

# COUNTERING IRANIAN PROXIES IN IRAQ

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## HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM,  
NONPROLIFERATION, AND TRADE

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

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## COUNTERING IRANIAN PROXIES IN IRAQ

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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2018

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, extraneous materials for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

I will make my opening statement and, then, yield to the ranking member, Mr. Keating from Massachusetts, for his opening statement.

For years, Iran has gone unchecked as it expanded its influence and recruited legions of murdering proxies across the Middle East. Lavishly funded by sanctions relief under the Iran Nuclear Deal, a network of terrorist criminals sow chaos in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq. Their objective: To expel U.S. influence from the region, conquer our allies, and subjugate millions, and establish the regime in Tehran as the undisputed master of the Middle East.

One of the central fronts in Iran's effort to do this is in Iraq. Make no mistake about it, Iran wants to make Iraq a puppet state of Iran. Exploiting Iraq's weak government and the fight against ISIS, Iran has mobilized thousands of militiamen and proxies to gain power in Baghdad. They are using their growing influence in Iraq to foster sectarianism, secure a supply line to terrorists in Syria and Lebanon, and recruit fighters for their many wars.

Iran is not interested in building a strong and sovereign Iraq. Iran is not interested in a peaceful Iraqi society where Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, and Kurds live in harmony together. As America and our allies have come to help fight ISIS and restore Iraq's legitimate authority over its own territory, Iran has been working to undermine our hard-won victory and threaten our soldiers and our diplomats.

In May, Iraq held its first election since the defeat of the ISIS caliphate. But many Iraqis did not bother to vote because they saw that the system in their country is corrupt. Like the Iranian people, they see the hand of Iran's oppressive regime in undermining the institutions in Iraq. They see Iran's proxies, men who swear al-

legiance to the Supreme Leader in Tehran, running for office in their own country of Iraq. They see the vast wealth of their nation being squandered to pay for Iran's militias while they live in poverty, without clean water or electricity.

The Iraqi people are now in the streets demanding a change. They do not like the direction their nation is going and the heavy influence of Iran in their nation's politics. We should not, either.

Men that ordered the murder of Americans only a few decades ago are gaining a foothold in Iraq's new government. These Iranian-supported terrorists turned politicians regularly threaten Americans and our allies while their militias have committed countless atrocities across Iraq and Syria. For years, they have murdered their own countrymen and have forced thousands from their homes. Meanwhile, our Government has sought to appease Iran's proxies in Iraq.

Despite the President's clear direction to counter Iran's expansionism across the Middle East, the State Department has shielded these murderers from any punishment. They say now is not the time; we could upset the status quo. We are allowing fear to get the better of common-sense foreign policy.

That is why I have introduced H.R. 4238, the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act, introduced over a year ago. The bill would target two specific Iraqi militias, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, commonly referred to as AAH and HHN, which are terms that I will use because they are a lot easier to pronounce.

These terrorists answer directly to Iran and they have the blood of Americans, Iraqis, Syrians, and Kurds on their hands. For some unknown reason, we have refrained from targeting these groups, despite their evil acts. U.S. inaction has allowed these terrorists to gain more and more power in Iraq and now in the Iraqi Government.

As is usually the case in Washington, "analysis paralysis" has set in. So-called "experts" say Congress should not be mandating sanctions and we should pass the buck to the Executive Branch. We have the responsibility as representatives of Americans killed by these groups to not stand idly by.

My staff was in Baghdad last month, and the Embassy staff scoffed at this legislation, saying sanctions would provoke the terrorist militias. Ironically, just a few weeks later, these groups launched a mortar attack against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

This stalling technique of government bureaucrats who have a long track record of inaction on this issue is not good for the United States foreign policy or the Iraqis. While we do nothing, Iran is doing everything. They are expending all of their efforts to consolidate their power in Baghdad, and it is paying off.

It seems to me Americans should be tired of investing blood and treasure in Iraq as Iran seizes more power. If Iraq is ever going to become a strong and independent nation, we must take a stand against Iranian proxies in that nation.

Without objection, I want to introduce two letters: One letter from Chairman Royce and myself to the Secretary of State requesting the Secretary of State to examine these two terrorist organizations and to see if they meet the foreign terrorist organizations re-

quirement. We received a reply yesterday that basically said what the requirements were to be designated as a foreign terrorist organization; basically, no answer at all.

Without objection, I would like to introduce both of these into the record.

Mr. KEATING. No objection.

Mr. POE. And now I will yield to the ranking member, Mr. Keating from Massachusetts. Go ahead.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Poe follows:]

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Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ted Poe (R-TX), Chairman**  
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Hearing:  
“Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq”  
September 26, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

“For years now, Iran has gone unchecked as it expanded its influence and recruited legions of murdering proxies across the Middle East. Lavishly funded by sanctions relief under the Iran nuclear deal, a network of terrorist criminals sow chaos and conflict in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq. Their objective: to expel U.S. influence from the region conquer our allies subjugate millions and establish the theocratic regime in Tehran as the undisputed master of the Middle East.

One of the central fronts in Iran’s effort to conquer the region is in Iraq. Make no mistake, Iran wants to make Iraq a puppet state of Iran. Exploiting Iraq’s weak government and the fight against ISIS, Iran has mobilized thousands of militiamen and political proxies to gain power in Baghdad. They are using their growing influence in Iraq to foster sectarianism secure a supply-line to terrorists in Syria and Lebanon, and recruit fighters for their many wars.

Iran is not interested in building a strong and sovereign Iraq. Iran is not interested in a peaceful Iraqi society where Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, or Kurds live in harmony together. As America and our allies have come to help fight ISIS and restore Iraq’s legitimate authority over its territory, Iran has been working to undermine our hard-won victory and threaten our soldiers and diplomats.

In May, Iraq held its first elections since the defeat of the ISIS caliphate. But many Iraqis did not bother to vote, because they saw the system as corrupt. Like the Iranian people, they see the hand of Iran’s oppressive regime undermining the institutions in Iraq. They see Iran’s proxies, men who swear allegiance to the Supreme Leader in Tehran, running for office in their country. They see the vast wealth of their nation being squandered to pay for Iran’s militias while they live in poverty, without clean water or electricity.

The Iraqi people are now in the streets demanding a change. They do not like the direction their nation is going and the heavy influence of Iran in their politics. We should not either.

Men that ordered the murder of Americans only a decade ago, are gaining a foothold in Iraq’s new government. And what have we done to stop them?

These Iranian-supported terrorists turned politicians regularly threaten Americans and our allies while their militias have committed countless atrocities across Iraq and Syria. For years they have murdered their own countrymen and have forced thousands from their homes. Meanwhile, our government has sought to appease Iran’s proxies in Iraq.

Despite the President's clear direction to counter Iran's expansionism across the Middle East, our State Department has shielded these murderers from any punishment. They say, now is not the time, we could upset the status quo. We are allowing fear to get the better of us.

That is why I introduced H.R. 4238, the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act a year ago.

This bill would target two Iraqi militias, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN). These terrorists answer directly to Iran and have the blood of innocent Americans, Iraqis, Syrians, and Kurds on their hands. For some inexplicable reason, we have refrained from targeting these groups despite their countless evil acts. Our inaction has allowed these terrorists to gain more and more power in Iraq.

As is usually the case in Washington, 'analysis paralysis' set in. The 'experts' now say Congress should not be mandating sanctions and we should pass the buck to the executive branch. We as representatives of Americans killed by these groups should not stand idly by.

My staff was in Baghdad last month and the Embassy staff scoffed at my legislation, saying sanctions would provoke these terrorist militias. Well just weeks later, these groups launched a mortar attack against the US embassy in Baghdad.

Another argument we now hear is that while Iraqi government formation is underway, it is not the right time to sanction these groups. But will conditions for designation be any better once these thugs hold key government positions? This is just a stalling technique of government bureaucrats who have a long track record of inaction on this issue. There will simply never be a perfect time to sanction these groups.

While we do nothing, Iran is doing everything. They are expending all their efforts to consolidate their power in Baghdad. And it's paying off. Decisive action must be taken now. Americans are tired of investing blood and treasure in Iraq as Iran seizes more power. If Iraq is ever going to become a strong and independent nation, we must take a clear stand against the Iranian proxies in that nation. And that's just the way it is."

---

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We have held a number of hearings on Iran and its destabilizing activities throughout the region. Today we focus specifically on Iran's engagement in Iraq. It would be an understatement to say that the security situation in Iraq has presented an incredible challenge to the United States foreign policy and national security. And throughout, the Iraqi people have suffered greatly over the course of multiple conflicts.

Today we are at a critical juncture. How the U.S. engages with Iraq, with its government, its people, and its economy can have an outsized impact on whether Iraq is able to build on the fragile security that exists today and actually achieve lasting stability. Iraq has to be more than where we have a military base to combat ISIS.

This hearing today is, therefore, timely and important because, as we shape our own policy toward Iraq for the coming years, we can't ignore Iran's influence and interest there. The history between Iran and Iraq is long and complex, and Iran's entrenched influence throughout Iraq's policy and military apparatus stymies efforts to strengthen democratic institutions there and ensure that the Iraqi Government can effectively protect its citizens from internal and external threats.

A government must be able to exercise control over the use of force within its borders, and the political parties and representatives in a country must be loyal, first and foremost, to their country and their people. Iran's control over and ties to political and military groups in Iraq flies in the face of these critical objectives and undermines Iraq's ability to ever be able to fully be independent and secure.

How to reduce and manage Iran's influence, however, is an open question, not only because of Iran's ties to powerful entities and individuals in Iraq, ones that run deep, but also because our policies toward Iran and across the region, as well as those of our allies, are also at play.

There are two general ways to think about approaching the issue: By countering the Iranian influence, their agents, and actions, on the one hand, and by working ourselves and our allies to support Iraq in pursuit of its own stability and sovereignty, both of those things.

Countering Iran's influence in the region through sanctions and related means has received a lot of attention. However, I am concerned that we don't do enough to also pay enough attention to the policies that would support Iraq in becoming more independent and more resilient to Iranian policies and actions, actions that undermine that independence.

Today, I look forward to discussing our options for moving forward to address Iran's influence in Iraq. Specifically, what steps our State Department should be taking alongside Treasury, DoD, Commerce, and others? What can and should we be doing as part of a coalition with our allies to further this progress? What barriers exist to reducing the influence of Iran's proxies in Iraq, and what can we do with our allies to eliminate those barriers? And also, what should we avoid in terms of policy missteps, so that the conflict that is mired in Iraq's past can be overcome in favor of sta-

bility, a stability that keeps Iraq safe, keeps Americans safe, and promotes our shared interest in the region?

We are seeing a shift in Iraq right now where people are demanding that their government be accountable to them, and not to foreign interests. We share that vision for Iraq's future and have a lot more that we could do to promote closer, more productive diplomatic security and economic ties with Iraq that Iraqi interests would benefit by.

We have this opportunity to break with the history of challenges and conflicts in Iraq and, instead, choose how we will support a different path forward. It is my hope that we will take this opportunity and use it wisely.

And so, I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses today and hearing from you on what should be another important committee hearing, and hopefully, one that can move us forward to be successful in this endeavor.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. POE. I thank the gentleman.

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

And without objection, all of the witnesses' prepared statements will be made part of this record.

I ask that each witness keep your presentation keep your presentation to no more than 5 minutes. When you see the red light come on in front of you, it is very simple; just stop, not slow down; just stop.

Thank you.

Mr. Behnam Taleblu is a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, where he specializes in nonproliferation issues in Iran.

Dr. Kimberly Kagan is the president of the Institute for the Study of War. She was awarded the Distinguished Public Service Award by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, for her service advising U.S. commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mr. Michael Pregent is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. He is a former intelligence officer in the United States Army, serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, including as an embedded advisor to the Iraqi Government.

And Ambassador Barbara Leaf is the Rosenblatt Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Previously, she served as U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates as well as other senior positions at the State Department, including as the first Director of the Office of Iranian Affairs.

Mr. Taleblu, we will start with you.

**STATEMENT OF MR. BEHNAM BEN TALEBLU, RESEARCH FELLOW, FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES**

Mr. TALEBLU. Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Trade, and Nonproliferation at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, on behalf of FDD, thank you for inviting me to testify.

It is a privilege to present my analysis today alongside Dr. Kagan, Mr. Pregent, and Ambassador Leaf, all of whose work on Iraq and Iran, as well as their service to our country, I respect and admire.

Also, I want to personally thank Judge Ted Poe, who I understand is retiring this year, for his leadership in Congress on the Iran issue.

Mr. POE. You are thanking me for retiring? Is that what you said? [Laughter.]

Mr. TALEBLU. For your leadership, sir, for your leadership.

Today, I will focus my comments on Iran's proxy strategy and militias, while highlighting measures like designations to counter Iran's armed agents of influence. Such a move does two important things. One, establishes the predicate for a new Iraq policy beyond the ISIS mission, and, two, helps implement the regional components of a more comprehensive Iran policy, which the current administration called for almost 1 year ago.

The Islamic Republic's proclivity for using proxies is not only consistent with its ideological goals, but also reflects a cognizance of escalation dynamics and the country's military aptitudes. Iran uses proxies, terror groups, and militias throughout Iraq and the Middle East because they enable the regime to do five key things.

One, help mask its hand abroad, aiding in deniability.

Two, dampen the prospects for escalation against Iranian territory.

Three, exploit the U.S.'s high bar for the use of force by operating in the gray zone.

Four, enter conflicts at an earlier stage, helping shape the outcome quicker, since militias are cheaper and easier to deploy.

And five, translate relatively cheap military power into a durable political influence.

This last point is crucial, given the success of doing it in Lebanon with Hezbollah, and now, the threat of Iraqi Shiite militias capturing the state.

Now to the militias. While there are too many militias to review in detail, my written testimony profiles four key militias, two of which are AAH and HHN. Both these groups retain overt links to Iran, are an impediment to Iraqi sovereignty, and a threat to U.S. foreign and security policy in Iraq and Syria.

The ascendancy of these militias who seek to draw Iraq into Iran's orbit and eject the U.S. from the region is a threat. Three U.S. Presidents have used designations before to disrupt the IRGC's financial support networks, expose its agents and affiliates, and publicly stigmatize them. It is now time to go with that approach in Iraq.

It is my recommendation that the U.S. use counterterrorism authorities to designate select Iranian proxies in Iraq that retain close ties to the IRGC. The legal authorities for such a move already exist, as does the evidence, as does the commensurate regional approach toward their patron, Iran. This makes the main issue one of political will.

Designating Iran-backed militias at a time when anti-Iranian sentiment is on the rise in Iraq can strengthen the hand of those who want to contest Tehran in Baghdad. A designation can also

send a message of deterrence and resolve against those who would side with Tehran over Washington willingly.

As a cautionary note, my recommendation for a terrorism designation should be seen as a floor, not ceiling, for U.S. policy. Designations will not do away with the Iranian proxy threat, but they can help the U.S. approach the problem with Iranian expansion and subversion more directly by using all elements of national power.

In my written testimony, I offer a survey of authorities, more detailed arguments in favor of designations, counterarguments, as well as my attempt to rebut those counterarguments. I also offer at least 10 recommendations for Congress, ranging from naming and shaming to inquiring about the IRGC's penetration of the Iraqi economy and arranging for non-military aid. I can also speak to non-congressional measures, if asked.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Special Representative for Iran, Brian Hook, said, "We don't make a distinction between the Iranian Government and these Iranian Shiite militias that are around the Middle East."

Now is the time to operationalize that call. America cannot afford to cede Iraq with its human capital, natural resources, and legacy of more than a decade of American investment in terms of blood and treasure to Iran. To be clear, there are risks to any strategy that involve countering Iran in Iraq. But, if the U.S. does nothing, Iran's subversion of Iraq's politics and security is guaranteed.

Thank you for your time and attention. I can address the militias more in detail later, but I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Taleblu follows:]

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY: FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES

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

# Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq

BEHNAM BEN TALEBLU

Research Fellow  
*Foundation for Defense of Democracies*

Washington, DC  
September 26, 2018



[www.defenddemocracy.org](http://www.defenddemocracy.org)

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Trade, and Nonproliferation at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for inviting me to testify. It is a privilege to present my analysis alongside Dr. Kimberly Kagan, Mr. Michael Pregent, and Ambassador Barbara Leaf, all of whose work on Iraq and Iran, as well as their service to our country, I respect and admire.

Today, I will focus my comments on Iran's proxy strategy and militias while highlighting measures to counter these forces in Iraq. Designating Iran's armed agents of influence can serve as a predicate for a new Iraq policy beyond the anti-Islamic State mission. It can also help implement the regional component of a more comprehensive Iran policy, which the current U.S. administration called for almost one year ago.<sup>1</sup>

### **Broader Iranian Motivations and Strategy**

Properly orienting the present discussion about Iranian militias in Iraq begins not in Baghdad but in Tehran. The radical Khomeinist interpretation of Shiite Islam underpinning the 1979 Islamic Revolution was something Iranian revolutionaries intended for export. Despite emphasis on the prioritization of "regime survival"<sup>2</sup> in assessments of Iranian strategy, the regime's ideology and desire to export the revolution remain important drivers of Iranian foreign and security policy. Indeed, surveying the chaos in the Middle East in 2015, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds-Force (IRGC-QF), Qassem Solcimni, boasted, "We are witnessing the export of the Islamic Revolution throughout the region. From Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen and North Africa."<sup>3</sup> Scrutinizing that list reveals a host of conflict zones, almost all of which feature a malign Iranian element in the form of a proxy or militia group that is destabilizing the region or subverting the status quo.

Although Tehran also employs soft power methods to export the revolution throughout the region and beyond,<sup>4</sup> the Islamic Republic's reliance on a diverse array of militants to wield hard power abroad is unquestionable. Iran has spent nearly four decades creating, cultivating, arming, funding, and training groups in various theaters to further its revolutionary cause. Iran has also worked to

<sup>1</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy," October 13, 2017.

(<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/>)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Unclassified Report on the Military Power of Iran," April 2010, page 1.

([https://fas.org/irpp/eprint/od\\_iran\\_2010.pdf](https://fas.org/irpp/eprint/od_iran_2010.pdf)). Looking at history, the regime has always had a penchant for expediency and self-preservation, but only when backed into a corner. Notable instances include: 1) Ayatollah Khomeini's begrudging acceptance of a United Nations Security Council-sponsored ceasefire agreement in July 1988 to end the bloody 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Khomeini famously likened this acceptance to drinking from a "poisoned chalice." 2) In September 2013, after years of escalating sanctions against Iran's illicit nuclear program, Khomeini's successor Ayatollah Khamenei called for showing "heroic flexibility," thereby authorizing a new era of nuclear diplomacy with the P5+1 that led to the interim (JPOA) and final (JCPOA) nuclear deals.

<sup>3</sup> Qassem Sotemani, cited in: Jeremy Bender and Michael B Kelley, "This sentence should cause a lot concern about Iran taking over Iraq," *Business Insider*, March 17, 2015. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/concern-about-iran-take-over-iraq-2015-3>)

<sup>4</sup> For Iran's penetration of the Western Hemisphere using this model, see: Emanuele Ortolenghi, "State Sponsors of Terrorism: An Examination of Iran's Global Terrorism Network," *Testimony before the House Homeland Security committee Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence*, April 17, 2018, page 1. ([http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/EO\\_HHSC\\_WrittenTestimony.pdf](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/EO_HHSC_WrittenTestimony.pdf))

co-opt existing groups or their members. Among Iran's longest-running and most successful attempts to do the former include Lebanese Hezbollah<sup>5</sup> and the Badr Organization in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Evidence of the latter is found in Iran's more recent arming<sup>7</sup> of the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

#### *Why Proxies?*

The Islamic Republic's proclivity for using proxies is not only consistent with its ideological goals, but also reflects a cognizance of escalation dynamics and the country's military strengths and weaknesses.<sup>8</sup> Iran uses proxies, terror groups,<sup>9</sup> and militias throughout the Middle East (and in Iraq, in particular) because they enable the regime to do five key things:

- **Help mask its hand abroad:** By drawing on non-Iranian actors<sup>10</sup> with pre-existing grievances, Tehran achieves a measure of plausible deniability in the asymmetric assaults and terror attacks it orders against its adversaries.
- **Dampen prospects for escalation against Iranian territory:** Should Iran's "hand" be revealed, having a robust proxy network spread out across the Middle East – or even multiple groups within a single country like Iraq – can deter escalation against Iranian equities while keeping conflict localized and, most importantly, away from the Iranian homeland.
- **Play to its strengths – and its adversaries' weakness – by operating in the "gray zone":**<sup>11</sup> Iran's ability to engage in graduated escalation without provoking an outright response from its conventionally superior foes highlights Tehran's understanding of its

<sup>5</sup> Ranj Alaadin, "Iran Used the Hezbollah Model to Dominate Iraq and Syria," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/opinion/iran-hezbollah-iraq-syria.html>)

<sup>6</sup> Amir Toumaj, "Death of a General: What Shaban Nasiri Reveals About Iran's Secretive Qods Force," *War on the Rocks*, March 23, 2018. (<https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/death-of-a-general-what-shaban-nasiri-reveals-about-irans-secretive-qods-force/>)

<sup>7</sup> See: Phil Stewart, "In first, U.S. presents its evidence of Iran weaponry from Yemen," *Reuters*, December 14, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-arms/in-first-u-s-presents-its-evidence-of-iran-weaponry-from-yemen-idUSKBN1E52J6>); Behnam Ben Taleblu, "A peek inside Houthi Rebel's recent missile strikes in Saudi Arabia," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 28, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/03/a-peek-inside-houthi-rebels-recent-missile-strikes-in-saudi-arabia.php>); and Jericca Goodson, Simon Chin, and Valerie Lincy, "Iranian Arms Shipments to Yemen Violate U.N. Resolutions," *Iran Watch*, November 3, 2016. (<https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/policy-briefs/iranian-arms-shipments-yemen-violate-un-resolutions/>)

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of these issues, see: J. Matthew McInnis, "The Future of Iran's Security Policy: Inside Tehran's Strategic Thinking," *American Enterprise Institute*, May 2017. (<https://cdm.mashregnews.ir/d/2017/07/06/01982034.pdf>)

<sup>9</sup> See: Carol Morello, "Terrorism is down worldwide, but State Department says Iran maintains 'near-global reach'," *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2018. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/terrorism-is-down-worldwide-but-state-department-says-iran-maintains-near-global-reach/2018/09/19/3a85b1-dbae-4496-a295-b78599c6720\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-terrorism-602d11bb0e5d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/terrorism-is-down-worldwide-but-state-department-says-iran-maintains-near-global-reach/2018/09/19/3a85b1-dbae-4496-a295-b78599c6720_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-terrorism-602d11bb0e5d))

<sup>10</sup> Despite being "local" and "non-Iranian," many of these groups pledge allegiance to Iran. For example, see: Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Iraqi Shiite militia leader says he would overthrow government if ordered by Iran's supreme leader," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 12, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/us-designated-terrorist-of-iraqi-militia-reportedly-in-aleppo.php>)

<sup>11</sup> For more on gray zone conflicts, see: U.S. Department of State, The International Security Advisory Board, "Report on Gray Zone Conflict," January 3, 2017. (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/266849.pdf>)

adversaries' high bar for the use of force as well as their reservations about employing that force. Iran frequently uses proxies and terror groups to impose costs on adversaries while avoiding direct retaliation, enabling Tehran to make incremental gains with limited costs.<sup>12</sup>

- **Enter conflicts at an earlier stage and shape the outcome:**<sup>13</sup> Equipping and deploying militias to a theater of conflict is far cheaper than training and sending conventional forces. This reduced price tag lowers the bar for intervention and for the use of force by Iran and its proxies. Taken as a measure of their political commitment, an early intervention can – but does not always – enable Tehran greater say over the direction of a conflict over time.
- **Translate relatively cheap military power into durable political influence:** For Iran, a longstanding and successful relationship between a patron and a proxy moves beyond men, money, and munitions, and focuses instead on political support to co-opt key state institutions or the entire state where the proxy is active. Thus, Lebanese Hezbollah is playing an influential<sup>14</sup> – and by some estimates, the most influential<sup>15</sup> – role in Lebanese politics today. The same threat exists in Iraq today with respect to IRGC-backed militias.

#### *The Evolution of Iran Proxies' Objectives*

Prior to the Arab Spring in 2011, Iran employed proxies for two basic purposes: conducting acts of terrorism against targets antithetical to regime interests and ideals, and subverting or co-opting central authority in states that were at odds with Tehran. After 2011, when Syria's Assad regime was in peril, Iran surged Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC into the Syrian theater. Iran also created, trained, and armed Arab and non-Arab Shiite militias to rally in defense of the one Arab government Tehran could count as an ally. This soon became the model for the third type of proxy employment: militia support to shore up states aligned with, or favorable towards, Tehran. Building on Iran's extensive proxy network in Iraq,<sup>16</sup> a similar cadre of actors was marshaled in 2014 to reconquer territory from the Islamic State. The regime helped channel Iraqis (mostly Shiites) and other newly created proxies into the broad umbrella force called the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs). Battlefield experience for this "Shiite Liberation Army,"<sup>17</sup> an

<sup>12</sup> This strategy defined the Iranian experience in Iraq from 2003-2011. See: Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell, Dan Madden, "Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War," *Rand Corporation*, 2016, page 25. ([https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1000/RR1003/RAND\\_RR1003.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1000/RR1003/RAND_RR1003.pdf))

<sup>13</sup> Noted in: Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Missing The Point On Iran's Ballistic Missiles," *War on the Rocks*, April 28, 2017. (<https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/missing-the-point-on-irans-ballistic-missiles/>)

<sup>14</sup> Israeli Defense Forces, "Hezbollah's Influence over the Lebanese Political System," accessed September 19, 2018. (<https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/facts-and-figures/hezbollah/hezbollahs-influence-over-the-lebanese-political-system/>)

<sup>15</sup> "Israeli minister says 'Lebanon equals Hezbollah' after election," *Reuters*, May 7, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-election-israel/israeli-minister-says-lebanon-equals-hezbollah-after-election-idUSKBN1B0LW>). Some scholars contest this interpretation. See: Bilal Y. Saab, "The United States Has Not Lost Lebanon," *Foreign Policy*, May 8, 2018. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/08/dont-scrap-washingtons-lebanon-policy-is-working/>)

<sup>16</sup> Entities like Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.

<sup>17</sup> In Western parlance, this is called Iran's "Shiite Foreign Legion." But in 2016, an IRGC official coined the term "Shiite Liberation Army" during an interview with hardline media. See: "«فطميون» پیشقراول نبرد سوریه بودند/«ارتش»" (*The Fatemiyoun Were The Forefront of The War In Syria/The Artesh' Has Several Volunteer Martyrdom Divisions*), *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), August 18, 2016.

integrated multi-ethnic force loyal to the IRGC-QF that can be deployed across national boundaries in service of the Islamic Republic's foreign adventures, marks a potentially new era in Iran's use of proxy forces.

#### **Identifying Iran's Agents of Influence in Iraq**

Shiite militias in Iraq have come a long way since the first years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, when firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) and the Badr Brigade dominated the scene.<sup>18</sup> The multiplicity of militias in Iraq today is a product of the splintering of the JAM's "Special Groups"<sup>19</sup> during the Iraq War, as well as the mobilization of what became the PMU in 2014. The threat, according to experts, is that "this constellation of Iranian-backed militias is eclipsing official Iraqi institutions, and sowing the seeds of conflict for decades to come."<sup>20</sup> But more than checking or overshadowing Iraqi institutions is the threat that comes from integrating militias<sup>21</sup> into the Iraqi security forces or seating them in government without vetting and disarming them, or ignoring what their true allegiances may be.<sup>22</sup>

While political and religious groups lie outside the scope of this testimony, Iran-backed militias often contain some political or religious components that ground them in the state and society in which they operate. With reference to Iraq, it is important to recall that revolutionary Iran has had long-standing ties to the Da'wa party,<sup>23</sup> and that Iran was once home to many Iraqi Shiites in exile, particularly during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Iran's continued relationship with, and cultivation of, these entities is strategic. Over time, these relationships have provided Iran with inroads into Iraq's politics, society, and economy. As Soleimani once claimed, "We're not like the Americans. We don't abandon our friends."<sup>24</sup>

Soleimani's dictums matter not only because they offer insight into the mind of a noted terrorist, but because as IRGC-QF chief, he is one of few Iranian security officials sufficiently empowered

(<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/05/28/1161426/>؛ فاطمیون پیش، قر اول خبر د سحر ریه جو دندار تکی جندین لشکر، (در مطلب شهادت دار د)

<sup>18</sup> These two groups clashed with each other multiple times. See: Qassim Abdul-Zahra And Hanzza Hendawi, "Rival Militias Threaten Iraq's South," *Associated Press*, October 25, 2006. ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/25/AR2006102501432\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/25/AR2006102501432_pf.html))

<sup>19</sup> For example, see: U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Hizballah Commander Responsible for American Deaths in Iraq," November 19, 2012. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1775.aspx>)

<sup>20</sup> Ali Khedery, "Iran's Shiite Militias Are Running Amok in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, February 19, 2015. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/19/irans-shiite-militias-are-running-amok-in-iraq/>)

<sup>21</sup> See threat from Qais al-Khazali in: "Notorious Iraq militia leader once held by US threatens Americans on the battlefield," *Fox News*, August 9, 2016. (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/08/09/notorious-iraq-militia-leader-once-held-by-us-threatens-americans-on-battlefield.html>)

<sup>22</sup> Tyler Stapleton and Amir Toumaj, "Iraq Opens its Gates to Iran's Trojan Horse," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 3, 2016. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-bit/tyler-stapleton-iraq-opens-its-gates-to-irans-trojan-horse/>); Amir Toumaj and Romany Shaker, "Top Iraqi-Shiite cleric endorses incorporation of PMF into the state," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 28, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/12/top-iraqi-shiite-cleric-endorses-incorporation-of-pmf-into-the-state.php>)

<sup>23</sup> Colonel Terry M. Lcc, "Iran's Influence in Iraq," *U.S. Army War College*, June 7, 2010, page 6. (<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a542054.pdf>)

<sup>24</sup> Qassem Soleimani, quoted in: Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>)

to have the capability to see his intentions through.<sup>25</sup> Many Shiite militias have received training, weapons, or direction from Tehran, usually at the behest of the IRGC-QF.<sup>26</sup> Recent news of Iranian missile proliferation to Shiite militias in Iraq should come as no surprise as it is a measure of Tehran's fondness for, and investment in, these groups.<sup>27</sup> For these militias, it is a point of pride to be visited by Soleimani on the battlefield and be photographed alongside him.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Knowing Your Enemy – Profiles of Four Key Militias*

The profiles below present important details about four of the most influential Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq. Of those four, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba have the most overt links to Iran and to (not yet designated) elements of the Iranian threat network in Iraq. The list below is not exhaustive. There are many other Iran-backed forces in Iraq, as well as others operating in Syria and across the region. For additional information on militias operating in both theaters, I highly recommend the scholarship of my colleagues David Adesnik and Amir Toumaj, who produced 10 militia profiles for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in February 2018.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Munathama Badr<sup>30</sup> (Badr)**

- Name (English): The Badr Organization
- Year founded: 1982, renamed in 2012<sup>31</sup>
- Current leader: Hadi al-Amin<sup>32</sup>
- Current sanctions: None

<sup>25</sup> See the note Soleimani reportedly sent General Petraeus about Iran's regional policy, cited in: Ali Alfoneh, "Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani: A Biography," *American Enterprise Institute*, January 2011, page 1. (<http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/soleimani.pdf>)

<sup>26</sup> For example, see: "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," *Stanford University*, March 24, 2017.

(<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1432?highlight=haqqani-network>)

<sup>27</sup> Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Iran moves missiles to Iraq in attempt to fortify security, influence," *Axios*, September 7, 2018. (<https://www.axios.com/iran-moves-missiles-to-iraq-in-attempt-to-fortify-security-influence-d3693e7e-108e-40e6-834a-54a995f69226.html>); Tovah Lazaroff, "Nikki Haley: Iran Proxies Reportedly Developing Missile Production In Iraq," *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), September 21, 2018. (<https://www.jpost.com/International/Nikki-Haley-Iran-proxies-reportedly-develop-missile-production-in-iraq-567691>)

<sup>28</sup> Jeremy Bender, "Here are photos of Iran's military mastermind drinking tea on the front lines of the war against ISIS," *Business Insider*, March 5, 2015. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/2-photos-of-irans-qassem-suleimani-on-front-lines-of-isis-war-2015-3>); Caleb Weiss, "Qods Force commander photographed with Iraqi militia in Aleppo," *FDD's Long War Journal*, October 18, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/qods-force-commander-photographed-with-iraqi-militia-in-aleppo.php>)

<sup>29</sup> David Adesnik and Amir Toumaj, "FDD Profiles of Leading Iranian-Backed Militias," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, February 28, 2018. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/iranian-backed-militia-profiles/>)

<sup>30</sup> Transliterated from Arabic: منظمة بدر

<sup>31</sup> Philip Smyth, "Should Iraq's ISCI Forces Really Be Considered 'Good Militias'?", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 17, 2016. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/should-iraqs-isci-forces-really-be-considered-good-militias>)

<sup>32</sup> Susannah George, "Breaking Badr," *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2014. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/>)

- Ties to Iran: Badr sided with Iran against its fellow Iraqis during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>33</sup> Badr, which is popularly known as “Iran’s oldest proxy in Iraq,”<sup>34</sup> has adopted Iran’s Khomeinist interpretation of Islam.<sup>35</sup>
- Threat: Badr has effective control of Iraq’s interior ministry,<sup>36</sup> strong presence in many PMU units, and retention of weaponry.<sup>37</sup> Al-Amiri has reportedly threatened to topple any American-imposed government.<sup>38</sup>
- Other notes:
  - Badr holds 22 seats in Iraq’s parliament as part of the Fatah coalition.<sup>39</sup>
  - The militia was originally named *Faylaq al-Badr* (The Badr Corps), which was the armed wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (which later became the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq).<sup>40</sup>
  - Badr partook in the offensive to dislodge the Peshmerga from Kirkuk after the 2017 independence referendum by Iraqi Kurds.<sup>41</sup>

#### Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH)

- Name (English): The Hezbollah Brigades/Brigades of the Party of God
- Year founded: 2007 (with roots in 2003)<sup>42</sup>

<sup>33</sup> “Badr Organization,” *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed September 20, 2018.

(<https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/badr-organization>)

<sup>34</sup> Babak Deghanpishch, “Special Report: The fighters of Iraq who answer to Iran,” *Reuters*, November 12, 2014.

(<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-militias-special-report/special-report-the-fighters-of-iraq-who-answer-to-iran-idUSKCN0FW0Z20141112>)

<sup>35</sup> “Badr Organization,” *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed September 20, 2018.

(<https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/badr-organization>)

<sup>36</sup> Ali Alfoneh, “An Obstacle to Riyadh’s Outreach to Baghdad: Iraqi Interior Minister’s Ties with I.R.G.C.,” *Middle East Institute*, October 25, 2017. (<http://www.mei.edu/content/fo/obstacle-riyadh-s-outreach-baghdad-iraqi-interior-minister-s-ties-irgc>); Susannah George, “Former US prisoner now leading Iraq’s Interior ministry,” *Associated Press*, May 8, 2017. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/05/09/former-us-prisoner-now-leading-iraq-s-interior-ministry/>); Loveday Morris, “Appointment of Iraq’s new interior minister opens door to militia and Iranian influence,” *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2014.

([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/appointment-of-iraqs-new-interior-minister-opens-door-to-militia-and-iranian-influence/2014/10/18/10181612a347-438e-4743-902a-254a169ca274\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.bd0275b26762](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/appointment-of-iraqs-new-interior-minister-opens-door-to-militia-and-iranian-influence/2014/10/18/10181612a347-438e-4743-902a-254a169ca274_story.html?utm_term=.bd0275b26762))

<sup>37</sup> “Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development,” *Stanford University*, November 13, 2016.

(<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/4337?highlight=kataib-hezbollah>)

<sup>38</sup> Kowsar Nawzad, “Iran-backed militia leader: ‘I will overthrow’ any US-imposed Iraqi PM,” *Kurdistan 24* (Iraq), August 9, 2018. (<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/13ab70dd-78d6-4e3f-8be6-fc099eeac98a>)

<sup>39</sup> Tamer El-Ghobashy and Mustafa Salim, “Iraqi election seen as a contest between Iran’s challenger and America’s incumbent,” *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2018. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-election-seen-as-a-contest-between-irans-challenger-and-americas-incumbent/2018/05/10/7bfc4912-538f-11e8-96d4-ca1d035642ce\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-iraq%3Airaqi%3Aelection%3Airaqi%3Aelection-seen-as-a-contest-between-irans-challenger-and-americas-incumbent%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_term=.ce71b9e20887](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-election-seen-as-a-contest-between-irans-challenger-and-americas-incumbent/2018/05/10/7bfc4912-538f-11e8-96d4-ca1d035642ce_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-iraq%3Airaqi%3Aelection%3Airaqi%3Aelection-seen-as-a-contest-between-irans-challenger-and-americas-incumbent%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.ce71b9e20887))

<sup>40</sup> Philip Smyth, “Should Iraq’s ISCI Forces Really Be Considered ‘Good Militias’?” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 17, 2016. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/should-iraqs-isci-forces-really-be-considered-good-militias>)

<sup>41</sup> Anchal Vohra, “Iraq’s Shiite Militias Are Just Getting Started,” *Foreign Policy*, October 18, 2017.

(<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/18/iraqs-shiite-militias-are-just-getting-started/>)

<sup>42</sup> Noted in the KH profile in: David Adesnik and Amir Toumaj, “FDD Profiles of Leading Iranian-Backed Militias,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, February 28, 2018. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hj/iranian-backed-militia-profiles/>)



- o Iran has come to rely on KH, among several other Iraqi Shiite militias, to bolster Tehran's pro-Assad coalition in Syria.<sup>54</sup>

#### Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)

- Name (English): The League of the Righteous
- Year founded: 2006<sup>55</sup>
- Current leader: Qais al-Khazali<sup>56</sup>
- Current sanctions: None
- Ties to Iran: AAH is "extensively trained and funded by" Iran's IRGC.<sup>57</sup> According to a noted scholar, "Khazali has reportedly pledged allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei."<sup>58</sup>
- Threat: AAH claims to have carried out at least 6,000 attacks on American military and coalition forces from its inception in 2006 to the end of the Iraq War in 2011.<sup>59</sup> The group is capable of carrying out lethal ambushes, such as the one in January 2007 that killed five American service members.<sup>60</sup>
- Other notes:
  - o AAH's political wing, "al-Sadiqoun," won an estimated 13-15 seats in the recent parliamentary elections and was part of the Fatah coalition.<sup>61</sup>
  - o The group is more than just a militia – AAH provides social services to Shiites in Iraq.<sup>62</sup>
  - o AAH has sent forces to fight in Syria to defend the Iran-aligned Assad regime.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Iran's pivotal role in Aleppo massacres," December 29, 2016.

(<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Issues/Pages/frans-pivotal-role-in-Aleppo-massacres-December-2016.aspx>)

<sup>55</sup> "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," *Stanford University*, March 24, 2017. (<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/143?highlight=haqqani-network>)

<sup>56</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Special Report: The fighters of Iraq who answer to Iran," *Reuters*, November 12, 2014. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-militias-specialreport/special-report-the-fighters-of-iraq-who-answer-to-iran-idUSKCN0IW6ZA20141112>)

<sup>57</sup> "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," *Stanford University*, March 24, 2017. (<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/143?highlight=haqqani-network>)

<sup>58</sup> Ahmad Majidyar, "Iran-Backed Iraqi Militia Leader Intensifies Propaganda against U.S. and Its Allies," *Middle East Institute*, August 1, 2017. (<http://www.mei.edu/content/iran-backed-iraqi-militia-leader-intensifies-propaganda-against-us-and-its-allies>)

<sup>59</sup> "Al-Sadr fled to Iran due to assassination fears," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (U.K.), January 26, 2011. (<https://eng-archiv.aawsat.com/theaawsat/news-middle-east/al-sadr-fled-to-iran-due-to-assassination-fears>)

<sup>60</sup> Matthew Hilburn, "One-time US Prisoner Now Key in Battling IS," *Voice of America*, March 15, 2015. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/qais-khazali-one-time-us-prisoner-now-key-in-battling-islamic-state/2679431.html>)

<sup>61</sup> These sources report 13, 14, and 15 seats, respectively. Phillip Smyth, "Iranian Militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 11, 2018. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-militias-in-iraqs-parliament-political-outcomes-and-us-response>)

<sup>62</sup> Mamoun Alabassi, "Iraqi post-election horse-trading in full swing," *The Arab Weekly* (UK), June 3, 2018. (<https://thearabweekly.com/iraqi-post-election-horse-trading-full-swing>); Ahmad Majidyar, "Iran-backed Iraqi group defends its history of violence, reacts to U.S. Congressional bill," *Middle East Institute*, May 29, 2018. (<http://www.mei.edu/content/iran-backed-iraqi-group-defends-its-history-violence-reacts-us-congressional-bill>)

<sup>63</sup> Alreza Nader, "Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.-Iran Cooperation?" *Rand Corporation*, accessed September 19, 2018, page 10. ([https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND\\_PE151.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND_PE151.pdf))

<sup>64</sup> Matthew Hilburn, "One-time US Prisoner Now Key in Battling IS," *Voice of America*, March 15, 2015. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/qais-khazali-one-time-us-prisoner-now-key-in-battling-islamic-state/2679431.html>)

**Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN)**

- Name (English): The Movement of the Noble of Hezbollah/Movement of the Noble of the Party of God
- Year founded: 2013<sup>64</sup>
- Current leader: Sheikh Akram al-Ka'abi<sup>65</sup>
- Current sanctions: The U.S. Treasury Department designated al-Ka'abi in 2008, prior to HHN's founding, pursuant to EO 13438 "for threatening the peace and stability of Iraq and the Government of Iraq."<sup>66</sup>
- Ties to Iran: Al-Ka'abi is dedicated to Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and Iran's vision of Islamic governance. Al-Ka'abi has met with, and is widely admired by, Iran's revolutionary elite.<sup>67</sup> Sheikh Mokhtar, Nujaba's Syria commander, reportedly told a group of Hezbollah fighters in 2016, "We will go to defend anywhere the Islamic Republic of Iran deems necessary, because we are committed to [the] Supreme Leader."<sup>68</sup>
- Threat: The U.S. designated Al-Ka'abi for "leading attacks against members of the Government of Iraq and Coalition Forces."<sup>69</sup> Al-Ka'abi said publicly he would overthrow the Iraqi central government if the Supreme Leader asked him to do so.<sup>70</sup>
- Other notes:
  - HHN partook in the siege of Aleppo.<sup>71</sup>
  - In early 2017, Iranian outlets reported comments from an HHN spokesman claiming that the group had established a "special brigade" in Syria "ready to take actions to liberate [the] Golan."<sup>72</sup>

<sup>64</sup> "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," *Stanford University*, March 24, 2017. (<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/143?highlight=haqqani+network>)

<sup>65</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Special Report: The Iraqi militia helping Iran carve a road to Damascus," *Reuters*, September 22, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-nujaba-specialrep/special-report-the-iraqi-militia-helping-iran-carve-a-road-to-damascus-idUSKCN1BX11N>)

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Fueling Violence in Iraq," September 16, 2008. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/bp1141.aspx>)

<sup>67</sup> Amir Toumaj, "Iraqi militia leader receives warm reception in Tehran," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 9, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/iraqi-militia-leader-receives-warm-reception-in-tehran.php>)

<sup>68</sup> "Commander: Al-Nujaba Ready to Fight Terrorists Anywhere Ayatollah Khamenei Deems Necessary," *Fars News Agency* (Iran), July 9, 2016. (<http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950419000826>)

<sup>69</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Fueling Violence in Iraq," September 16, 2008. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/bp1141.aspx>)

<sup>70</sup> Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Iraqi Shiite militia leader says he would overthrow government if ordered by Iran's supreme leader," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 12, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/us-designated-terrorist-of-iraqi-militia-reportedly-in-aleppo.php>)

<sup>71</sup> Tamer El-Ghobashy and Maria Abi-Habib, "Iraqi Militias Complicate Aleppo Battle," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2016. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-militias-complicate-aleppo-battle-1475687051>)

<sup>72</sup> "Iraqi Resistance Movement Establishes Brigade to Liberate Golan Heights," *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), March 8, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/03/08/1349676/iraqi-resistance-movement-establishes-brigade-to-liberate-golan-heights>); Note: Although Nujaba does not have the military capability to liberate the Golan Heights from the Israeli Defense Forces, it speaks to the long-term intentions of the group, ideological orientation, and affinity with Iran-backed causes, as well as their provocative messaging and media strategy.

### Debating a Designation for Iran's Proxies in Iraq

The ascendancy of Iran-backed militias in Iraq is a threat to U.S. interests since it further draws the country into Iran's orbit and has the potential to erode U.S. influence and room for maneuver. This was recently demonstrated when militias attacked U.S. diplomatic facilities in two Iraqi cities.<sup>73</sup> Iran-backed Shiite militias spent nearly a decade targeting U.S. service members during the Iraq War,<sup>74</sup> cutting their teeth on the issue of resistance against America. Now, despite some setbacks,<sup>75</sup> these groups are seeking to translate their military success<sup>76</sup> into greater political power<sup>77</sup> in Baghdad.

Three U.S. Presidents -- George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and now Donald Trump -- have relied on designations to push back on the expansive influence of Iran's IRGC by disrupting its financial support networks, exposing its agents and affiliates, and publically stigmatizing them. It is now time to apply that approach in Iraq. It is my recommendation that the U.S. move to designate select Iranian proxies in Iraq that retain close ties to Iran and the IRGC. The legal authorities for such a move already exist, as does the evidence required for designations. This makes the main issue one of political will.

As a cautionary note, my recommendation of a terrorism designation for such entities should not preclude future U.S. actions against Iran in Iraq and in defense of Iraqi sovereignty. Designations will not do away with the Iranian proxy threat in Iraq. But they can help the U.S. approach the problem of Iranian expansionism and subversion more directly and by using all elements of national power.

Below is a brief overview of the legal authorities available to U.S. policymakers to designate elements of Iran's proxy network in Iraq. I then summarize arguments in favor of designations, followed by an attempt to engage with and refute counterarguments to such a move.

<sup>73</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, "Trump's Latest Warning to Iran Didn't Come Out of Nowhere," *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2018. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/trump-warns-iran-shia-militia-iraq/569989/>)

<sup>74</sup> As described in: Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> "Iraq Shi'ite Paramilitary Leader Al-Amiri Withdraws Candidacy for PM," *Reuters*, September 18, 2018. (<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-09-18/iraqi-shiite-paramilitary-leader-badi-al-amiri-withdraws-candidacy-for-pm>)

<sup>76</sup> Liz Sly, "Pro-Iran militias' success in Iraq could undermine U.S.," *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2015. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iraqs-pro-iranian-shiite-militias-lead-the-war-against-the-islamic-state/2015/02/15/5b5b1c10-ae94-11e4-8876-460b1444ebc1\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.5b0bcdd744f8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqs-pro-iranian-shiite-militias-lead-the-war-against-the-islamic-state/2015/02/15/5b5b1c10-ae94-11e4-8876-460b1444ebc1_story.html?utm_term=.5b0bcdd744f8))

<sup>77</sup> Amir Toumaj and Romany Shaker, "Iranian-backed Iraqi militias form coalition ahead of parliamentary elections," *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 25, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/01/iranian-backed-iraqi-militias-form-coalition-ahead-of-parliamentary-elections.php>); Isabel Coles and Ali Nabhan, "Iran-Backed Militias Seek Political Sway in Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2018. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backed-militias-seek-political-sway-in-iraq-1525944600>)

*Survey of Legal Authorities Already in Place*

- **Designation Pursuant to EO 13224**<sup>78</sup>
  - Name: Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions With Persons Who Commit, Threaten To Commit, or Support Terrorism<sup>79</sup>
  - Date signed: September 23, 2001
  - Summary of punishments: Enables the U.S. to block the assets of foreign individuals and entities related to the subject matter of the order, as well as their agents, affiliates, and associates.
  - Recommendation: To target select Iran-backed militias in Iraq with this order, since they are agents of Iran's IRGC and are overseen by Iran's IRGC-QF. This EO was used to designate both the IRGC and IRGC-QF.<sup>80</sup>
  
- **Designation Pursuant to EO 13438**<sup>81</sup>
  - Name: Blocking Property of Certain Persons Who Threaten Stabilization Efforts in Iraq
  - Date signed: July 17, 2007
  - Summary of punishments: "prohibit[s] all transactions between the designees and any U.S. person and freeze[s] any assets the designees may have under U.S. jurisdiction."<sup>82</sup>
  - Recommendation: This EO can be used against militia networks in Iraq. In fact, it has already been used against the leaders of select militias, but the stigma surrounding a terrorism designation is greater.
  
- **Addition to FTO List**
  - Maintained by the U.S. Department of State since 1997, the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list is public, thereby naming and shaming foreign militant groups that partake in terrorism or "retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism."<sup>83</sup> Listing an entity makes its members subject to a U.S. visa/travel ban, prohibits U.S. persons from supporting the listed entity, and requires U.S. financial institutions to take control of any funds in accounts linked to an FTO or its affiliates.

<sup>78</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, "Executive Order 13224," September 23, 2001. (<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/122570.htm>)

<sup>79</sup> Executive Order 13224, "Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions With Persons Who Commit, Threaten to Commit, or Support Terrorism," September 25, 2001. (<https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/13224.pdf>)

<sup>80</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism," October 25, 2007. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/np644.aspx>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates the IRGC under Terrorism Authority and Targets IRGC and Military Supporters under Counter-Proliferation Authority," October 13, 2017. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0177.aspx>)

<sup>81</sup> Executive Order 13438, "Blocking Property of Certain Persons Who Threaten Stabilization Efforts in Iraq," July 19, 2007. (<https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/13438.pdf>)

<sup>82</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Fueling Violence in Iraq," September 16, 2008. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/np1141.aspx>)

<sup>83</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," accessed September 19, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>)

*Arguments in Favor of Designating Iran's Proxy Network in Iraq*

- **A step towards a coherent Iraq policy**
  - *Righting wrongs:* For several years, Washington has not had a clear Iraq policy other than its support for the anti-Islamic State mission. When it comes to the fate of Iraq, operating without a clearly articulated and operationalized vision can lead to regional perceptions of American aloofness at best and disinterest at worst. American passivity was most evident when it came to confronting issues like sectarian slaughter committed by Shiite militias,<sup>84</sup> the response from Shiite militias to the Kurdish independence referendum in 2017,<sup>85</sup> as well as the 2018 parliamentary election and the political crisis that has ensued. A designation against groups that have American blood on their hands in Iraq or report directly to Iran in attempts to frustrate American foreign policy in Iraq would begin to change that.
  - *Signaling capabilities and newfound resolve:* Designating groups like AAH and HHN signals that the U.S. does care about a wide array of issues ranging from government formation to Iraqi sovereignty, the fate of the PMU, as well as checking Iranian influence in Iraq. It also indicates that the U.S. can and will use all avenues available to produce favorable outcomes, even if it means openly angering the Iranians in Iraq.
  - *Sending a deterrent message:* Designating AAH and HHN sends a message to Iran's current (and potential) partners in Iraq. There is a plethora of Iran-linked actors in the PMU<sup>86</sup> as well as individuals seeking positions within the Iraqi government that want to subordinate Iraq's national politics to Iranian interests. By issuing designations, the U.S. can incentivize groups to move away from Iran and lay the predicate for targeting others.
    - Given Badr's already entrenched political and military influence, a U.S. designation may not influence its behavior. But stigmatizing AAH, which just gained a substantial bloc of seats in the Iraqi parliament, may be

<sup>84</sup> See: Vivian Salama, "Iran-Backed Shia Militias Are Reportedly Slaughtering Sunnis In Iraq While Fighting ISIS," *Associated Press*, October 14, 2014. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/iran-backed-shia-militias-are-reportedly-slaughtering-sunnis-in-iraq-while-fighting-isis-2014-10>); Jeff Stein, "Ramadi's Dirty Little Secret In The War Against ISIS," *Newsweek*, December 19, 2015. (<https://www.newsweek.com/ramadi-mosul-iraq-isis-shia-militias-sunnit-baghdad-iran-iraqi-security-forces-407085>); Zach Beauchamp, "The US uses Iraq's Shia militias to fight ISIS. They just got accused of ethnic cleansing," *Fox*, February 5, 2016. (<https://www.fox.com/2016/2/5/10918780/shia-militias-divide-cleansing>); Ned Parker and Jonathan Landy, "Special Report: Massacre reports show U.S. inability to curb Iraq militias," *Reuters*, August 16, 2016. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-massacres/special-report-idUSKCN10Y1VD>); Hisham Arafat, "Iraqis fleeing to Syria's Rojava recount Shia militias' atrocities," *Kurdistan 24* (Iraq), November 12, 2017. (<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/idea/3736521d-0140-47c0-9316-a54f9bd1718e>)

<sup>85</sup> Richard Spencer, "Shia militias vow to fight new Kurdish state in Iraq," *The Times* (UK), June 21, 2017. (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/shia-militias-vow-to-fight-new-kurdish-state-in-iraq-jvw09smth>); Ranj Alaaadin, "If Trump wants to confront Iran, he should start in Kirkuk," *Foreign Policy*, October 16, 2017. (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/16/if-trump-wants-to-confront-iran-he-should-start-in-kirkuk/>)

<sup>86</sup> Nicholas A. Heras, "Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network," *Middle East Institute*, 2017. ([https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP2\\_Heras\\_IraqCT\\_0.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP2_Heras_IraqCT_0.pdf))

possible and could reinforce the message that America stands with those who work in Iraq's national interest.

- **Operationalizing the call to push back on Iran in the region**
  - *Building on words:* In his October 2017 address on the Iran deal, President Trump promised that he would engage with “allies to counter the regime’s destabilizing activity and support for terrorist proxies in the region.”<sup>87</sup> In an address this month, Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook said, “We don’t make a distinction between the Iranian government and these Iranian Shiite militias that are around the Middle East.”<sup>88</sup> These are both powerful statements, but must be followed up with concrete action. Iran is still able to support its militias in Iraq and carry out its proxy strategy, which is designed to eject America from Iraq and permanently keep Baghdad weak.
  - *Holding groups accountable:* Stigmatizing and impeding the financing of groups that have blood on their hands and meet the criteria of being an agent or affiliate of the IRGC and/or the IRGC-QF is consistent with long-standing bipartisan efforts to pressure Iran. It also represents a serious effort to prevent Iran from solidifying its hold on Iraq.
  - *Recognizing the regional challenge:* If Iran’s modus operandi in the region is to use proxies, terror groups, and militias to disguise its hand, then U.S. policy must expose Iran and its activities at every turn. By using a variety of legal and economic means to name and shame AAH and HHN, the U.S. would contest an important component of Iran’s Iraq policy.
  - *Thinking beyond Iraq:* Given that many of Iran’s Iraqi proxies are also active in Syria, designating them could have second or third order effects on a different battlefield. As Iran’s militias work to bolster the Assad regime, a designation can stigmatize those actors before they become feature into any political settlement or become legitimized.

#### *Countering the Counterarguments to Designating Iran’s Proxy Network in Iraq*

Below, I present four likely counterarguments to designating elements of Iran’s proxy network as well as my attempt to refute each counterargument. Whichever argument ultimately prevails, prudence and a nuanced understanding of Iran’s security strategy and Iraqi internal politics will remain essential. To be clear, there are risks to designating AAH and HHN. But if the U.S. does nothing, Iran’s subversion of the political process and security forces in Iraq will be guaranteed.

<sup>87</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy,” October 13, 2017.

(<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/>)

<sup>88</sup> See comments by Brian Hook in video: “Iran’s Missile Proliferation: A Conversation with Special Envoy Brian Hook September 19 Event,” *The Hudson Institute*, September 19, 2018. (<https://www.hudson.org/events/1603-iran-s-missile-proliferation-a-conversation-with-special-envoy-brian-hook92018>)

- **Efficacy:** *Designations are not effective and are at best symbolic. They will only bolster those in Iraq who peddle anti-Americanism.*
  - The idea that designations will instantaneously dry-up funding to a terror group is a misunderstanding of the applicability of this policy tool. Designations against Iranian proxies are only a component of a U.S. strategy against Iran in Iraq.
  - While there are limited financial restrictions and penalties that come with a designation, these designations send an important message. This symbolism can be most effective in Iraq, with the goal to show militias – by virtue of their patronage – as agents of Iran at a time when Iraqi Shiites are grieving and have stormed an Iranian consulate.
- **Stratification:** *A graduated approach to sanctions, initially focused just on militia leaders, is preferable to a blanket designation of elements of Iran's proxy network.<sup>89</sup>*
  - The logic behind graduated escalation – whether bombing<sup>90</sup> or sanctions – is to incrementally increase costs to an adversary to incentivize a change in behavior. But parceling out and delaying designations at such a low level would more likely signal timidity.
  - The growing influence of Iran's Shiite militias in Iraq – as well as the regime's willingness to resort to overt punishment against targets in Iraq<sup>91</sup> – means that it is too late to stratify and sub-divide designations. Those who sought graduated measures should have made their case years earlier, as the militia threat was forming.
    - I do not oppose the principle of graduated pressure, but designations against an Iranian proxy should form the baseline for that pressure strategy, not its upper limit.
- **Timing:** *Given the ongoing talks over government formation in Iraq, now is not a good time for sanctions.*
  - U.S. attempts to stigmatize IRGC-linked actors while a government is forming in Baghdad could actually have a positive effect. Such a move signals U.S. resolve to push back against Iran in the region and provides backing to local actors looking to marginalize those who subvert Iraqi policy for Iran's benefit. It will also become increasingly clear who in the Iraqi government is willing to work with a proxy of Iran instead of the U.S. That in turn, could facilitate the introduction of harsher political and economic measures.

<sup>89</sup> Michael Knights, Barbara A. Leaf, Matthew Levitt, and Phillip Smyth, "The Smart Way to Sanction Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 17, 2018. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-smart-way-to-sanction-iranian-backed-militias-in-iraq>)

<sup>90</sup> For example, see: A.L. George, "Some Thoughts on Graduated Escalation," *Rand Corporation*, December 1965, pages 3-4. ([https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_memoranda/2006/RM4844.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_memoranda/2006/RM4844.pdf))

<sup>91</sup> See: Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Analysis: Iranian Missile Strikes Against Kurdish Dissidents in Iraq," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 14, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/09/analysis-iranian-missile-strikes-against-kurdish-dissidents-in-iraq.php>)

- The desired designation – by virtue of congressional mandate – is likely to take time to be implemented. Take for example the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (CAATSA) of 2017. The bill offered a 90-day window for the president to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization pursuant to EO 13224.<sup>92</sup> It is likely that any new attempt by Congress to direct the actions of the executive branch's hand will feature a similar countdown.
- **Harm: Sanctioning proxies would anger Iran, which in turn could cause serious harm to U.S. personnel in Iraq**
  - This is the most serious counterargument because Iran and its proxies retain the capability to retaliate against the U.S. in Iraq. However, to believe that Iran and its proxies have been entirely peaceful until now ignores hostilities such as the recent attacks in Baghdad and Basra against American diplomatic properties. U.S. designations of Iranian proxies is not the driver of violence in Iraq.
    - Contingency planning and force protection must be critical elements of U.S. policy in Iraq. However, like designations, they cannot be the only elements of that policy.
  - Despite the risk of retaliation, there is also reason for very cautious optimism. Iran has threatened massive retaliation before, but it has also backed down when faced with a firm threat of reprisal.<sup>93</sup>
  - In October 2017, Washington ended the debate over the question of “is the IRGC a terrorist group”<sup>94</sup> by designating it under EO 13224. Since then, the IRGC has not wrought havoc in Iraq because of that label due to its own concerns about escalation as well as responding to a non-violent move with overt violence. Moreover, the designation has helped stigmatize the IRGC and its affiliates while increasing the pressure on Iran. It is also the predicate by which the U.S. is able to designate HHH and AAH – for having ties to the IRGC and IRGC-QF.

<sup>92</sup> Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, Pub. L. 115-44, 131 Stat. 886, codified as amended at 115 U.S.C. (<https://www.congress.gov/bills/115th-congress/house-bill/5364/text>)

<sup>93</sup> See the case of the Strait of Hormuz in 2012: David Ignatius, “Getting Iran to back down,” *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2012. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/getting-iran-to-back-down/2012/02/21/gIQA4Mh8TR\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.7bc6f295b53f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/getting-iran-to-back-down/2012/02/21/gIQA4Mh8TR_story.html?utm_term=.7bc6f295b53f)); Elisabeth Bumiller, Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, “U.S. Sends Top Iranian Leader a Warning on Strait Threat,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 2012. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/13/world/middleeast/us-warns-top-iran-leader-not-to-shar-strait-of-hormuz.html>); Joby Warrick and Steven Mufson, “Iran threatens U.S. ships, alarms oil markets,” *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2012. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-in-new-provocation-threatens-us-ships/2012/01/03/gIQA4Mh8TR\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.a46e08c914aa](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-in-new-provocation-threatens-us-ships/2012/01/03/gIQA4Mh8TR_story.html?utm_term=.a46e08c914aa))

<sup>94</sup> The debate surrounding the designation of the IRGC-QF in 2007 centered on fears of Iranian retaliation in Iraq. According to David Crist, the Bush administration wanted to target the entire IRGC, but settled on the Quds Force instead. For more on this, see: David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: The Penguin Press: 2012).



There is a need now more than ever to make sure both countries interpret the document the same way. The U.S. must clarify to the Iraqi government that integrating designated entities into the government can entail risks to the U.S.'s ability to carry out the political and economic sections of the SFA in its entirety.

- **Meet and Plan:** Continue to meet with members of the executive branch – especially the Defense Department – to red team contingency plans that include scenarios about Iraq's political future and the integration of Iran-backed militias into the Iraqi state. The goals should be how best to secure U.S. interests should America face low-probability but high-impact scenarios.
- **Communicate:** Members of the U.S. government (and especially members of Congress) must clearly communicate that stabilizing Iraq is a national security priority. As a major oil exporting state, especially one that has seen ample American blood and finances invested in its defense and stabilization, Iraq cannot fall prey to Iran's regional machinations. This message must be conveyed to both domestic and foreign audiences who are cognizant of the paradox of an administration that wants to be less involved in the Middle East but simultaneously more active in contesting and confronting Iran.
- **Build and Expand:** Some Gulf states are increasingly the targets of Iran's ire and have sought ways to counter and deter Iranian aggression, both at the local and international levels. Congress and the administration should focus get these states to support a strong, stable, and sovereign Iraq to check Iran in the region and impede its use of proxies.
- **Reach out and Connect:** Congress should commence a high-level dialogue with the new Iraqi government on Iran deal-related sanctions. With the heaviest U.S. sanctions on Iran returning in early November, Iran will be looking for ways to bust sanctions using its militia and proxy networks, as well as pressuring Iraq (among other jurisdictions of weak central authority) to not enforce U.S. sanctions.<sup>98</sup> The U.S. must educate Iraqi lawmakers, politicians, as well as banks and businesses about the risks of financial dealings with Iran after November 4. It should also make clear that despite the re-imposition of sanctions waived by the nuclear deal, America still wants its international partners to respect UN restrictions and travel bans from that deal, which Iraq has not been enforcing.<sup>99</sup>

There is an impression right now that America can do, "perhaps not much,"<sup>100</sup> in Iraq. But targeting Iran's network in Iraq is one way to change that. America cannot afford to cede Iraq, with its human capital, natural resources, and legacy of more than a decade of American investment in

<sup>98</sup> Behnam Ben Taleblu and Romany Shaker, "Iran's Allies in Iraq Vow to Help Tehran Skirt U.S. Sanctions," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 16, 2018. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/behnam-ben-taleblu-irans-allies-in-iraq-vow-to-help-tehran-skirt-us-sanctions/>)

<sup>99</sup> See the case of Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Defense Industries Organization in: Valerie Lincy and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Iran's Compliance with UNSCR 2231: Alleged Violations Must Be Addressed," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 2017, pages 5-6. ([http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/MEFMO\\_WPONAC.pdf](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/MEFMO_WPONAC.pdf))

<sup>100</sup> Josh Rogin, "Iraqi terrorist turned politician told U.S. interrogators he worked with Iran to kill Americans," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2018. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/08/30/iraqi-terrorist-turned-politician-told-u-s-interrogators-he-worked-with-iran-to-kill-americans/?utm\\_term=.8a91402e051e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/08/30/iraqi-terrorist-turned-politician-told-u-s-interrogators-he-worked-with-iran-to-kill-americans/?utm_term=.8a91402e051e))

Behnam Ben Taleblu

September 26, 2018

terms of blood and treasure, to Iran. Thank you very much for your time and attention, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. POE. Thank you.  
Dr. Kagan?

**STATEMENT OF KIMBERLY KAGAN, PH.D., PRESIDENT,  
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR**

Ms. KAGAN. Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, colleagues, thank you for inviting me to testify and thank you for your expertise provided today.

Iraq stands at a crossroads. It held a parliamentary election in May 2018, and as of today, it has not formed a government. The composition and the character of the next Government of Iraq will determine whether the U.S. can achieve its long-term goals and objectives, which I outline in my written testimony, through determined U.S. diplomatic engagement, backed by positive and, if needed, coercive instruments of policy.

Iranian political proxies are competing with Iraqi figures acceptable to the U.S. and to the Iraqi people for control of the Iraqi Government. Victory for the Iranian proxies would likely lead to the expulsion of the U.S. from Iraq and de facto Iranian control over Iraqi foreign policy at least, if not its domestic policy also.

Iraqi political parties are prohibited by law from maintaining armed militias, but many, nevertheless, do in reality. The most militarily capable of those militias respond to Iran and, in particular, to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force. These militias have been actively shaping the political environment to influence the government formation process not just politically, but through the use of force. They have also recently fired rockets toward the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad for the first time since 2014.

American interests absolutely require that the future Iraqi Government not include the de facto leaders of these militias. The Iraqi Government has nominally incorporated some of these militias into the Iraqi Security Forces, unfortunately. They have acquired ISF, Iraqi Security Forces unit designations, hoping to obfuscate the fact that they remain distinct militia units responsive to separate chains of command and control.

They have, nevertheless, rebuffed the Prime Minister's recent attempts to declare himself their Commander-in-Chief as recently as this month. Their true allegiance is to their Iranian masters.

These forces will continue to corrode the ISF regardless of who becomes the next Prime Minister if these forces are permitted to remain effectively outside of the Iraqi Prime Minister's control or if the next Prime Minister is himself an Iranian proxy. The situation is unacceptable to the U.S. not simply because it will lead to attacks on American personnel and likely the expulsion of American forces; it will also erode the Iraqi Security Forces capability in the same way that occurred in 2013, allowing ISIS to seize large swaths of Iraq.

The Trump administration has recently begun acting to resist the efforts of Iranian political proxies to capture the Iraqi state. It has begun to use the threat of the imposition of existing American sanctions aimed at Iran against Tehran's agents in Iraq and those who do business with them. Iraq has had to send a delegation to Washington to request special exemptions from these sanctions for

the first time since the U.S. has waived them in the past without demanding any quid pro quo.

The two organizations, AAH and the Nujaba movement, unquestionably, deserve to be sanctioned. And AAH, in particular, is responsible for killing, among others, five Americans in Karbala in 2007, a crime in which its leader, Qais Khazali, was actually complicit. And the Nujaba movement is a splinter of AAH and is establishing itself as a regional terror network.

Now, however, is not the moment for Congress to mandate the imposition of sanctions on these or any other specific groups or individuals in Iraq. The threat of sanctions, either broad or highly targeted, is the most powerful non-military weapon American diplomats in the region have. The behavior of Iraqis as our diplomats have threatened to use this weapon of sanctions demonstrates its significance, because it changes Iraqis' behavior. Our diplomats are showing the determination and skill to use this tool in an extremely delicate effort to keep Iranian agents out of government.

And right now, our priorities should be ensuring that Iraq forms a government that is sovereign, capable, and acceptable. Should the U.S. not be able to do so, or should these organizations, of course, remain after the government formation process, that is the time when Congress should consider mandating these sanctions against these terrorist groups.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Kagan follows:]



*Prepared Testimony of*

**Dr. Kimberly Kagan**  
**President, Institute for the Study of War**

*Before the*

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade**

Hearing on “Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq”

Wednesday, September 26, 2018

The Institute for the Study of War is a non-partisan, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization and does not take institutional positions on legislation. The views expressed in this testimony are solely those of the witness.



Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important topic.

The United States has enduring national security requirements in Iraq. The hard-fought gains of the United States, its global coalition, and the Iraqi people to expel the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) from its strongholds, including Mosul, are necessary but insufficient to ensure long-term American interests in Iraq. The endurance of those gains is threatened, moreover, by factional fighting and major governance failures throughout Iraq that have led both to widespread popular protests and to the mobilization of armed groups.<sup>1</sup>

Core American objectives in Iraq are as follows:

- Deny Iraq as a safe haven to al Qaeda, ISIS, and potential successors by:
  - Destroying their military organizations and preventing them from reconstituting;
  - Diminishing the drivers of instability in which these groups rise and flourish;
  - And ultimately ending the communal civil wars in Iraq and Syria on terms that set conditions to achieve both of the goals above.
- Integrate Iraq into the states system in the Middle East in ways benefiting U.S. interests and allies by:
  - Encouraging U.S. allies to re-establish diplomatic, economic, and other normal state-to-state relations with its Arab neighbors;
  - Maintaining Iraq as a U.S. ally against terrorist groups and state sponsors of terror, including Iran;
  - Ensuring Russia does not become a primary military partner for Iraq;
  - And ultimately extricating Iraq from the global and regional conflict in Syria.
- Prevent Iran from using Iraq as a base for hegemonic expansion in the Middle East by:
  - Ensuring Iraq retains sovereign institutions of government;
  - Extricating Iraq from global and regional conflicts;<sup>2</sup>
  - And denying Iran the ability to recruit, pay, retain, and replenish military proxies for use in Iraq and elsewhere;
- Maintain the free flow of goods, resources, and services that benefit a global economy, while preventing sanctioned countries, persons, and entities from profiting illegally.

Iraq stands at a crossroads. It held a parliamentary election in May 2018. As of September 24, 2018, it has not yet formed a government. The composition and character of the next government will determine whether the U.S. can achieve its goals through determined U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iraq backed by positive and, if needed, coercive instruments of policy.



Iranian political proxies are competing with Iraqi figures acceptable to the U.S. for control of the Iraqi government. Victory for the Iranian proxies would likely lead to the expulsion of the U.S. from Iraq and *de facto* Iranian control over Iraqi foreign policy at least, if not domestic policy.

Iraqi political parties are prohibited by law from maintaining armed militias, but many nevertheless do. The most militarily-capable of those militias belong to the Iranian proxies. They have been actively shaping the political environment to influence the government formation process. They have also recently fired rockets toward the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad for the first time since 2014. American interests absolutely require that the future Iraqi government not include the *de facto* leaders of these militias.

The Iraqi government has nominally incorporated some of these militias directly into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), unfortunately. They have acquired ISF unit designations hoping to obfuscate the fact that they remain distinct militia units. They nevertheless rebuffed the prime minister's attempts to declare himself their commander-in-chief earlier in September 2018. Their true allegiance is to their Iranian masters.<sup>3</sup>

These forces will continue to corrode the ISF regardless of who becomes the next prime minister if they are permitted to remain effectively outside of the Iraqi prime minister's control—or if the next prime minister is himself an Iranian proxy. This situation is unacceptable to the U.S. not simply because it will lead to attacks on American personnel and the likely expulsion of American forces, but also because it will replicate the erosion of ISF capability that allowed ISIS to seize large areas of Iraq in 2014.

The Trump Administration has recently begun acting to resist the efforts of Iranian political proxies to capture the Iraqi state. It has begun, for the first time, to use the threat of the imposition of American sanctions aimed at Iran against Tehran's agents in Iraq and those who do business with them. Iraq has had to send a delegation to Washington to request special exemptions from these sanctions, again for the first time, since the U.S. had waived them without demanding any *quid pro quo* from Iraq in the past.

Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH) unquestionably deserves to be sanctioned for its long history of killing Americans, including most notably the kidnapping and murder of five Americans from Karbala in 2007—a crime in which Qais al Khazali, AAH's leader, was personally complicit. Harakat Hizbullah al Nujaba, a newer group, is establishing itself as a regional terror network in support of Iranian objectives and certainly also, therefore, deserves to be sanctioned.



Now is not the moment, however, for Congress to mandate the imposition of sanctions on these or any other specific groups or individuals in Iraq. The threat of sanctions—either broad or highly-targeted—is the most powerful non-military weapon American diplomats in the region currently have. The behavior of Iraqis as our diplomats have threatened to use that weapon demonstrates its significance. Our diplomats have shown the determination and skill to use this tool in the extremely delicate effort to keep Iranian agents from gaining control of the Iraqi government. They must retain full power to choose exactly when, where, and how to deploy this tool in a series of negotiations that Congress cannot possibly follow or react to in real time.

I do not in principle oppose Congressionally-mandated sanctions against Iranian proxies—or any other enemies of the United States in Iraq or elsewhere. Congress may well quite appropriately revisit the question of sanctioning these or other groups in Iraq once the new Iraqi government has formed and is seated—which may be soon. It is useful, moreover, to have legislation of this type under active consideration in Congress at this time to lend credibility and seriousness to American threats to sanction Iraqi entities. But the time to act on this legislation is after a new government forms and not before.

American national security in Iraq, the region, and beyond absolutely requires rolling back, weakening, and ultimately eliminating armed Iranian proxies beyond the Islamic Republic's borders. The U.S. should use all instruments of national power, including sanctions such as those being considered in this body, other diplomatic and economic pressures and incentives, the strengthening of Iraqi government and security institutions, the long-term deployment of limited American military forces to assist an independent and acceptable Iraqi state, and other means as required. But all such efforts must be coordinated by a region-wide strategy to contain and roll-back Iranian aggression and subversion of its neighbors. The administration must articulate as part of its counter-Iranian efforts a specific long-term approach to removing Iranian-controlled fighting forces from within the ISF and Iraq generally.

Iraq is not yet lost. Iranian influence flowed in to fill the vacuum left by the departure of U.S. forces in 2011 and American hesitancy following ISIS's rise in 2014. Recent administration efforts are clawing back some of the ground that the U.S. has lost to Tehran. Efforts to roll back militias and ensure a sovereign and independent Iraqi government deserve support.

I thank the committee for the opportunity speak before you today, and look forward to your questions.



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- <sup>1</sup> Kimberly Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, "The U.S. Can Defuse Iraq's Crisis," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-can-defuse-iraqs-crisis-1536792976>.
- <sup>2</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Ghambir, Christopher Kozak, Hugo Spaulding, and Katherine Zimmerman, "U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al Qaeda, Report Two: Competing Visions for Syria and Iraq: The Myth of an Anti-ISIS Grand Coalition," Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project, January 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/competing-visions-syria-and-iraq-myth-anti-isis-grand-coalition>.
- <sup>3</sup> Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Omer Kassim, and Patrick Martin, "Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces: Orders of Battle," Institute for the Study of War, December 2017, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iraqi-security-forces-and-popular-mobilization-forces-orders-battle-0>.

Mr. POE. Thank you, Dr. Kagan.  
Mr. Pregent?

**STATEMENT OF MR. MICHAEL PREGENT, SENIOR FELLOW,  
HUDSON INSTITUTE**

Mr. PREGENT. Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-proliferation, and Trade, on behalf of the Hudson Institute, I am honored to testify before you today about countering Iranian proxies in Iraq.

We are being asked today to define the threat of these militias, their role in Iraq, and what we can do about it. I come at this from a different position. I am a former intelligence officer. But when I was asked to do this by General Petraeus and H.R. McMaster in 2007, my job was to find levels of Iranian influence in the Iraqi Government and the Iraqi security intelligence apparatus.

If I had had the amount of intelligence that I have today back in 2007, Qais Khazali wouldn't have 15 seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis would not be the Deputy Commander of the Hashd al-Shaabi, the Popular Mobilization Units. Qassem Soleimani would not be walking the streets after Sunni towns are destroyed in this ISIS campaign.

The level of evidence of Iranian influence in the Iraqi Government has never been higher than it is now, and I can't believe that we are sitting here trying to get Asaib Ahl al-Haq designated as a terrorist group when it has killed Americans when it was a premiere militia responsible for EFP attacks against Americans, explosively formed penetrator attacks against Americans, where it kidnapped five Americans in hopes of trading them for captured IRGC Quds Force operatives, only to have them executed when the raid went wrong.

Qais Khazali had one seat in 2014 in Parliament. Because of our obfuscation in this U.S. anti-ISIS campaign where we actually empowered Iraqi Shiite militias tied to Iran to take credit for the victories against ISIS in this campaign, he now has 15 seats in the COR. My argument today is, discredit Qais Khazali now, sanction Qais Khazali and AAH now, so that once the Iraqi Government is formed, those seats are toxic. No one would want to stand next to Qais Khazali.

We need to make it a point that no Iraqi politician that says they are pro-U.S. can feel comfortable standing next to Qais Khazali. They are very comfortable doing that now. We can't make it comfortable for the current Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, to stand next to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a designated terrorist who is the leader of Kataib Hezbollah. Kataib Hezbollah is already a foreign terrorist organization.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis is already designated. Yet, he is the Deputy Commander of the People's Mobilization Units, or the Popular Mobilization Units. He has killed Americans. He has directed that Americans be killed. He gets a government paycheck. No Iraqi politician is afraid to stand next to him unless you are somebody who is opposed to him being in the government. He commands the budget. He decides what militias get money.

Now Kim brought up a great point. These militias are now in the Iraqi Security Forces. That means they have access to U.S. intelligence, U.S. equipment, U.S. funds. And if I was able to go to General Petraeus in 2007 and say, a Badr Corps officer is actually now the Minister in the Ministry of Defense, he would have said, "I can't believe that."

Qasim al-Araji is the Director of the Ministry of Interior. He is a Badr Corps officer. And the biggest problem that we are talking about now, it is difficult for us to make an argument—I don't know why it is, but there are some on the other side that don't want to designate AAH and Harakat Nujaba. But the key facilitator to everything Qais Khazali wants to do, everything that Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis wants to do, everything that Qassem Soleimani wants to do, is the leader for the Badr Corps, and his name is Hadi al-Amiri. He is the commander of the Hashd al-Shaabi, the People's Mobilization Units.

Qais Khazali, in his declassified tactical intelligence reports, said that Badr Corps trained on explosively formed penetrators, trained on sniper missions, trained on rocket attacks, trained on mortar attacks against U.S. personnel. Yet, we have this argument that is dominant in Washington, DC, that Badr Corps is not as bad as AAH, not as bad as Harakat Nujaba, not as bad as the IRGC Quds Force, when Badr Corps facilitates everything these militias are doing in Iraq, are doing in Syria.

So, I will close with this: We need to listen to the Iraqi people. There is the first time the Shia, Sunni, and Kurds in Iraq have told us to do something about Iranian influence. The Shia have burned down AAH offices. They have burned down Badr Corps offices. They have burned down Kataib Hezbollah's offices, and they burned down the Iranian Consulate. They are trying to tell us something. Listen to them.

And I will stop there.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Pregent follows:]

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Testimony of

**Michael Pregent**

Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

on

**“Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq”**

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism,  
Nonproliferation, and Trade

Wednesday, September 26, 2018

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, on behalf of the Hudson Institute, I am honored to testify before you today about Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq.

We've are being asked today to define the threat of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds (Jerusalem) Force (IRGC-QF) Iraqi militias, their role, and how the U.S. can counter Iran's malign influence.

**How bad is it?** Well, Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force, now has an armed political party that came in second in Iraq's elections. It is named the Fatih Coalition, and it is poised to have a major role in Iraq's next government.<sup>1</sup> They are threatening Americans, they've launched rockets and mortars at our embassy in Baghdad, at our consulate in Basra; they are in Syria, and they want to go to Jerusalem.<sup>2 3</sup>

**Iran's Proxies are positioned to be dominant players in Iraq's new government.**

**Soleimani's directed and funded Iraqi militias have a political party called Fatih and they came in second in Iraq's parliamentary elections.** They came in second to Moqtada al-Sadr, a man who directed militia attacks against the U.S. on behalf of Qassem Soleimani, and ahead of Prime Minister Hader al-Abadi, a man that stood aside along with U.S. officials and allowed IRGC-QF Iraqi militias to grow influence over Iraq's political and security situation.<sup>4</sup>

Fatih coalition members, to include the new Sunni speaker of the Council of Representatives, are taking pro-Iran positions to include threatening the U.S., condemning the U.S., and announcing that Iraq would not adhere to U.S. sanctions on Iran.<sup>5</sup>

**What is Fatih?** Fatih is comprised of key IRGC-QF militias and enablers.

<sup>1</sup> Falih Hassan and Rod Nordland, "Iraqi Political Alliance Unites a U.S. Friend and Foe" *NYT*, June 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/world/middleeast/iraq-elections-prime-minister.html>

<sup>2</sup> John Irish and Ahmed Rasheed, "Exclusive: Iran moves missiles to Iraq in warning to enemies" *Reuters*, August 31, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-missiles-exclusive/exclusive-iran-moves-missiles-to-iraq-in-warning-to-enemies-idUSKCN1LG0WB>

<sup>3</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "White House Blames Iranian-Backed Militias for Attacking U.S. Facilities in Iraq" *WSJ*, September 11, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-blames-iranian-backed-militias-for-attacking-u-s-facilities-in-iraq-1536707458>

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Aboulenein, Maher Chmayteli, "Populist cleric Sadr all but wins Iraq election" *Reuters*, May 13, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election/populist-cleric-sadr-all-but-wins-iraq-election-idUSKCN1IE091>

<sup>5</sup> Amir Toumaj, "Analysis: Tehran's push to force US exit from Iraq" *Long War Journal*, September 21, 2018. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/09/analysis-tehrans-push-to-force-us-exit-from-iraq.php>

**Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes has killed Americans.** Mohandes is the leader of the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed Kataib Hezbollah or Hezbollah Brigades, and is also the deputy commander of the Hashd al-Shaabi or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU).<sup>6</sup>

Mohandes is also a designated terrorist and his group is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. Surprisingly, Mohandes receives a paycheck from the Iraqi government, has access to U.S. intelligence, equipment, and funding through a Badr militia network in the Iraqi Security Forces. The PMU have been absorbed into the Iraqi Security Forces and now fall under the Prime Minister's office.<sup>7</sup>

**Qays Khazali has killed Americans.** Khazali is the commander of the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed Asaib ahl al-Haqq, or League of the Righteous, a group that has killed Americans, continues to threaten Americans in Iraq and Syria, and is responsible for launching mortar and rocket attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and the consulate in Basra<sup>8</sup>. Khazali is also a member of the Fatih coalition, and his group AAH went from 1 seat in parliament to 15 seats.<sup>9</sup>

**Akram al-Kaabi has killed Americans.** Al-Kaabi, formally of Asaib ahl al-Haqq, leads the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed militia Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. Akram al-Kaabi is designated for killing Americans and his group was attacked by U.S. airstrikes in Syria for threatening U.S. forces in al-Tanf, Syria.<sup>10 11</sup>

Akram al-Kaabi is no friend of the Iraqi Government and has said if the Supreme Leader gave the word he would overthrow the Baghdad Government.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> David Daoud, "PMF deputy commander Muhandis details Hezbollah ops in Iraq" *Long War Journal*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/pmf-deputy-commander-muhandis-details-hezbollah-ops-in-iraq.php>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq" *DOT*, July 2, 2009. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "White House Blames Iranian-Backed Militias for Attacking U.S. Facilities in Iraq" *WSJ*, September 11, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-blames-iranian-backed-militias-for-attacking-u-s-facilities-in-iraq-1536707458>

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Pollack, "The unfortunate rise of the Khazali Network" *AEI* August 30, 2018. <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-unfortunate-rise-of-the-khazali-network/>

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Fueling Violence in Iraq" *DOT*, September 16, 2008. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1141.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "The Iraqi militia helping Iran carve a road to Damascus" Reuters, September 22, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/tags/harakat-al-nujaba>

<sup>12</sup> Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Iraqi Shiite militia leader says he would overthrow government if ordered by Iran's supreme leader" *Long War Journal*, November 12, 2015.

**To counter Iran's Proxies in Iraq we must first acknowledge that Badr Corps is Iran's premiere proxy in Iraq.** Badr facilitates everything Iran's IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani, Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes, Qays Khazali, and Akram al-Kaabi want to do in Iraq and Syria. Badr is Iran's premiere proxy in Iraq and Qassem's go-to is Hadi al-Ameri.

Soleimani's greatest asset is Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed Badr Corps. Ameri is also the head of the Fatih coalition and the commander of the Hashd al-Shaabi where Badr, Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib ahl al-Haqq, Harakat Nujaba, and Kataib Imam Ali are the command and control structure for the hundred-thousand-man force.  
13 14

Hadi al-Ameri facilitates everything Qassem Soleimani wants to do in Iraq through his network of highly placed Badr officers throughout Iraq's intelligence and security apparatus. Ameri's lieutenants facilitate IRGC-QF militia activities, procure U.S. M1 Abrahams tanks, have access to U.S. intelligence through Qassem al-Araji's MOI<sup>15</sup>, and have access to funds through the Prime Minister's security budget.<sup>16</sup>

Soleimani's premiere proxy is Badr Corps. In Khazali's Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIR), he states Badr Corps trained in Iraq on the same tactics AAH did to target Americans.<sup>17</sup> Badr Corps is the face Soleimani wants to show to the U.S. We often hear the argument from senior U.S. officials that, "Badr isn't as bad as the others". In fact, Badr is worse. Badr facilitates and masks everything Soleimani, Mohandes, and Khazali, and Akram al-Kaabi are doing in Iraq.

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<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/us-designated-terrorist-of-iraqi-militia-reportedly-in-aleppo.php>

<sup>13</sup> Guido Steinberg, "The Badr Organization: Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq" *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, July 2017. [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C26\\_sbg.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C26_sbg.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Phillip Smyth, "Iranian Militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response" *WINEP*, June 11, 2018. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-militias-in-iraqs-parliament-political-outcomes-and-u.s.-response>

<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, "Iraq Interior Minister Qassem al-Araji Was Twice Detained by U.S." May 8, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iraq-interior-minister-qasim-al-araji-was-twice-detained-u-n756166>

<sup>16</sup> Inspector General, Department of Defense, "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | October 1, 2017 – December 31, 2017" *DOD*, February 2, 2018. <http://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/1430685/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-and-operation-pacific-eag/>

<sup>17</sup> Josh Rogin, "Iraqi terrorist turned politician told U.S. interrogators he worked with Iran to kill Americans" *Washington Post*, August 30, 2018 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/08/30/iraqi-terrorist-turned-politician-told-u-s-interrogators-he-worked-with-iran-to-kill-americans/?utm\\_term=.eec64b8493bb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/08/30/iraqi-terrorist-turned-politician-told-u-s-interrogators-he-worked-with-iran-to-kill-americans/?utm_term=.eec64b8493bb)

Badr's saturation of Iraq's Security Forces is none more evident than having top Badr officer Qassem al-Araji, detained twice by U.S. forces for providing lethal aid to kill Americans, as the Minister of Interior.<sup>18</sup> His ministry facilitates IRGC-QF militia access to U.S. intelligence, funds, and equipment.

#### **Arguments for Designation and Targeting.**

**Designated terrorists and terrorist organizations are seeking to destabilize Iraq**, they are threatening Americans in Iraq and Syria, and they have access to U.S. intelligence, funds, and equipment. Designated terrorists are being rejected by Iraqis, and their terrorist organization affiliates are having their offices set ablaze by Iraqis who have had enough of Iran and its proxies. It's time for the U.S. to do what Sunnis, Kurds, and now Shia Iraqis are asking us to do – stand behind them and give them strength to push back against Qassem Soleimani.<sup>19</sup>

**Asaib ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba were created, funded, and trained by the IRGC Quds Force** – these IRGC-QF militias answer directly to Qassem Soleimani and grew their influence under the U.S. ISIS campaign.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Policy Recommendations.**

##### **Maximum Pressure Campaign is needed for Kataib Hezbollah.**

We need a maximum pressure campaign on Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes and his Kataib Hezbollah militia. Mohandes and Kataib Hezbollah are designated, and I'm not sure they feel it. Kataib Hezbollah has penetrated Iraq's economic sectors to benefit the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah. Everything and everyone Kataib Hezbollah touches should be subject to U.S. secondary sanctions.

**Designate Badr.** Badr is not the Baath party – De-Baathification affected teachers, technocrats, relatives, anyone who was employed by the Saddam regime had to join the party. Badr is simply an IRGC-QF proxy, it is not a party, and being a member of Badr is not required to be in government. De-Baathification is needed in Iraq, de-Baathification will end Soleimani's ability to use legitimate institutions such as the Ministry of Defense (MOD), Ministry of Interior (MOI), Ministry of Transportation (MOT), and Ministry of Energy (MOE) to further Iran's strategic hold on Iraq's security apparatus and sever Soleimani's penetration of Iraq's economic sectors.

<sup>18</sup> Associated Press, "Iraq Interior Minister Qassem al-Araji Was Twice Detained by U.S." May 8, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iraq-interior-minister-qasim-al-araqi-was-twice-detained-u-n756166>

<sup>19</sup> Isabel Coles and Ali Nabhan, "Iraqi Protesters Torch Iranian Consulate" *WSJ*, September 7, 2018 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-protesters-torch-iranian-consulate-1536356602>

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Majidyar and Husayn Hosoda, "Iran-Backed Iraqi Groups Threaten Violence Following U.S. Terrorism Bill" December, 6, 2017. <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/iran-backed-iraqi-groups-threaten-violence-following-us-terrorism-bill>

**Sanction Qays Khazali and Asaib ahl al-Haqq (AAH).** We must sanction Qays Khazali to discredit Qays Khazali, sanction Qays Khazali because Iran doesn't want us to and the Iraqis protesting do. Sanction Qays Khazali to disrupt his position ahead of government formation – sanction him so that politicians that want to work with the US ahead of Iran see a message that the US will not overlook the IRGC-QF's influence in the Iraqi government.

**Sanction Akram al-Kaabi and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN).** Akram al-Kaabi directed Americans be killed during the Iraq War and is threatening to do so again. Akram al-Kaabi's group has moved on American forces in Syria and as a result, his forces were attacked and decimated by American air power. He is threatening to target and kill Americans again in Iraq and Syria.

By not sanctioning AAH and addressing the IRGC-QF's influence in Iraq has created a Force Protection issue. The argument that designating AAH and HHN will put US soldiers at risk is a straw man argument – allowing AAH and HHN to grow their influence by ignoring their role puts our soldiers at risk.

**Listen to Iraqis.** All Iraqis are saying no to Iran's malign influence in Iraq except for the religious parties and militias tied to Iran – the ones we are unfortunately backing as well. Now is the time to use U.S. leverage and Treasury tools to help Iraqis limit Iran's influence and bring Iraq back into its traditional role as a bulwark against Iranian aggression and expansion.

We can do this by increasing our pressure campaign on the designated FTO Kataib Hezbollah, by not granting waivers for Iraq to do business with Iran, and to designate Asaib ahl al-Haqq and Harakat al-Nujaba. Let's make it hard for Hadi al-Ameri to be in the same room with Soleimani and his designated lieutenants – Ameri and Badr Corps need to feel that they are next.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee.

Michael Pregent  
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Michael Pregent

Mike Pregent is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. He is a senior Middle East analyst, a former adjunct lecturer for the College of International Security Affairs, and a visiting fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

Pregent is a former intelligence officer with over 28 years' experience working security, terrorism, counter-insurgency, and policy issues in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. He is an expert in Middle East and North Africa political and security issues, counter-terrorism analysis, stakeholder communications, and strategic planning.

He spent considerable time working malign Iranian influence in Iraq as an advisor to Iraq's Security and Intelligence apparatus, including an embedded advisory role with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's extra-constitutional Office of the Commander-in-Chief. An office set up to ensure Iranian-backed Shia militia party control of Iraq's security and political process.

Pregent served in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, served as a liaison officer in Egypt during the 2000 Intifada, as a counter-insurgency intelligence officer at CENTCOM in 2001, and as a company commander in Afghanistan in 2002.

Pregent served as an embedded advisor with the Peshmerga in Mosul 2005-06. Also, as a civilian SME working for DIA, he served as a political and military advisor to USF-I focusing on reconciliation, the insurgency, and Iranian influence in Iraq from 2007-2011. He was a violent extremism and foreign fighter analyst at CENTCOM from 2011-2013.

He holds a Masters in Strategic Public Relations from The George Washington University and is a graduate of the U.S. Army's Defense Language Institute in Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian Dialect.

Mike is a free-lance writer for the *The Wall Street Journal* and a contributing writer to the *Daily Beast*.

Mike Pregent has numerous publications on ISIS, Iran's Qods Force, and on Syria and Iraq. His writings have been published in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, *The Tower Magazine*, *Long War Journal*, *New America Foundation*, *CNN*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Business Insider*, and the *Daily Beast*.

Mike frequently appears as an expert analyst on Shia militias, Iran, Iraq, and ISIS with appearances on BBC World News, MSNBC, Al-Jazeera International, CNN, CNN International, VOA Persia, and Fox News.

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Mr. POE. Thank you.  
Ambassador?

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE BARBARA LEAF,  
ROSENBLATT DISTINGUISHED VISITING FELLOW, THE  
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY**

Ms. LEAF. Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished committee members, on behalf of the Washington Institute, thank you for the opportunity to appear today to offer my perspective on a new variant of an old challenge for the United States and Iraq and some suggestions for how we might proceed in the period ahead.

No issue has so confounded U.S. policymakers across three administrations as how best to counter the role of Iran and the proxy forces it established on the terrain of its one-time foe. Washington has felt frustrated in its ability to blunt Iran's predatory and destabilizing activities. Certainly, Iran achieved its overriding strategic goal over the last 15 years, ensuring that Iraq could not pose a national security threat to Iran.

To that point, Tehran used a varied set of tools, proliferation of well-equipped and trained Shia militias, subordinating and intimidating Iraqi politicians, directly intervening to shape a compliant government in Baghdad, gaining economic leverage over Iraq at large, and infiltrating Iraqi Security Forces.

But much of Iran's earlier success was a product of exploiting three factors: The internal weakness of Iraq, U.S. mistakes, and the external environment. Changes wrought in all three do not wholly favor Iran today, and they offer material for crafting a refreshed and integrated U.S. approach to Iraq.

As the Senate follows action by the House to consider legislation for imposing U.S. sanctions on these two Iranian-controlled Iraqi militias, I would urge the administration to do the following or consider the following: Don't interrupt Iran while it is making mistakes. Tehran is suffering some of its most dramatic setbacks in Iraq since 2003, including violent anti-Iranian protests in Basra recently. A move for comprehensive sanctions on Asaib Al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah would give Tehran a welcome chance to change this narrative to an anti-U.S. focus.

Designate Harakat Hezbollah as a warning shot. There is less prospect for blowback. The militia does not take part in the political process and its leader was previously designated.

Issue Asaib Ahl al-Haq sanctions at the right moment and on its leader first. Quietly signal to Iraqi interlocutors that Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais Khazali and the group will be designated eventually, but hold off for now during delicate government formation.

Don't crowd all the Shia factions to close ranks around Asaib ahl al-Haq. Iraqi leaders appear readier to swallow sanctions on the case than on the group writ large. Many of the group's foot soldiers joined after 2014 to fight ISIS, not to further a pro-Iranian agenda.

Finally, coordinate with the new Iraqi Government. This is going to be challenging. Consulting is a gesture of no surprises/respect for the new government of a friendly country, and it may help us and the new Prime Minister manage the internal reaction productively.

The final three points: The Iraq of 2018 is not the Iraq of 2005 or 2011. Iraqi nationalism is percolating vividly just beneath the surface of the body politic with a corresponding antipathy toward Iran, and that presents a bold opportunity for the U.S., if handled adroitly.

Washington, likewise, is different. The Trump administration appears fixed on fixing Iran's destabilizing regional activities. If it is serious, Iraq is the place to set that effort in motion with method and energy. Don't be limited to sanctions. Remind the Iraqi public and political class what ties with the U.S. offer that Iran cannot: Respect for Iraqi sovereignty, help in gaining security and stability, access to international financing and investment that will help create jobs.

Finally, Iraq's isolation of earlier years has ebbed, replaced by warming ties with Jordan and a similar trend with its Gulf neighbors. The U.S. must press those partners to deepen their engagement with Baghdad.

The contest for influence in Iraq for too many years has been a lonely game for the U.S. against Iran. It need not be. Washington's Arab allies have proximity; common language; shared history, not all of it unpleasant; some of them, deep pockets; all of them, sound national security reasons to pull Iraq firmly back into the community of nations.

Unlike Washington, Tehran has an unblinking focus on Iraq, linked to its efforts in Syria. As with Syria, Iran's influence in Iraq corresponds directly to the degree that Iraq is weakened, estranged from its neighbors, and isolated internationally. The U.S. must do what it does best, what Iran cannot do: Mobilize other regional and European partners as well as international financial institutions to the effort of bringing stability and security to this vital country.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Leaf follows:]




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## Containing Iranian Proxies in Iraq

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

September 26, 2018

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee to offer my perspective on a new variant of an old challenge for the United States in Iraq, and some suggestions to consider for how we might proceed in the period ahead as Iraqi politicians form a new government.

Perhaps no issue has so confounded U.S. policymakers across three administrations in their approach to Iraq as that of countering the role of Iran and the proxy forces it established on the terrain of its onetime foe. Whether with political, economic, or military tools, Washington has repeatedly felt frustrated in its ability to blunt Iran's predatory and destabilizing approach to Iraq.

Iran achieved its overriding strategic goal in Iraq over the course of the past decade and a half: ensuring that Iraq could not pose a national security threat to Iran. Tehran used a varied set of tools: proliferation of well-resourced, equipped and trained Shia militia proxies, some of which morphed into political actors; suborning and intimidating Iraqi politicians; directly intervening to attempt to shape a compliant (or at least non-hostile) government in Baghdad; and infiltrating Iraqi security forces. But I would argue that much of Iran's earlier success was a product of exploiting three factors: the internal circumstances in Iraq; U.S. mistakes in both policies and activities; and the external environment in Iraq's immediate neighborhood and the wider region. In other words, it is worth reflecting thoroughly on the changes wrought in all three—which, perhaps counter-intuitively, do not wholly favor Iran—as a way of crafting a refreshed and integrated policy approach to Iraq.

In that regard, as the Senate follows action by the House to consider draft legislation—the “Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act” which calls for imposing U.S. sanctions on two Iranian-controlled Iraqi militias, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN)—I would urge the Administration to assess the how and when of using such a tool. I would recommend the Administration deploy it as part of a larger integrated and re-energized strategy; that the United States do so carefully weighing timing and sequencing, so as to minimize Iran's manipulation of the issue at this delicate stage of Iraq's government formation process; and that it consult with Iraq's new government in proceedings.

Factors internal and external to Iraq present significant new challenges to Iran in using its tried-and-true playbook there. The Iraq of 2018 also offers opportunities to the United States if Washington is willing and able to invest the requisite energy in the bilateral relationship. It is more urgent than ever that Washington do so. A progressive sense of drift of U.S. attention, coupled with an excessive focus on

picking “our guy” at each phase of government formation, risks ceding the advantage to Iran. Unlike Washington, Tehran has an unblinking focus on its neighbor, which it views as part and parcel of its efforts in Syria.

The United States must also do what it does best—what Iran cannot do—mobilize other regional and European partners, as well as international financial institutions, to the effort of bringing stability and security to this vital country.

#### **THE SOURCES OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE**

There has long been a tendency among some analysts and policymakers (including in the Gulf) to view Iran’s principal inroad in Iraq as sectarian in nature, given Iraq’s Shia majority. A review of the multiple tools Tehran has deployed over time underscores that this is both an outdated and overly simplistic perspective.

##### *Shared History with Some, Willingness to Work with All*

In the immediate days of post-Saddam Iraq, Iran could and did draw on a set of deep relationships and shared history with the spectrum of major Shia political figures who re-entered Iraqi politics, many of whom had spent years in exile or in hiding in Iran; others, like Badr chief Hadi al-Ameri and members of the Dawa Party and Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), had a deeper kinship, forged in fighting alongside Iranian forces against Iraq in the 1980-1988 war. But Tehran had never neglected relations with Iraqi Kurdish leaders, who have made the trek to consult with Tehran with as much regularity as Baghdad’s Shia political class. Even Sunni leaders have been wooed.

##### *Familiar Playbook*

From the opening days of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, U.S. forces faced the phenomenon of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, which grew in number, strength, and lethality over the course of the ensuing eight years of the American troop presence there. Indeed, Iranian-backed militias pulled off two of their most notorious and lethal attacks, in Karbala and Baghdad, against American and British personnel, at the high-water mark of the U.S. combat presence in Iraq in 2007, when U.S. forces numbered approximately 166,000, alongside an additional 12,000 coalition troops. Iran methodically proliferated these militias, peeling off elements from Muqtada al-Sadr’s movement and Hadi al-Ameri’s Badr Organization to form groups like Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah.

##### *Promising Internal Environment*

Iraq’s descent into turmoil, sectarian violence, and a full-blown Sunni insurgency played havoc with U.S. efforts to stabilize the country, but provided a permissive operating environment for Iranian lethal-aid efforts. Over the course of each national election, IRGC-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani became a powerful kingmaker and broker behind Baghdad’s closed doors.

##### *Promising External Environment*

A pariah state under Saddam, isolated politically and economically under UN sanctions, estranged from its Sunni neighbors following its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Iraq from 2003 on had little prospect of reintegration into the regional family of nations. Indeed, its internal turmoil ensured Iraqi leaders were focused inward; the U.S. troop presence, even after the signing of the 2008 Security Agreement between Baghdad and Washington, offered a convenient excuse for regional states to shun Iraq as “occupied”; and demographics in a democratic Iraq, in which a Shia majority perpetually viewed by Iraq’s neighbors as

“in Tehran’s pocket” would dominate the national government, gave Tehran the ultimate advantage in deepening and exploiting Iraq’s isolation.

#### **THE UNITED STATES: PLAYING THE SHORT TERM, ON IRAN’S TERMS**

Set side by side, U.S. investment of resources in Iraq from 2003 to 2018 would seem to dwarf Iran’s (albeit exact figures on Tehran’s spending are elusive). Washington’s spending in Iraq—combining defense, reconstruction, stabilization, and assistance expenditures—totaled well over \$2 trillion. Borrowing from a model used in Afghanistan, the United States also moved in 2005 to establish an eventual sixteen Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) across Iraq (with a smaller number embedded with U.S. military units around Baghdad), led by U.S. diplomats and staffed by civilian subject matter experts to bring development assistance, technical and administrative capacity-building, and rule-of-law training directly to the provincial level of the country.

I led such a team in Basrah from 2010 to 2011, in a highly kinetic environment fostered by the full spectrum of Iranian-backed militias in the country, which regularly directed mortar and rocket attacks at the base where we were co-located with U.S. division headquarters. My staff and I, like U.S. forces, were regularly targeted by these militias with IEDs and EFPs.

There was no question that then, as now, U.S. personnel were at a severe disadvantage to Iranian “diplomats” and agents, who moved freely in an environment that Tehran and its proxies had methodically made inhospitable and insecure for us and Westerners in general. The development of these Iraqi militias by Iran thus had multiple purposes: fighting an asymmetrical war against U.S. and coalition forces; providing Tehran leverage on and against an ostensibly friendly government in Baghdad; keeping Iraq perpetually unstable and Iraqi security services intimidated by and incapable of constraining the militias; fostering a forbidding and insecure environment for Western governments, businesses, or other agents of outside influence; intimidating Iraqi politicians and the public; and ultimately, ensuring Iraq’s continuing estrangement from its Sunni neighbors.

Washington’s preoccupation over successive elections (encouraged by Iraq’s own politicians) with picking “the right man” to push as prime minister as a means of achieving U.S. strategic goals was ultimately a game that carried risks and—most notably in the case of Nouri al-Maliki—backfired. Ironically, Maliki was also “Soleimani’s man.” But he is forever after termed “Washington’s man,” as a result of a bitterly contested, drawn-out government formation process in 2010. It was the sectarian policies he pursued after the U.S. troop withdrawal, and as Washington’s hands-on approach to Iraq disappeared, that contributed devastatingly to both the emergence of ISIS and the collapse of Iraq’s security forces in the spring of 2014 as ISIS overran Ramadi and Mosul.

#### **IRAQI ELECTIONS: ACUTE VOTER ALIENATION AND BAGHDAD-CENTRIC DEALMAKING**

Iraq has just completed the first act of a three-act play, forming a national government following elections on May 12. These elections were distinguished by exceptionally low voter turnout (a claimed 44 percent that was more likely closer to 25 percent, the lowest by far since the first parliamentary elections in 2006); widely perceived corruption, including in the follow-on recount; no commanding lead for any of the Shia parties; and splintered ranks among the Sunnis and Kurds, the latter heretofore the kingmakers in government formation. In addition to the poor showing of Prime Minister Abadi—despite presiding over the victory against ISIS—another surprise was the jump in seats for Asaib Ahl al-Haq, from 1 in 2014 to 15 in this year’s run.

In the race to build a coalition that would form the next government, the two front-runners, Muqtada al-Sadr and Hadi al-Ameri, competed against each other to woo many of the same allies. Policy agendas played no role. This was strictly transactional deal-making, quite unplugged from the country's enormous problems.

The United States, by all accounts, has focused single-mindedly on a second term for Abadi; awkwardly, he was an early candidate for inclusion in the coalition being shaped by Sadr, whose militia battled U.S. troops from 2003 to 2011, and who foreswore any contact with U.S. officials even after the 2011 troop withdrawal. Iran initially backed the efforts of two allies, Hadi al-Ameri and Nouri al-Maliki, who worked closely with two successive administrations.

#### **AND TREND LINES: NATIONALISM PERCOLATING, FRUSTRATION WITH POOR GOVERNANCE BOILING**

The Baghdad-centric government formation game ensued side by side with—and apparently impervious to—an eruption in July of public protests in Basrah, Iraq's second-largest city and heart of the country's energy resources. Chronic electricity and clean water shortages, the former made worse by Iran's diversion of the first for its own domestic needs and the latter by the catastrophic failure of Basrah's water-treatment plant, sparked protests that took a spectacular and violent turn in September.

The ultimate loser in the domestic tumult that ensued was “Washington's man,” Prime Minister Abadi, as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani publicly enjoined Baghdad's politicians to put to the side those leaders who had already been “tried” (and found wanting). Former PM Nouri al-Maliki was the other casualty, and two former competitors, Sadr and Ameri, pushed by Qasem Soleimani, joined efforts to build out the first elements of government formation, a Sunni speaker of the Parliament and two deputy speakers. Iran's agility and willingness to drop one favored coalition element (Maliki) and work with another (Sadr)—despite a long history of difficult relations with the latter—led the Baghdad political class to deem Tehran the winner/Washington the loser in this episode of the Iraqi political game.

But the spectacle of enraged Iraqi protesters in September sacking and burning not just the symbols of the state, but for the first time the offices of Iranian-backed militias and parties, as well as Iran's consulate, was extraordinary. The events—in Iraq's Shia heartland—offered potent evidence of two factors which do not augur well for Iranian interests in the long-term: percolating Iraqi nationalism (with a not-so-latent anti-Iranian character) and seething public grievances with poor governance, poor service delivery, and Iraq's economic weakness, despite its status as the fourth largest oil producer globally and the prospective wealth it holds in the world's fifth largest oil reserves, two-thirds of which are in Basrah.

#### **BACK TO BASICS FOR THE LONG GAME: U.S. INFLUENCE AND POWER**

Against such a turbulent backdrop, one seemingly navigated adroitly by Iran's chief of Iraq policy, Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani, it is tempting to conclude that the United States will always be severely disadvantaged—by Iran's proximity, its coercive tools and infiltration of Iraqi parties and institutions, its years of effort and commitment to the project.

But while the operating environment in Iraq for America's diplomats and military remains as challenging as ever, the United States has a coherent and—most importantly—positive set of national security goals that align well with those of Iraq, including its next government, and the security, economic and political tools to pursue them. Those goals, across three very different U.S. administrations—a stable, sovereign, secure Iraq, reintegrated into its neighborhood—remain as vital as ever, and in conflict with Tehran's own zero-sum proposition for Iraq. They also speak well to that 60 percent of Iraq's nearly 40 million citizens

who are twenty-five or younger, whose aspirations—for jobs, decent public services, security—depend on the country breaking out of the isolation that has plagued it for forty years.

Iran's isolation and straitened financial resources have sharpened its coercive approach to Iraqi politicians in this latest period of government formation. The proliferation of its proxies in post-ISIS Iraq has provided Tehran with a greater power to intimidate Iraq's political party chieftains than ever before. Credible stories of not-so-veiled death threats in the mix of discussions over the speaker election abound. But Iran is isolated in the wider region—with only Bashar al-Assad's Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and Yemen's Houthis to call its allies—and internationally, Tehran fares little better beyond highly transactional relationships with Russia and China.

Ultimately, Tehran relies on isolating and weakening its neighbor—and playing divide-and-rule within Iraq's three major communities—to address its own national security goals. Iran's economic policies are similarly predatory. Those goals and policies are wearing thin on significant parts of the Iraqi public, to judge by September's riots.

#### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Sanctioning AAH and HHN, while eminently justifiable in legal terms, is a tool which should be levied with an eye to timing and sequencing to maximize the desired effects and minimize Tehran's ability to exploit domestic Iraqi backlash.

- Don't interrupt Iran while it is making mistakes. Tehran is suffering some of its most public and dramatic setbacks in Iraq since 2003, with protestors chanting "Iran out," burning images of the Supreme Leader, and looting the Basrah consulate. Wading in right now with comprehensive U.S. sanctions on AAH and HHN would give Tehran a welcome distraction and a chance to change the narrative, whip up Iraqi nationalism, and put pressure on Iraqi politicians to defend the two groups.
- Designate HHN first as a warning shot. Placing sanctions on HHN offers little prospect of significant blowback in Iraq. Like Kataib Hezbollah, HHN does not take part in the political process; its leader was previously designated for "threatening the peace and stability of Iraq." HHN remains active in Syria, and targeting it would serve the dual purpose of highlighting U.S. resolve on that front. Notably, the group can be designated by executive order at any time; the administration need not be tied to Congress's timeline.
- Issue AAH sanctions at the right moment. For now, Washington should quietly signal key Iraqi interlocutors that AAH leader Qais al-Khazali and AAH will be designated eventually. This must be done carefully so that the issue does not land like a bomb in the middle of government formation talks, which would likely force all Shia militia leaders—even Sadr—to close ranks. Washington should therefore be prepared to wait on announcing formal designations and sanctions. As with HHN, the president can sanction AAH by executive order at any time.
- Sanction Khazali before AAH. Iraqi leaders appear readier to swallow sanctions on Khazali than sanctions on AAH writ large, apparently viewing the group's leaders as more nefarious than its rank-and-file fighters. Washington has precedent for such a move in designating HHN leader Akram Kaabi years before seeking sanctions on his group. This approach may split Khazali and other AAH leaders away from the group's foot soldiers, many of whom joined after 2014 specifically to fight the Islamic State, not to further a pro-Iranian agenda. Designating AAH as a whole could follow later; in fact, the prospect of such sanctions could incentivize the Iraqi government to demobilize AAH soldiers more urgently.

- Coordinate with the new Iraqi government. The final complexion of the government that emerges—and the future prime minister—may make this challenging, but an effort to communicate the intent and the context for the decision, privately and ahead of the public announcement in Washington, is both a gesture of common “no surprises” respect for the government of a friendly country, and may help us—and the new PM—manage the internal reaction productively.

*The Iraq of 2018 Is Not the Iraq of 2005 or 2011*

Iraqi nationalism is percolating just beneath the surface of the body politic—with a corresponding antipathy towards Iran—as is a boiling sense of public anger about poor governance and public services.

*Washington, Likewise, Is Different*

The Trump Administration appears fixed on “fixing” Iran’s undermining of regional partners in a way that the two preceding administrations were not; whether the strategy as such amounts to more than heated rhetoric and reimposition of crushing sanctions is less clear. Certainly, if the Administration is serious about containing Iran’s efforts in the region, there is no place (aside from Syria) more important to set to that effort with seriousness, method, and energy; unlike Syria, Iraq offers a cleaner playing field. The Administration’s latest efforts in calling back to service Ambassador Jim Jeffrey as envoy on Syria, and the evidence emerging of a more coherent policy on Syria—retaining a blocking/constraining U.S. troop presence, engaging Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and key European allies—is quite encouraging in that regard.

A similar multipronged effort is needed on Iraq, with visible participation by senior officials in Washington. This is no suggestion to go back to the era of weekly video conferences by the President or Vice President with the Iraqi PM. But it must be clear to Iraq’s public, its political class, and to Iran that Washington has an enduring commitment to a strategic relationship with Iraq. An early trip to Baghdad and Erbil by Secretaries Pompeo and Mattis will provide a clear signal of intent. Discussion about a long-term training mission for Iraq’s security forces, including the Counter-Terrorism Service, should be high on the agenda. But the issue of a U.S. force presence should not swamp discussion of all other aspects of the bilateral relationship. Likewise, an early invitation to Washington to the new PM and key members of the cabinet should be a priority, with a proposal for a structured approach to meeting annually.

*Finally, Iraq’s Isolation of Earlier Years Has Ebbd*

Saddam’s legacy, as well as the by-product of Iran’s “ownership” of a Shia-dominated Baghdad, poisonous relations between Saudi King Abdullah and former PM Nouri al-Maliki, and the regional politics over U.S. “occupation of Iraq,” has been replaced by a warming of ties with Jordan and at least the beginning of the same trend with its Gulf neighbors. The United States must engage with those partners to push for deepening of their engagement with Baghdad.

The contest for influence in Iraq for too many years has been a lonely game for the United States against Iran. It need not be. Washington’s Arab allies have proximity, common language, and history (not all of it unpleasant), some of them deep pockets, and all of them sound national security reasons to pull Iraq firmly back into the community of states. The United States should do what it does best—lead the way.

Mr. POE. Thank you all very much.

I believe that what the four of you have said is probably news to most Americans, completely unaware of the situations that you have talked about. And that is unfortunate.

Ambassador, is the United States in the business of nation-building of Iraq?

Ms. LEAF. No, not at this point.

Mr. POE. Dr. Kagan, do you believe that the United States is in the business of nation-building?

Ms. KAGAN. No, I do not. I believe the United States is in the business of helping Iraq secure itself; helping to keep Iraq sovereign, and helping Iraq to stabilize after ISIS took it over.

Mr. POE. Okay. Dr. Pregent, I could tell you wanted to answer that question. I skipped you real quick.

Mr. PREGENT. I would say the United States, unfortunately, has been the role of obfuscating the role of Iran. When we talk about what we are trying to do in Iraq, we are basically taking the Dawa Party position. We are taking a Shia political party tied to Iran's position on the way forward in Iraq and we are not listening to the Iraqi people.

Our intelligence community didn't see ISIS coming. We didn't see Iran's creeping influence because of the intelligence gaps that we had, based on the level of engagement with Iraq, because we are talking to the Dawa Party and we are talking to Iraqi generals. And I have never met an Iraqi politician who has ever said the situation got worse on his watch or her watch, and I have never met an Iraqi general that said the situation got worse on his watch.

Mr. POE. Mr. Taleblu?

Mr. TALEBLU. No, I don't believe that the U.S. policy is nation-building, but I do believe that the U.S. does want to disabuse itself of Iraq entirely. And the reason I say that is the reason we are having a hearing about do these entities or do Iran's proxies in Iraq warrant designation in 2018 and not in 2007 or 2017 or 2016. It is because Washington simply seems to be pivoting away from Iraq and the Middle East at a time when Iran is looking to escalate and entrench itself in the Middle East.

Mr. POE. Do you think that Congress should take up and consider legislation to designate AAH and HHN as terrorist organizations?

Mr. TALEBLU. I mean, my initial wish was that the administration, multiple administrations, which have the legal authority to do so, would have done it earlier. So, it is never too late to correct a mistake, in my view.

Mr. POE. Dr. Kagan?

Ms. KAGAN. I would like the administration to take up designations to enforce sanctions that are possible through existing designations on terrorist groups, and depending on the outcome of government formation, then Congress should take up the legislation.

Mr. POE. Ambassador Leaf?

Ms. LEAF. Mr. Chairman, I think the administration has a number of things already in its toolkit. This is one of them that you might—

Mr. POE. Should Congress take it up? That is my question.

Ms. LEAF. Well, I am not really supposed to offer an opinion on that from my standpoint, but if you do, there is legal justification, absolutely.

And I can tell you I was on the receiving end of a lot of Iranian resourcing and outfitting of these militias in 2010 to 2011. I know very well, and many people knew very well then, the extent to which Iran was proliferating the field with destabilizing elements. I would like to see those tools used appropriately at the right time.

Mr. POE. Mr. Pregent?

Mr. PREGENT. I think we should definitely designate AAH and Harakat Nujaba now to prohibit them from gaining more influence in the Iraqi Government.

Mr. POE. Let me reclaim my time. Realistically, if Congress did this today, it would be a year before that would ever actually take place.

Mr. PREGENT. It wouldn't matter. Qais Khazali would hear it, and Qais Khazali would be affected by it.

Mr. POE. All right. Let me ask you this. It is based on your testimony. So, does the United States give the Iraqi Government money, hard cash?

Mr. PREGENT. Yes.

Mr. POE. And you have testified that the Minister of Defense of Iraq is one of these bad guys?

Mr. PREGENT. The Minister of Interior, Qasim al-Araji, was detained twice by U.S. forces for providing—

Mr. POE. Interior, not the Defense?

Mr. PREGENT. Interior, sir, but Interior controls the Federal police, all these militias, has access—

Mr. POE. And has access to U.S. intelligence?

Mr. PREGENT. Yes, has access to U.S. intelligence.

Mr. POE. So, we are paying money to the Iraqi Government, and this individual gets part of that money, obviously, or his agency does? And this organization, these two organizations have committed terrorist acts against Americans, and they have access to U.S. intelligence in Iraq?

Mr. PREGENT. Yes. So, they have—

Mr. POE. Is that right?

Mr. PREGENT. It is. That is the glaring truth to all of this.

Mr. POE. Why do we do that?

Mr. PREGENT. Because you will hear key language, if you listen to it. Former terrorist, now politician—Qais Khazali is not a former terrorist; he is still a terrorist and a politician. Qasim al-Araji is not a former member of Badr Corps.

Mr. POE. There is no such thing as a former politician.

Mr. PREGENT. He is a current member of Badr Corps and he is the Director of the Ministry of Interior. And you can't make those arguments. You see General Votel sitting across from Qasim al-Araji, a man detained twice for providing lethal aid to AAH to kill Americans, directed by Qassem Soleimani of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, sitting next to an American general, telling him, "No, I'm not giving funds, equipment, or training to any Shia militias." And then, you find U.S. M1 Abrams tanks, not battlefield captures, but tanks that were given to them by Iraq Security Forces to be used against Kurdish allies in the Kirkuk offensive.

This isn't a political statement. This is just simply a statement of fact. Kataib Hezbollah, Badr Corps, and AAH have bragged about being able to use American equipment, from night vision goggles to advanced small armed weapons—

Mr. POE. And tanks?

Mr. PREGENT. To M1 Abrams tanks. And this is a violation of the Leahy law.

Mr. POE. This befuddles me.

Mr. PREGENT. This is a violation of the Lipinski Act.

Mr. POE. I have to reclaim my time.

Mr. PREGENT. Yes, sir, it is a pleasure. I will stop.

Mr. POE. Mr. Keating here wants to ask a lot of questions, and I am going to let him.

Mr. KEATING. Just quickly, if you could, yes or no, Mr. Pregent. Is our level of intelligence sufficient now in Iraq?

Mr. PREGENT. It is not.

Mr. KEATING. You made a statement that it is much improved.

Mr. PREGENT. It is not, sir, unfortunately. June 9th, 2009, we had a campaign called Out of the Cities, where we brought everybody back to major bases. Our intelligence footprint went black. We didn't know what was going on in Iraq.

Our intelligence now is highly classified signals intelligence and highly classified human intelligence. The signals intelligence is basically a PR platform where Iraqi politicians can get on a cell phone and say very positive things about how they are not involved in sectarian acts or targeting of Americans or targeting of Iraqis.

Mr. KEATING. Right.

Mr. PREGENT. And the human reports are basically Brett McGurk going and talking to Iraqi politicians, and you have senior American official meets with Iraqi official, says that everything is okay.

Mr. KEATING. Okay. If I could, our time is so limited.

Mr. PREGENT. Sure, sure.

Mr. KEATING. Ambassador Leaf, I agree with a lot of your recommendations that you brought forward. I am concerned, too, that we are mostly one-dimensional on military emphasis. Now we are very sanction-centered perhaps in our alternatives. And one of my concerns has always been the lack of contingencies and other alternatives. Because as we go down this road, the more roads we have to influence things, the better off. And I think it has to be much more dynamic than it has been.

So, can you talk to us a little bit about what the State Department, the USAID, the Commerce Department, the kind of things that you think they should be doing? Because we are all in agreement on this. I don't think most Americans, they are not looking at the ball here. I mean, this is one of the more critical areas that we are dealing with in the entire global footprint right now. We have invested so much in this. Yet, we are not paying enough attention. But that attention has to be at so many different levels to be effective.

Could you comment on what we could do in some of these other areas I mentioned?

Ms. LEAF. Yes. So, Congressman, you know, Iraq has always been a tough place to work as an American diplomat, a civilian offi-

cial; obviously, for our military troops as well. Much of that was not only the violence that blew up in terms of Sunni violence and insurgency early on, but this proliferation of Iranian-backed militias made the operating environment for us extraordinarily difficult.

As I said earlier, when I was in Basra 10 years ago, I had to go around with humvees and MRAPs. Nonetheless, I got out and about, and I met with governors and politicians and generals and normal Basrawees, as they call themselves.

We have a consul general in Basra who was singled out in the aftermath of the violence against the Shia militia offices and the consulate. He was singled out as this great agent that was wreaking havoc against Iranian interests really in that area.

That goes to the point that our diplomats are actually out in the terrain meeting all the time and doing what we do around the world, which is cultural and educational work, helping draw investment and business folks to a very difficult country.

It was no accident that there was a shot taken against the consulate, a shot taken against—

Mr. KEATING. I hate to interrupt, but—

Ms. LEAF. Sorry. I'm very sorry.

Mr. KEATING. I just want to get a sense of—

Ms. LEAF. Yes?

Mr. KEATING. One of the puzzles I have at the end is this: We have talked about this increased nationalism in Iraq now. But can they get beyond their own divisions, Shia, Sunni, Kurds? I mean, we want them to be able to be stable and secure. How much of a problem do these divisions that are—

Mr. PREGENT. This is the first time you have Sunnis, Kurds, and Shia all saying Iran needs to get out of Iraq. We ignored it when the Sunnis said it. We ignored it when the Kurds said it. We cannot ignore it when 60 percent of the population of Shia is now telling us to do the same thing.

Mr. KEATING. That is great. Now what about internally looking at Iraq, though, and their own stability and their own ability as a democracy going forward? How much of that is still a very difficult obstacle for Iraq going forward?

Dr. Kagan?

Ms. KAGAN. It is, indeed, a difficult obstacle for Iraq and Iraqis. There is an incredibly fragile state in Iraq, but it matters to the United States, its national interests, its economic interests, that the fragile state that exists now in Iraq builds itself into a robust sovereign state that is capable of securing Iraq from terrorists and is on our side.

Mr. KEATING. Okay, very quickly, because I am over my time. Just one quick question, yes or no. Give us a little hope here, too. I mean, going forward, putting a new government together after an election, my belief is the U.S. should look at this as a new opportunity going forward. Do you think this presents us a greater opportunity with this government? They have their own feeling of sovereignty. It is not just like our guy that is there. Doesn't that present an opportunity? Just quickly, yes or no.

Mr. TALEBLU. Yes, and it is an opportunity that should not be squandered, both for the sake of post-ISIS Iraq and for the sake of pushing back on Iran.

Ms. KAGAN. The United States has a unique opportunity to stand with the people of Iraq against Iran.

Mr. KEATING. Yes?

Mr. PREGENT. The U.S. has an opportunity to stand with the people of Iraq against the current political parties that control Iraq.

Ms. LEAF. And, sir, I would just say that it is important that we not stick to an old model of trying to pick a guy.

Mr. KEATING. Right.

Ms. LEAF. We ought to have a full flank of guys.

Mr. KEATING. I agree with that opportunity.

Okay, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. POE. I thank the gentleman.

Mr. Perry?

Mr. PERRY. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Pregent, we met some time ago at a hearing where this was outlined. The IRGC, as you know, you gave me the locations, the picture of the map with the IRGC flag on an M1 tank. And it was manifest in an amendment that I offered in the NDAA which passed. And it is about reporting. You know, it was as far as I could go, right? I wanted all the funds stopped immediately in the Train and Equip Program until we could prove that none of that taxpayer money was going to the IRGC or being used by IRGC proxies.

I talked to the Secretary about it and he said, "Look, we can't control if they fall into their hands." You know, they get them and there is a certain amount of that that happens, and it is not our country and we can't control that, which I said, "We can control if they ever get any more," right?

I couldn't convince enough folks on the initial amendment, but we have this one. So, I think we will see some reporting, and I hope we do, which will inform us. And then, maybe we can take some policy action.

What are the downsides for designating these two organizations as terrorist organizations? What are the downsides? Why wouldn't we do that?

Mr. PREGENT. The argument is that it becomes a force protection issue if we designate them. But I would argue that it is already—

Mr. PERRY. Hold on.

Mr. PREGENT. Yes, sir.

Mr. PERRY. For people that don't know—you and I know.

Mr. PREGENT. Yes, sir.

Mr. PERRY. But explain why that is a problem.

Mr. PREGENT. We are afraid that, if we designate them, they will attack us. Well, they have already threatened to attack us. They have killed Americans in the past. AAH just launched rockets and mortars against our Embassy. They are actually being blamed for killing Iraqi protesters in Basra, to include prominent female protesters in the last 24 hours. So, they are already doing that.

Harakat Nujaba is the one terrorist organization that we have actually used U.S. air strikes to decimate in Syria because they en-

croached on the U.S. training mission in al-Tanf. AAH and KH surrounded an American base after President Trump authorized cruise missile attacks. They are already threatening us. They are already willing to attack us.

Not only do we need to designate them, we can attack them now for a force protection issue, but we should actually change the AUMF as well to allow the targeting of designated terrorist organizations. We are okay killing Sunni terrorist groups. We need to be able to do the same with Shia ones that threaten U.S. forces.

Mr. PERRY. I have got an AUMF that does exactly that, but I can't seem to get much traction on that as well from either side.

What is the downside? I mean, if we don't designate. They are out there. We know they are out there. They are using our stuff. They are attacking us. They are threatening to use it against us and attack us. If we ignore them, what is the potential?

Mr. PREGENT. Qais Khazali is so afraid of designation that he has sought to hire a lobbying group in DC to keep Congress from designating his terrorist group.

So, here is the argument. Here is the biggest thing. Here is the strategy. If we don't designate Qais Khazali, then the argument, a month or 2 months from now, when government is formed, is that we can't go after somebody who has 15 seats in congress. That would be influencing their election process.

Mr. PERRY. Right.

Mr. PREGENT. This is a strategy to not designate AAH now, so that once AAH becomes a formal part of the Iraqi Government, the argument from the State Department will be, we can't designate them now because they are in the Council of Representatives. That is the strategy and that is why we should designate them now.

Mr. PERRY. Because it has worked in Jordan with the MB and other places, right? We can't do anything because they operate within the government. But there is a bigger, I guess there is a more desperate downside that, sure, then they are crafting policy and they are involved in crafting policy, but, then, they actually gain strength from a legitimate standpoint, and there is almost nothing we can do about it.

Mr. PREGENT. What is the strategy? Not to do anything now, but once they get entrenched in the Iraqi Government, then make the argument that we can't because they are actually sitting COR officials, and we would be doing what we say Russia is doing in our election, influencing an election.

Mr. PERRY. And thank you. So, with what little time I have left, tangible steps? Designation has to be one of them. What tangible steps?

Mr. PREGENT. Put them on the AUMF. They are designated terrorists. They threaten Americans in Syria, in Iraq.

DoD is now contemplating putting air defense assets back into Iraq, not to protect against an ISIS threat, but against an Iranian threat, using Iraqi proxies. We are now moving or contemplating putting in counterfire battery systems and artillery, not to defend against ISIS, but to defend against Iraqi militias tied to Iran.

So, we need to designate. We need to have other tools, such as the AUMF, and increase our intelligence focus on these groups, and

stop relying on Dawa Party talking points to say that they are not a threat.

Mr. PERRY. Would that counter-battery be located at the Embassy or other points throughout the country, like in Basra or elsewhere?

Mr. PREGENT. Anywhere we have U.S. assets, you should have a Q36 and Q37 radar. You know what those are.

Mr. PERRY. Right.

Mr. PREGENT. Those are radars that tell you where it came from. And this AAH attack on our Embassy came from a Shia-controlled neighborhood just east of Sadr City, where the Badr Corps Iraqi military commander was in charge of that battle space. So, you literally have Iranian proxies or IRGC Quds Force proxies in uniform and out of uniform threatening Americans. And our argument can't be we can't designate them because they will attack us. They already are.

Mr. PERRY. Already are, right.

I yield.

Mr. POE. Mr. Schneider?

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you. I want to thank the chairman and ranking member for having this hearing, and the witnesses for being here and sharing your perspectives.

Ambassador Leaf, you made, I think, the poignant comment that 2018 is not 2006 or 2011. And if I can, I would like to ask the panel to look forward longer term. What is the long-term implication of failing to thwart the influence of Iran in Iraq, of failing to put a stop to these proxies? I will just go straight down the table.

Mr. TALEBLU. The long-term implications are gross, sir, and that is why it is an excellent question. It would be ceding a country which has immense oil resources to the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism. It would be moral in terms of the human, material, blood, treasure that the U.S. has spent there. It would be political. It would be Iran being able to use Iraq as a launchpad, a literal launchpad. They could forward-deploy Tails, short-range ballistic missiles. Iran already has the largest ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East. They could forward-deploy them into Iraq there.

It could destabilize Saudi Arabia. We had the same concerns about a strong Iraq in the nineties doing that to Saudi. The same could happen if a strong pro-Iran Iraq could do that. The list, most unfortunately, goes on and on and on. Every opportunity that we have along the DIME paradigm—diplomacy, intelligence, military, economic—to influence Iraq, Iran would seek to co-opt that and use Iraq against us. It is a zero-sum game between the U.S. and Iran in the Middle East, and ceding Iraq would be a gross mistake.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Dr. Kagan?

Ms. KAGAN. I agree. In addition, the risks of creating conditions in which Iraq, once again, falls prey to terrorists, Sunni terrorist groups that exploit the vacuum, political and security, that exists when a sectarian Shia government backed by Iran controls their Security Forces, that risk goes up and up. And that is why it is a matter of national security to have Iraq stabilized, not under the strong hand of Iran, but under a political accommodation that is enduring.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Mr. Pregent?

Mr. PREGENT. This is a time to go after everything Iran touches in Iraq. Iraq's economy is actually doing better than Iran's is. Iran's is in the tank. This is an opportunity to pull Iraq away into its traditional bulwark status.

But one of the biggest obstacles we face is, first off, ISIS is not defeated. ISIS has stepped up its attacks in Diyala, Saladin, Kirkuk Province. They have now had suicide bombings in Baghdad. So, ISIS isn't defeated, and the Shia militias are actually okay with that, because they use the argument that, because ISIS is still around, that they can continue to punish Sunni communities, Kurdish communities, and Shia Nationalist communities.

We have to bring Iraq back into its traditional stance, an independent, sovereign country. I believe in relationships with your neighbors, but the United States doesn't dictate who the President of Mexico is going to be. The United States doesn't command Canada's security forces. The "Islamic Republic of Mexico" doesn't decide who our President is, and the "Islamic Republic of Canada" doesn't have primacy over our security forces.

I want a role for Iraq that is absent Iranian influence other than trade and agricultural, religious activities, not this malign influence.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Ambassador Leaf?

Ms. LEAF. So, the one point of variance I would have with Mike is that, when you talk about Iraq's traditional posture within the region, it was, if we look back in recent history prior to 2003, it was a very violent, aggressive, threatening relationship that it had in multiple directions.

So, I agree with all my fellow panelists; this is a key point to influence the shape of things to come. But I do believe strongly that we have to step nimbly within sometimes the minefields, metaphorically, of Iraq's own domestic politics. We have to get, as I have said earlier, greater buy-in to the effort by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular. And you saw that in the past year, but it has got to be deepened.

We can't go it alone and we can't do things that knock about and play to Iran's strength. The Iraqi nationalism is boiling. It is not just percolating; it is boiling. And I think we need to let it play that out.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Yes, I have to reclaim my time. I don't have the clock, but I see the light is on.

Thank you. I think one of the challenges, proxies are a tool. It is not a strategy. Iran has a broader strategy, but the strategy is to drive their goals, and their goals are regional and disruptive to the entire region, I think. I think that is a key thing to understand.

I wish I had more time. I will posit the question, and I guess we will leave it hanging. But, broadly, I think the conversation we need to have in Congress, and in this country, is what is the role of the United States, and drawing the distinction between that role, between engagement—and U.S. engagement is critical—but also leadership. And is there a role for U.S. leadership? Can we achieve our goals, what can be our strategy, without U.S. leadership?

With that, I will yield back.

Mr. POE. I thank the gentleman. Well said.

The gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Garrett.

Mr. GARRETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks to the members of the panel, and apologies because I sort of came in on the fly. It has been a day.

I want to start on the macro and work my way down. So, if I sound like I am way off the subject matter of countering Iranian proxies in Iraq, it is because I am, but we are going to sort of try to do a big picture down. And I am going to start all the way over in Northeast Asia and North Korea, as we talk about Korea nuclear and missile technology, right?

North Korea right now has three marketable commodities: Human beings, which they almost literally sell. And you should learn more about that if you don't know about it. That there are people being sold for revenue for a state in 2018 is beyond comprehension. Coal and missile and nuclear technology. Economically, they are in a vice.

Now, when you have but few marketable commodities, and there are people on the market for those commodities, you are going to sell them to who you can sell them to. That is the macro. We are working our way down.

I would argue, and I think it is almost unassailable in its logic, that it is far more important what rhetoric is put out by the mullahs to the Iranian people than to the international community; that we should listen to what is said in Farsi and not what is said in English.

And the rhetoric that is put out by the mullahs—and I listen to a Member of Congress, who I shall not name, say, “Well, Rouhani is the duly-elected President in a legitimate election.” And then, I had to counsel this individual that there were 403 people who declared for that particular election, and the mullahs essentially approved four. So, sure, it was a free and fair election, if you consider that about 99 percent of the people that wanted to run were disallowed, right?

And so now, we have got a paradigm wherein, if you listen to the rhetoric in Farsi, and then, you take the historical paradox as it relates to nuclear configuration, right, mutually-assured destruction, and you lay an atheist nation state and its ideology, the Soviet Union, for example, on top of that, and then, contrast it to what is coming out of Iran, we need to consider that perhaps the game is a little different, right? The Iranian mullahs do not think like the former Soviet Union.

So now, we are moving down another level. I did some math one time and estimated that, between 1979 and 1988, in the green revolution, if you adjusted for population, the United States in 1945 and Iran present-day, that the Iranian regime had killed as many of its people by percentage as the United States lost during the entire Second World War. That is the regime against its people. It is the IRGC and the Quds, et cetera, and they have demonstrated a willingness to quite literally shoot young female students in the face in the streets, with cameras rolling.

And so now, as we look at this Iranian move toward the Mediterranean, that has manifested itself not just in Iraq, but also in Syria, and we look at what violence and horror has been visited

upon dissidents in Iran, why are we to expect anything different in Iraq, et cetera, and Syria?

And so, it has taken me a long way to get to the point, but I guess the point is that it is important we are here today. And so, the question I would have—and I have a finite amount of time as well—is, Iraqi Kurdistan, the number of attacks, say, for example, in Erbil are a fraction of what they had been. Now it is not non-existent, and to be sure, we haven't defeated ISIS. It is political rhetoric that is dangerous at best and stupid at worst to suggest that we have defeated an idea, because we won't defeat the idea in the short term. You can't beat an idea on the battlefield. We have eviscerated a lot of their war-making capability, but it is you can crunch all you want and we will make more. There are people coming because they believe in that idea.

So, what is being done differently in places like Iraqi Kurdistan where we do see some stabilization, some assertion of localized control and some autonomy, and a reduction in Iranian influence that is not being done in, say, Iraq writ large? And what lessons can we learn?

And then, secondarily, is there a way that the United States can support and advocate on behalf of ethnic and religious minorities? You know, the Nineveh Plain, for example, was in 2004 home to about 1 million, 1.5 million, Christians. I think last time I tried to get a good count, it was 200,000, which, by the way, by my definition would be definitely cleansing, if not genocide.

But what can we learn from Iraqi Kurdistan, and what can we do to help ethnic minorities and religious minorities in Iraq? And how can we encourage an integration of these two subsets of the Iraqi population to create a sustainable Iraq?

Mr. Taleblu?

Mr. TALEBLU. Taleblu.

Mr. GARRETT. Okay, I was ballpark. Sorry.

Mr. TALEBLU. That was quite close, though. Thank you, sir.

Just based on the predicate you laid there with the North Korean-Iranian relationship, and Iraq first, it is very important to point out that some of Iran's most important medium-range ballistic missile systems do come from North Korea. It was actually the Iran-Iraq War that spurred Iran toward Pyongyang to procure those systems. The Shahab-2 and -3, the Shahab-3, and the Khorramshahr are all based on liquid-fueled North Korean design. So, that is important to note for the record. All of them can carry a nuclear payload.

Based on your question to the Kurds, I mean, the first kind of non-empirical thing to learn is hope, hope and determination. The U.S. has more than just capabilities on its side; it has resolve. It needs to win the balance of resolve against Iran.

So, when you have ethnic minorities, as well as the rest of the majority in the country, resolute against Iran, you have an Iraq that you are able to use (a) as part of your regional strategy against Iran and (b) to support itself. So, the quest for sovereignty and resolve is something I would take from the experience of Iraqi Kurds.

Mr. GARRETT. And is there sort of a stratification as it relates to Iraq? You have got Kurds and Shia and Sunni. In the Sunni, I

mean, is there a discernable lack of interest in sort of nationalist cooperation? I will let you finish and go from there.

Mr. TALEBLU. No, I think the Sunnis do want to be part of the political process, and when they are excluded from the political process and when they are downtrodden and dispossessed and squeezed into a corner, when you have Shiites finally take power is when you get things like ISIS. Everyone in Iraq deserves a choice that is much better than Qassem Soleimani or ISIS.

Ms. KAGAN. That brings me to an opportunity that I think we now have in Iraq to support and sustain population in the second largest city in Iraq, Basra, which is contested among different Shia political parties. There is a humanitarian disaster in Basra right now. It is water is non-potable. Latest reports that I have received are that 95,000 humans have been hospitalized in Basra as a result of the undrinkable water.

These are the angry people who are protesting the government elites that are trying to form a corrupt government. This is the political milieu in which people are asking not for militia safety, but actual government institutions that are responsive.

The United States should stand with the people of Basra. It should ensure that it, the United States, and its allies, are providing humanitarian aid to the people of Basra, not the Shia militia groups, not the Iranian-backed elements. The way that we can actually gain the most opportunity in Iraq is to support the people and not the politicians.

Mr. PREGENT. It is very hard to do that, unfortunately, supporting the people, and then, still supporting Baghdad's government. The Dawa Party is basically in charge.

This picture in Basra where protests emerged in the face of Haider al-Abadi, "our guy in Baghdad," in quotations, the one we are pushing forward, and Prime Minister Maliki, who is an Iranian puppet, who is somebody that led the Dawa Party, and it was conditioned on U.S. air support to defeat ISIS that Maliki stepped down, because he was blamed for this disenfranchisement in the Sunni and Kurdish populations.

Their faces have now been merged. There is no party that is not tied to Iran, unfortunately. Even the moderate parties, Hikmah Party, Sayirun, Dawa—there is Dawa Tanzim and, then, there is Dawa—still want the U.S. to exit Iraq. And that is an Iranian strategic goal, is to get the U.S. out.

The best answer for all three groups, you have disenfranchisement in the Sunni population, the Kurdish population, and the Shia population. They are all asking us to do something about Iran. This is the first time that has happened, and it is a great opportunity for the United States to listen to the people by not supporting the current structure in Iraq. And I don't know how we do that when there are no other parties that are allowed to form and to build consensus.

Twenty-five percent of Iraqs voted in this election. Some will say it is as high as 40 percent. Well, it was 60 and 80 percent before. And I don't know how we go forward, but we need to recognize the problem and we are ignoring it.

Ms. LEAF. Congressman, one of my pet peeves is the diminishing profile that the bilateral relationship with Iraq has had in Wash-

ington for some years now. And really, we need to do better than that. And I say it to this administration, too. Look, the administration took what I think is a very important step forward in pulling together a more coherent policy on Syria, including how you deal with Iran there, by appointing Ambassador Jim Jeffrey. And you have seen the results already.

We need not an envoy as such for Iraq, but you need a more coherent approach and a visible one with high-level Washington engagement. So, I would say, just as Dr. Kagan said, we can do something very significant in Basra. We can do something very significant in terms of working with the Kurds and getting Erbil and Baghdad back on a better track.

We have an impact within Iraq of bringing people together, not weakening them, splintering them. And I would say, as soon as this new government is seated, an early visit by Secretaries Pompeo and Mattis would be in order, and an invitation for that Prime Minister to come to Washington. Reinvigorate the relationship.

Mr. GARRETT. Mr. Chairman, I know I am a million miles over.

Mr. POE. You are. I agree with you on that. [Laughter.]

Ms. LEAF. I think I just put him over. [Laughter.]

Mr. GARRETT. No, no, you didn't. I was over before. Begging your indulgence for 30 seconds?

Mr. POE. The gentleman is recognized for 30 seconds.

Mr. GARRETT. First of all, I knew that Ms. Leaf was smart, but, then, when I read that she is an alumni of both the College of William and Mary and the University of Virginia, I realized you were really smart.

Ms. LEAF. Thank you.

Mr. GARRETT. Ultimately, there are two points Dr. Kagan pointed out. The USAID paradigm always has been historically to deliver aid to people, ingratiating people and engendering goodwill toward the United States. Having said that, though, where people don't exercise self-determination, right—and so, it is kind of like the Chinese aid paradigm is give money to despots and dictators and ingratiate yourself to despots and dictators. The people aren't being able to—they don't feel empowered or enfranchised. So, we have to somehow change that.

I grew up in a “you break it, you buy it” world, No. 1. No. 2, without walking down the regime change road, there are opportunities inside of Iran, because the IRGC and the Quds guys are out in the field, and the people in Iran are feeling a little antsy. So, I just want to say I support the Iranian people exercising some self-determination, and that is one of my indulgents for it. I think it is important to be said from here.

Mr. POE. You got a lot in in 30 seconds.

I want to thank all of you for being here. It has been very informative, very good. We appreciate your expertise.

The full committee tomorrow is taking up this very issue that we have discussed or you have discussed today, and we appreciate your valuable information. Very, very difficult times. But thank you once again.

The subcommittee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:13 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

# A P P E N D I X

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**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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**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, September 26, 2018

**TIME:** 2:00 p.m.

**SUBJECT:** Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq

**WITNESSES:** Mr. Behnam Ben Taleblu  
Research Fellow  
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Kimberly Kagan, Ph.D.  
President  
Institute for the Study of War

Mr. Michael Pregent  
Senior Fellow  
Hudson Institute

The Honorable Barbara Leaf  
Rosenblatt Distinguished Visiting Fellow  
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

**By Direction of the Chairman**

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August 29, 2018

The Honorable Mike Pompeo  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to request that the Department examine whether Asa'ib ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN) meet criteria to be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) pursuant to the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1189), or as Specially Designated Global Terrorists pursuant to Executive Order 13224.

Public reports indicate that these Iraqi militias receive significant material support and direction from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Forces (IRGC), and have engaged in terrorist attacks, including attacks on U.S. soldiers in Iraq. AAH conducted numerous attacks against the United States and coalition forces in Iraq between its inception in 2006 and the United States' withdrawal in December 2011, including the January 20, 2007 attack on the Karbala Provincial Headquarters that resulted in the murder of five U.S. soldiers. HHN also led multiple mortar and rocket attacks on U.S. forces, namely at the Baghdad International Zone, in early 2008.

Both of these militias continue to threaten attacks on the United States and our allies. In December 2017, both militias called American forces in Iraq "legitimate targets," and called for an armed struggle against the U.S. and Israel. HHN has now established the "Golan Liberation Brigade" in Syria with the intent of attacking Israel. Further implicating these militias with terrorist activity, HHN's spokesman said on June 19, 2018 that HHN and Kata'ib Hezbollah – a State Department designated FTO – are "partners in blood and in objectives."

The United States and its allies must do all it can to counter Iranian aggression throughout the region, especially its support for radical militias. Designating these Iraqi militias as terrorist organizations would be an important step towards leveraging additional pressure on the Iranian regime's proxies and blocking them from the international financial system.

Sincerely,

EDWARD R. ROYCE  
Chairman  
House Foreign Affairs Committee

TED POE  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade

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



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable  
Ted Poe  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

SEP 24 2018

Dear Mr. Poe:

Thank you for your letter of August 29 requesting that the State Department assess whether Asai'b Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN) should be designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) or Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).

We are fully committed to taking appropriate action against Iran-backed and other foreign-sponsored groups in Iraq that subvert Iraq's sovereignty and engage in terrorist activity, and we expect the Iraqi government to do the same.

The designation of an organization as an FTO is made pursuant to section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The INA provides the Secretary with the authority to designate a group if he finds that it meets the specific criteria outlined in section 219. The Department prepares a detailed administrative record, which typically includes both classified and open source information, demonstrating that the statutory criteria for designation have been satisfied. If the Secretary, in consultation with the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Treasury, decides to make the designation, Congress is notified by classified communication seven days before the designation is published in the *Federal Register*, as section 219 of the INA requires.

Furthermore, under E.O. 13224, the Secretary of State may designate foreign individuals or entities that he determines, in consultation with the Secretary of the Treasury and the Attorney General, have committed, or pose a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism that threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States.

We hope this information is useful to you. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Charles S. Faulkner  
Acting Assistant Secretary  
Legislative Affairs