



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 of 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 harken 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 Nicaraguan 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 Hezbollah, 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 Hezbollah'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 not 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.

Hezbollah

In truth, even Hezbollah 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 Hezbollah's current, critical role in Iran's regional policy.

Hezbollah 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 Hezbollah fought from 1985 to 1991 were largely ill-trained militias—and Hezbollah 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 Hezbollah in 1987 because Tehran prevailed on Damascus to show restraint. Meanwhile, the Israel Defense Forces were not in any shape to take on Hezbollah 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 jurist). 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. As 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 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.