. Knights, I will start with you. This really is for everyone. But you talk about Iran projecting its force in the region, and I missed the discussion of the map but it's pretty clear what this is showing in Iran's efforts.

My colleague from Texas talked about why do we care. But Iran has a strategy. It has an objective that extends beyond its borders.

It does affect not just our allies but our interests. And so, I guess, for the whole panel, beyond just saying we need to stand up

to it, what specific steps would you advise to this administration, to Congress, to take to push back on Iran's malign influence in the region?

Mr. KNIGHTS. Maybe moving down the line quickly, one of the things we need to do is to create a buffer zone in which there are no Iranian or Iranian-backed forces on the borders of Israel and southern Syria.

We need to create a sustainable self-defensive pocket there that can ensure that Iranian-backed militias do not extend across another new huge swathe of Israel's border.

We also need to help Iraq to push back on the Iranian-backed militias that could potentially take over the country as a form of new Hezbollah or a new Revolutionary Guard within that country.

Those would be the two main things. I also think we need to end the Yemeni war with the Gulf coalition because that's turning a group of sometimes allies of Iran into potential proxies of Iran.

It's still at an early stage. The cement is not wet. We can still prevent something bad from happening there.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Just to clarify, you're drawing a distinction, I think it's important to point out, between allies and proxies. And allies have their own interests—proxies operate on—I don't want to put words in your mouth.

My assumption—allies have their own interests. Proxies operate under the instructions of the mullahs in Iran.

Mr. KNIGHTS. Correct, and we need to act quickest where Iran has shallow-rooted influence—places like Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia.

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. Congressman, you have U.S. partners in the region that are starting to assert themselves in the context of their own national environment.

In my own testimony, I focused specifically on the counter ISIS campaign of the Lebanese military, which was, to me, as someone who witnessed it first hand, exceptional in terms of its unity of effort, the lack of—lack of coordination with any third party.

When you have a military that wants to do the heavy lifting in the region, when it wants to act responsibly, when it wants to add to the metrics of stability in the region. Partners like that, and I use the term partners—should be empowered.

You don't empower them by not giving them the tools to be effective and by not thinking strategically over the long term. We cannot engage partners like the LAF and others in the region from fiscal year to fiscal year.

We need to take a page out of the Iranian play book and think long term, as difficult as that is, about the kinds of relationships and friendships that the United States is trying to create.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. When you say long-term, I think it's important. Tell me what time frame you have in mind that we should be thinking as policy makers in addressing what is looking backwards—conflicts that don't date decades or centuries but literally millennia.

Mr. NERGUIZIAN. I will use the example of the LAF again. The LAF is now thinking in 5- to 10-year increments about what kind of force it wants to become, and that's a realistic assessment of just

how we should see countries like Lebanon, like Jordan, like Egypt, relative to U.S. engagement.

You're looking at 5-, 10-year tranches where you have to have a coherent set of policy choices. Our friends in the United Kingdom do that very well.

The United States needs to be much better doing that.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Mr. Pollack.

Mr. POLLACK. Congressman, first I want to agree with the comments of both of my colleagues. Both Mike and Aram have made excellent points.

What I want to add to that is the importance of dealing with the underlying economic, social, and political problems of the Middle East.

As I said in my opening remarks and my written remarks, Iran doesn't create the problems of the region. It simply exploits them. If you want to stop Iran, we need to help the countries of the region deal with these problems.

Now, the great news is that we finally have allies in the region who are taking these problems seriously for the first time ever, in particular Saudi Vision 2030. We have no idea whether it's going to succeed.

But we should all be praising the crown prince for beginning this process and we as a nation should be trying to help him to move it forward and create the conditions under which it has the best chance of success.

Then there are other allies like Morocco and Jordan, who have been half-hearted at best. They need to be encouraged and enabled.

But at the end of the day, the problem that we face is that for too long the Middle East has been faced with a choice between repression or revolution, and the Iranians take advantage of both and the right answer is the third way, which is reform. That is the way that you shut them out.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Ms. Dalton.

Ms. DALTON. Great, if we still have time. Okay.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I'll say thank you, and we can—we can talk another time. I appreciate your comments. I think the importance of looking long term, beyond just the next quarter or year or, in our case, the next election, understanding that we have broad interests in the region that we need to work with our partners is critical.

So thank you for that and I appreciate the time. I yield back.

Mr. COOK [presiding]. Thank you.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Massachusetts, the ranking member, Mr. Keating.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to—I have a quick question regarding Russia's involvement. Perhaps Ms. Dalton.

How is it currently undermining stability—Russia—right now in terms of our security and stability and, you know, how is it opening up opportunities for Iran in the region and what can we do directly with Russia?

Ms. DALTON. I think this is a really timely question, and the United States is only beginning to wrap its head around what the implications are of the Russian intervention into Syria in 2015.

Certainly, Russia's support for Assad has allowed, as I believe you said in your opening remarks, Iran to not have to devote as many resources to support Assad because they have been working together and there is a convergence of interest when it comes to Syria that I think we have to see play out over time in terms of how replicable that relationship is going to be.

Iran and Russia, of course, have a very mixed history dating back to the 19th century. They are not natural allies and there is still that sort of historic enmity that I think underlies the current relationship.

But yet, what they share in common and I think what we need to not lose sight of is that they are both motivated by exploiting vulnerabilities and gaps in the region where U.S. presence has receded, where our relationships with partners has fractured, where governance is weak, and they are working together to exploit those gaps in ways that I think are going to be harmful for our interests and those of our allies and partners.

Mr. KEATING. They are also using that influence, as is Iran, for propaganda purposes in the area as well. What could the United States do—any of panellists—you know, to really better counter that propaganda influence? Because it really falls into line with our ability to not let them take advantage of these situations.

Ms. DALTON. I will take a quick crack at it and then open it up.

I think that, you know, while we need to not lose sight of this challenge, it's also important not to overly inflate their capabilities, their resourcing.

Both of these countries are not necessarily economically set up well to be a superpower in the region. So, you know, not presenting them as a bogeyman looking for opportunities to use our own information and operations and working with partners in the region to expose the weaknesses from an economic perspective in terms of the long-term sustainability of these activities, I think, will be critical.

Mr. KEATING. Anyone else have a comment on that?

Mr. KNIGHTS. As they say, sunshine is the best antiseptic. There's a lot that we can—there is a lot of information we've never used about Iranian-backed militias, and it's not gathered through sensitive means or at least they're not sensitive anymore—things we knew back from the days of Iraq when we were there.

There's things we know about Iranian-backed militia leaders in Iraq, about the fact that they've killed so many Iraqi citizens—they have Iraqi blood on their hands.

We can prove it. I don't think we expose enough.

Mr. KEATING. Right, and I do think, too, that the comment that both of their economies are not doing well certainly makes it right for us pointing that out and actually pointing out alternative areas with that—you know, with their way of life in those countries is not what it could be if they adopted a lot of our values—at least shared a lot of our values.

So I want to thank the panel and I yield back.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

On behalf of the Chair and the committee, I want to thank all four members.

We covered a lot of subjects today, being very patient with us and we covered a lot of ground.

Thank you again for being with us. This meeting is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:54 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Material Submitted for the Record

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Ted Poe (R-TX), Chairman

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade in Room 2200 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov):

DATE: Wednesday, October 4, 2017

TIME: 3:30 p.m.

SUBJECT: Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East

WITNESSES: Michael Knights, Ph.D.
Lafer Fellow
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Mr. Aram Nerguizian
Senior Associate
Burke Chair in Strategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies

Kenneth Pollack, Ph.D.
Resident Scholar
American Enterprise Institute

Ms. Melissa Dalton
Senior Fellow and Deputy Director
International Security Program
Center for Strategic and International Studies

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON *Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade* HEARING

Day *Wednesday* Date *10/04/2017* Room *2200*

Starting Time *3:35pm* Ending Time *4:54pm*

Recesses [ ] (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Representative Poe, Representative Cook

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session [✓]
Executive (closed) Session [ ]
Televised [ ]

Electronically Recorded (taped) [✓]
Stenographic Record [✓]

TITLE OF HEARING:

"Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East"

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Rep. Poe, Keating, Cook, Frankel, Zeldin, Schneider, Mast

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: *(Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)*

Rep. Rohrabacher

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes [✓] No [ ]
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

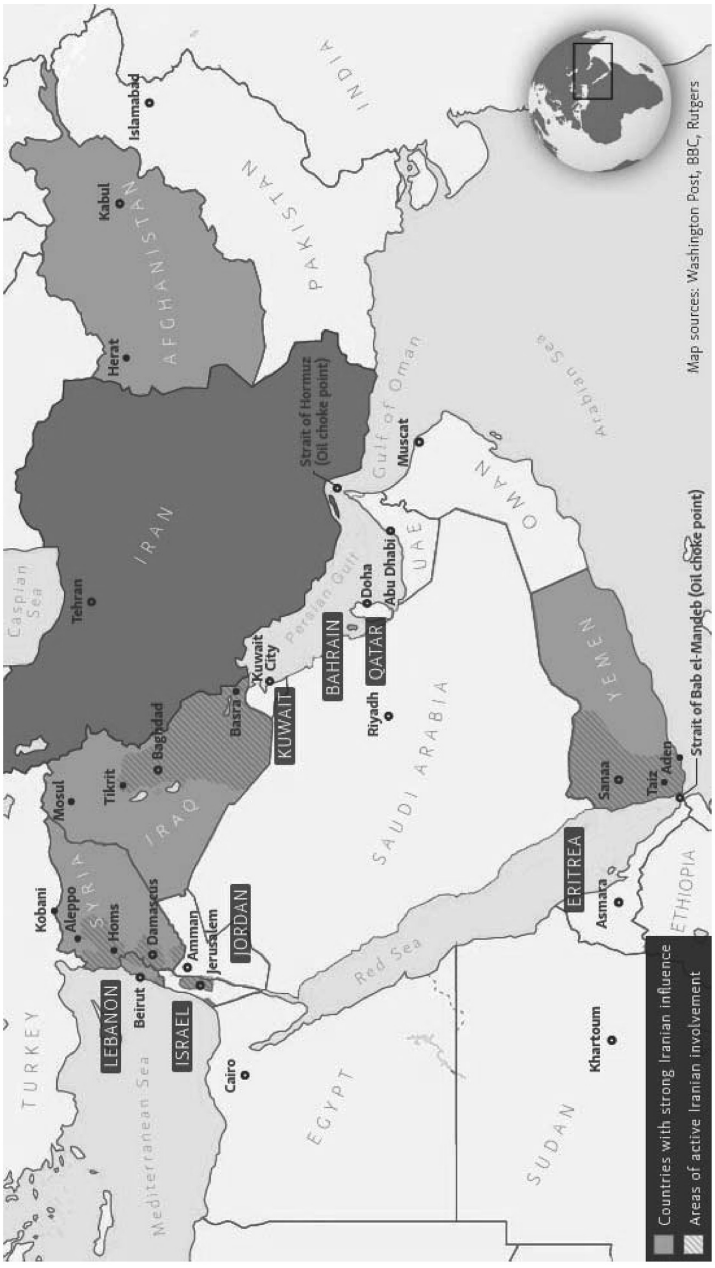
STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

IFR submitted by Rep. Poe

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED *4:54pm*

Sarah Wallace
Subcommittee Staff Associate

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE TED POE, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF TEXAS, AND CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, NONPROLIFERATION, AND TRADE



○