



The Iranian Threat Network and the Export of the Islamic Revolution

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The Iranian Threat Network (ITN) is comprised of entities operating in the regional and international arenas.¹ It contains a wide array of actors and serves Iran as a strategic tool to promote its interests. It is intended to disseminate the ideology of the Islamic revolution, preserve and position the Shiite on the Muslim world and provide Iran with tools that will enable it with leeway and assist the latter with accomplishing its regional and global goals.

The threat posed by ITN was highly visible after the elimination of Qassim Soleimani, al-Quds Force leader.² For example, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary general, called all ITN elements to unite under al-Quds Force, drive the Americans out of the region and avenge Soleimani and al-Muhandis' death.³ It should be noted, Iran is not interested in directly confronting the U.S. and thus its choice to use ITN. Even though the latter is comprised of various entities with varied alliances and commitment to Iran, Soleimani was (and still is) a role model both in Iran and outside. He was the architect that led and solidified ITN. His activity as a key player in the regional campaign and the personal relations he had forged with militia leaders across the Middle East strengthened ITN and provided him with a special stature among its members.⁴

ITN is comprised of Iranian proxies and actors collaborating with Iran to promote the latter's interests globally. For example, Hezbollah, a Lebanese hybrid terror organization that its activity is focused on the Middle East but operates terrorist and crime networks in dozens of countries across the globe. The organization is active among Shiite communities around the globe where the central government is weak and in international crime regions such the border triangle in South America or

¹ Omer Carmi, Deconstructing and Countering Iran's Threat Network, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/deconstructing-and-countering-irans-threat-network>

² Soleimani was killed at the beginning of January 2020 by a U.S. drone UAV strike on his caravan. Together with Soleimani eight IRGC officers and Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis, the second in command of Hashd al-Shaabi militia were killed. Soleimani was appointed to command al-Quds Force in 1997 and had elevated it into a leading and influential factor in connection with Iran's strategic decisions. For expansion see <https://www.ict.org.il/images/%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%99%D7%9D%20%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D%20%D7%97%D7%99%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%9C%20%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%99.pdf>

³ Matthew Levitt, "Fighters Without Borders"- Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft, CTC Sentinel, February 2020, Volume 13, Issue 2. Retrieved from: <https://ctc.usma.edu/fighters-without-borders-forecasting-new-trends-iran-threat-network-foreign-operations-tradecraft/>

⁴ Matthew Levitt, "Fighters Without Borders"-Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft, CTC Sentinel, February 2020, Volume 13, Issue 2. Retrieved from: <https://ctc.usma.edu/fighters-without-borders-forecasting-new-trends-iran-threat-network-foreign-operations-tradecraft/>

West Africa. In this sense Hezbollah serves as a power multiple for ITN as it has presence in the Middle East, Africa, LatAm and the west. Hezbollah is also active in Uganda, South Africa and south East Asia, specifically Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia.

ITN also includes the Houthi in Yemen, Iraqi militias AKA Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units, PMU) and other groups trained by IRGC/al-Quds Force. The latest addition to ITN is the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun Brigades, comprised of Afghani and Pakistani Shiite (respectively) currently fighting in Syria.

These groups are perceived as Irani proxies and have a complex relationship with Iran. Some are very dependent on Iran and does its bidding, others are independent, at least as far as decision making and command and control systems.

In the past decade, there is evidence that ITN has been expanding. One indication is the increasing number of arrests of Iranian agents in Europe, Hezbollah operatives and fundraisers for the latter in different parts of the world. For example, in 2017 two Hezbollah operatives have been arrested in the U.S. and accused of surveilling U.S. targets. In 2019 another Hezbollah operative that has underwent training in Lebanon and gathered intelligence on potential targets in NYC, Boston and Washington DC has been arrested in the U.S. Additional arrests of Hezbollah operatives were executed in Cyprus, Thailand, France and Peru⁵ as well arrests of Iranian agents in Europe. For example, in January 2018, the German police raided the homes of ten people suspected of being members of al-Quds Force who have gathered intelligence on Israeli and Jewish targets in Germany, among which were the Israeli embassy, senior community leaders and kindergartens.⁶

Iran also operates to recruit operatives who have dual citizenship and even people without Iranian or Lebanese profile. For example, in January 2019 the German police arrested a German-Afghani citizen on suspicion of espionage for Iran. Similarly, six months thereafter an Iraqi was arrested in

⁵ Matthew Levitt, "Fighters Without Borders"- Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft, CTC Sentinel, February 2020, Volume 13, Issue 2. Retrieved from: <https://ctc.usma.edu/fighters-without-borders-forecasting-new-trends-iran-threat-network-foreign-operations-tradecraft/>

⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/raids-across-germany-target-suspected-iranian-spies/a-42165145>

Sweden on espionage for Iran charges. On a similar note, the Netherlands accused Iran of recruiting Dutch criminals to assassinate Irani exiles.⁷

The information accumulated in recent years and continuous activity to locate and identify ITN operatives it seems that **ITN continues to be active, even more so these days**. ITN puts an effort into recruitment among various target audience, primarily Shiite communities in the Middle East and elsewhere but also Sunni communities. The activity takes place on two levels: **military operational and Dawah**.

The Military Operational level activities are being led by al-Quds Force and the Irani ministry of intelligence. The latter have been acting to form, organize and support local Shiite militias reporting to Iran on issues of Irani interests such as in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Pakistan and more. Simultaneously Iran operates in the international arena to form terrorist networks for operational purposes either through Irani agents or through militia members whose allegiance is to Iran, such as Hezbollah. This level is of paramount importance to the Irani regime, therefore the leaders of I-Quds Force, the most prominent of which was Soleimani, report directly to Iran's supreme leader (for expansion re ITN recruitment and operational tool see Case Study 1).

The Dawah level complements the military operational one and mainly operates through Shiite social activists. In the first decades post Islamic revolution, this level relied mainly on the physical infrastructure of Dawah systems formed in Shiite communities worldwide. These systems include mosques, Islamic centers, education centers, charities and Iranian institutions and aim to bring their respective communities closer to the Islamic revolution and Iran, reinforce their religious zeal and turn them into operations bases for the military-operational activity or as a pool for potential recruits for the latter. A prime example for that is the headquarters of the Zahra Center in the town of GrandSynthe in northern France that was suspected of being tied with Hezbollah and Iran. It likely served as a logistics support center for Irani activities in France and was shut down by the French government in 2019⁸ (for expansion see Case Studies 2 and 3).

⁷ Matthew Levitt, "Fighters Without Borders"-Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft, CTC Sentinel, February 2020, Volume 13, Issue 2. Retrieved from: <https://ctc.usma.edu/fighters-without-borders-forecasting-new-trends-iran-threat-network-foreign-operations-tradecraft/>

⁸ <https://www.france24.com/en/20181002-france-police-shiite-islamic-grande-synthe-terrorism>

The Irani effort to export the Islamic revolution outside Iran is in constant competition with the Saudi efforts to solidify its position as the leader of the Sunni world. The Saudi pan Islamic policy rely too on Dawah systems formed as of the 1960s in the Islamic world and Islamic communities in the west whose purpose was to facilitate the export of the Wahabi ideology and solidify Saudi Arabia stature in the Muslim world. The above clash not just in the Middle East but elsewhere as well. The Arab Spring revolts have only increased the tension and competition for spheres of influence. Khomeini, as early as 1979, made an effort to increase the Shiite sphere of influence in the Muslim world and branded the Iranian revolution as the Islamic Revolution. Further, he declared “al-Quds Day” as a day which its purpose is to identify with the Palestinians and organize rallies and demonstrations to “liberate” Jerusalem and the Iranian use this platform for an outreach and establishment of bridgeheads among Sunni groups to promote Iranian interests and export their revolution. This way, even though the bulk of the Irani activity is aimed at Shiite communities, Sunni organizations such as Hamas and PIJ collaborate with Iran.

These days one can observe various dissemination methods employed by Iran and its proxies: (i) Shiite entrepreneurs who are based in Iran and operate a network of influencers, recruiters, financiers and propagandists. For example, clerics based in Qom, Iran, act on behalf of the regime and manufacture a “religious network” with a potential for operations; (ii) Shiite institutions in the west, south America, Africa and other countries dealing with propaganda, agent recruitment and funding for Iran’s military-operative effort (Shiite militias, operatives etc.); (iii) entrepreneurs on behalf of Shiite militias such as Hezbollah, the Iraqi militias and others who raise money for operations through social media.

Recent decades technological advancement enabled Iran to expand its sphere of influence way beyond the middle east. In the 1980s-1990s it focused on building capabilities and infrastructure in the physical world - Islamic centers, face to face recruitment and building militias in neighboring countries. The Arab Spring revolts and the civil wars that ensued assisted Iran in disseminating their Islamic Revolution ideology and in building a Middle East operative axis. Qassim Soleimani was the ultimate executor of the said policy. The difference in between the Irani activity in the Middle East and on the global level stems from the nature of the arena and surrounding environmental conditions.

Since the Arab Spring the middle east is mired in regime chaos, civil wars, economic crises and terrorism. In this environment the leading effort is military operational. On the international arena, the leading effort is Dawah that encourages recruitment into the Iranian fold. Iran is active in south America, extensively in Venezuela but also in the border triangle among Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. In western Africa Iran built an extensive operational infrastructure that relies on Shiite communities and the west it developed a physical infrastructure, among others, in Germany.⁹

As technology evolved social media was added to the arsenal of Iranian dissemination tools. Through social media, Iran managed to export its ideology way beyond its borders through actors such the IRGC/al-Quds Force, the intelligence ministry and Iranian charities and NGOs. In recent years, digital footprint has been observed on social media that attest, at the very least, to Iranian ideological and religious messages dissemination. The social media rhetoric encourages violence in certain cases, accelerate radicalization and may mobilize to violence.

A joint ICT - Cobwebs Technologies research project on existing and new ITN related accounts has uncovered, inter alia, on a variety of social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and others) accounts belonging to members of Iraqi militias (supported by Iran). An analysis of said accounts found out that the activists praised shaheeds and mujahidin, share operative information and intelligence (e.g. monitoring US troop movements in Iraq and disseminating information against the troops), disseminating religious material and more. It is evident that the Iraqi militias play a more important role in ITN than previously thought. The above accounts expose ties not only to known Iranian proxies but additional middle eastern nexuses as well (in the Gulf states, Iraq and Yemen), South Asian ones (Pakistan, especially in Jammu and Kashmir regions), south east Asia (Indonesia), Africa (Nigeria and other regions)and Europe (among other, Germany).

The research sheds light on the nexuses within ITN, uncovers new networks and enables a better understanding of the geographic deployment of ITN. It seems that ITN is much wider than expected.

⁹ In April 2020 Germany designated Hezbollah in its entirety as a terror organization (until that date there was a distinction between Hezbollah's military wing and its social-political wing). In the background of the above designation, a likely activity of both Iran and Hezbollah on German soil. Per current estimates there are 1,050 Hezbollah operatives and supporters in Germany. Within the above framework, arrests of Hezbollah operatives have been carried out across Europe in Germany, France and elsewhere. For expansion see: [https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2455/Setting the Record Straight on Hezbollah#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2455/Setting%20the%20Record%20Straight%20on%20Hezbollah#gsc.tab=0)

It is strong and well connected. It is global and not limited to any specific region. It serves not only for kinetic activity but also to disseminate the ideology of the Islamic revolution globally. This extensive network includes more than the “usual suspects” (i.e. Iran’s most prominent proxies - Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, Houthi in Yemen etc.) but additional radical elements in the middle east, Asia, South Africa and Europe and freely operates in the above regions. In that sense, except for Germany that only recently started to act, Europe at large enables activists, cells and networks on its soil to support and provide assistance to Iran and Hezbollah’s activities.

Case Study No#1 - ITN as a Source to Identify and Activate Recruits

As previously mentioned, the above research uncovers the existence of a worldwide network of followers and members on a variety of social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and others) identified with Shiite ideology (see map below). This digital network includes activists, students, clerics and others who identify with Shia, disseminate propaganda and religious messages and profess deep support to Iran and Hezbollah.



ITN Deployment - Map of Members and Followers

The social profiles have been identified as consuming and disseminating Shiite theological content, refer to and quote Iranian leaders, praise military leaders especially Soleimani and Imad Faiz Morneiyeh (head of Hezbollah’s military wing until his elimination), and pay respects to Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khosein Khamenei. It should be noted, no specific references to specific terror activities have been observed other than statements by Nasrallah and Khamenei against the U.S. and Israel.

In this context, Khamenei tweeted Zakzaky’s portrait (see picture below - second row). The photo below demonstrates ITN’s complexity and its importance of ITN to Iran as it features Ismail Kaani (Soleimani’s successor as the commander of alQuds Force), Hassan Nasrallah - Hezbollah’s secretary general, Ismail Haniyeh - head of Hamas’ political chamber, Muhammd Ahmad Houssein - the Mufti of Jerusalem, Ziad Nahale - PIJ secretary general, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi - leader of the Houthi, Bashar al-Assad - president of Syria. It should be noted, the picture also contains unidentified portraits. The picture is a testament to the Iranian wishes to highlight the Islamic nature of their revolution and they do that by incorporating portraits of Sunni leaders, especially Palestinian ones on the backdrop of al-Aqsa mosque. Lastly, the picture highlights the central role Soleimani played in ITN by portraying him as a cloud above the mosque.



Picture on Khamenei’s Twitter Account

Additional ITN activists have been identified as follows: Kenya - an activists that supports Iran and Hezbollah and consumes Shiite religious and ideological content; Indonesia - an activist connected to Shiite clerics in the country who support Khamenei the Iranian leader; Pakistan - an activist

noted, his movement has been leading violent demonstrations and performing indoctrinations since the 1990s and to date has been outlawed http://www.mideast.co.il/p-2_a-800/

affiliated with the largest Shiite students group in the country (Imamia Students Organization) who has posted many messages and photos of Khamenei; Yemen - a Houthi activist identifying himself as an al-Quds Force activist; Germany - a Lebanese expat residing in Berlin with ties to Hezbollah and Hezbollah activist wearing Hezbollah uniform. Said activists also follows pages of Hezbollah's shahids.

The Physical Infrastructure Promoting ITN Activity

Case Study No#2 - Dawah Infrastructure - Zahra Center

The Iranian pan Islamic policy centered around the export of the Islamic Revolution, started with forming Dawah centers within Shiite communities in the middle east and around the globe. Those have formed the basis upon the values of the revolution were disseminated. With the advancement of technology and emergence of social media platforms, the Dawah centers became an important component in a network that combined the digital and physical worlds. The following are a few examples for the role the Dawah centers play within ITN.

The Shiite organization the Zahra Center was formed in 2005 in the town of GrandCynthe in northern France, by Yahia Gouasmi, Sheikh Jamel Tahiri and Khalid Abdelkrim. Per the center's web site, its main goal is to disseminate the message of Islam through the eyes of Muhammad and his family, pass along their thoughts and study their work. **Gouasmi** was born in Algeria, studied religious studies in Lebanon, and in 2009 formed an anti-Zionist party in France (which has been dismantled since). Gouasmi visited Iran several times, proud of his connections with the Iranian regime and presents himself as a soldier of the Imam Khomeini in France.



Left: Gouasmi meeting Nasrallah; Right: Gouasmi meeting Ahmadinejad

Sheikh Jamel Tahiri presents himself as a Shiite Imam that studied in the Baka, a known Hezbollah stronghold. In July 2006, he was recorded participating in a demonstration to support Lebanon and Hezbollah that took place in Paris on the backdrop of the Second Lebanon War.



Tahiri in the demonstration

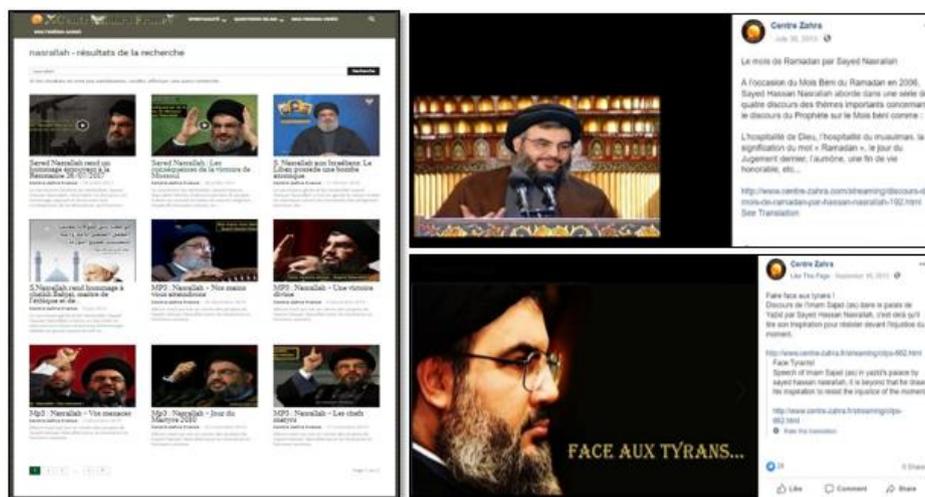
On October 2nd, 2018, the French police raided the Zahra Center and the homes of its leaders, on suspicions that the center is connected to and provides support to Iranian and Hezbollah terrorist cells. French sources confirmed that the raid was connected to the terror attack attempt in Villepinte¹¹ and that the center was suspected of providing logistics support to an Iranian terror activity in France. The raid uncovered unlawful hidden weapons. The center's treasurer, Bachir Gouasmi, Yahia's son, was sentenced to 18 months in prison by the court in Dunkirk for unlawful possession of weapons. In addition, 11 members associated with the center have been arrested for questioning on suspicions of connection to Iranian cells in France.¹²

About a year later, in light of the Zahra Center's connection to Iranian cells and open expressions of solidarity with Hezbollah and Hamas, the suspicion that the center was a key element in radicalization and incitement for terrorism grew stronger. Hence, it was argued that its activity might be translated into terrorism and it shut down indefinitely in March 2019. The French court ruled that the Zahra Center promoted propaganda intended to glorify armed struggle while

¹¹ Itamar Eichner, Mossad helped thwart major Iranian terror attack in France, Ynet, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5313291,00.html>

¹² Philippe, Huguen, French police raid Shiite Islamic center in 'anti-terror' probe, France 24, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.france24.com/en/20181002-france-police-shiite-islamic-grande-synthe-terrorism>

encouraging hatred and violence through antisemitic messages.¹³ It should be noted, the court also ordered to close two more organizations that operated out of the Zahra Center’s premises and promoted similar messages as well: Shia Federation of France, a party with an antisemitic agenda and Tele France Marianne. Moreover¹⁴, Tahiri has also been accused of posting an antisemitic article on the center’s web site and was sentenced to six months of suspended sentence and a fine of several thousand Euro. His attorneys’ claims that he did not explicitly called to attack Jews have been rejected by the court that ruled that this was an overt provocation for hatred.



Left: Nasrallah’s speeches available on the center’s web site; Right: support for Nasrallah on the center’s Facebook page

Case Study No#2 - Dawah Infrastructure - Association al-Ghadir (AAG)

AAG was formed in Paris in 1994 and per its website its goal is to disseminate the universal message of Islam as delivered by Muhammad and his family, Ahlul Bayt. Its activity includes conferences alongside commemoration of prominent Muslim events. Further, AAG has a system of schools and youth programs.

¹³ https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/06/20/le-tribunal-administratif-confirme-la-fermeture-du-centre-chiite-zahra-de-grande-synthe_5479345_3224.html

¹⁴ Alexis, Constant, Grande-Synthe: Christophe Castaner demande la dissolution du Centre Zahra et de ses satellites, LA VDN par La Voix du Nord, 2019. (French). Retrieved: <https://www.lavoixdunord.fr/555073/article/2019-03-20/christophe-castaner-demande-la-dissolution-du-centre-zahra-et-ses-satellites>



Excerpts from AAG's Facebook page

In November 2016, Jawad al-Sharistani, an Iraqi cleric living in Qom and serves as the Ayatollah Ali's Sistani's representative visited AAG head office in Paris. During his visit al-Sharistani met with the students and faculty of the schools affiliated with AAG. Al-Sharistani also visited another Shiite NGO called Imam al-Khoei. In addition, he visited the Catholic University of Paris as well as the Sorbonne University. During his visit to Paris, he met with the Lebanese ambassador to UNESCO and the representative of the Shiite committee in Paris.¹⁵ It should be noted that one of al-Sharistani's roles is to visit Shiite communities around the world.



Al-Sharistani during his Paris visit

Al-Sharistani maintains close ties with **Hezbollah and Iran**. On several occasions when he visited Beirut, he met with Nasrallah and other Hezbollah leadership members as well as met Nasrallah's son, Jawad, when the latter visited Qom. After Soleimani's elimination, al-Sharistani accompanied

¹⁵ Son Éminence Al seyed Shahrestani rend visite à l'association Al Ghadir et rencontre les présidents des centres islamiques à Paris, Shafaqna Français, 2016. Retrieved: <https://fr.shafaqna.com/son-eminence-al-seyed-shahrestani-rend-visite-a-l-association-al-ghadir-et-rencontre-les-presidents-des-centres-islamiques-a-paris/>

Sheikh Naim Qassim, Hezbollah's deputy secretary general to a condolence visit at Soleimani's house.



Al-Sharistani meeting Nasrallah and other Hezbollah functionaries

AAG invites to its gatherings another cleric named **Muhammad al-Safi**. The latter is also invited by the aforementioned al-Khoei foundation. He is known personality among Hezbollah members. For example, in 2018 he attended an event to commemorate the Imam Hussein in the village of Tura, Lebanon,¹⁶ that was jointly held by the boy scouts of Hezbollah and the boy scouts of Amal, and also gave a speech at an event to commemorate Fatma al-Zahra,¹⁷ held in Lebanon by Hezbollah. That year, he said, he also managed to meet Imad Morniyeh's mother before she passed.



Al-Safi at the joint Hezbollah-Amal boy scouts' event

¹⁶ Under the Shiite tradition, the month of Muharram is a month of mourning culminating in the Ashura Day when a ceremony is being held to commemorate the Battle of Karbala and is the Memorial Day for the Imam Hussein, son of Ali.

¹⁷ Muhammad's daughter Fatma, AKA Fatma al-Zahra, is considered a saint for Shiite. She was Ali's (the Shiite's first imam and Muhammad's heir) wife. Fatmiya is the annual event in her memory when the Shiite mourn her death.



Al-Safi meeting Shiite militias in Iraq



Invites to events on the Facebook pages of the NGO where al-Safi made a public speaking

Summary and Insights

The Iranian pan Islamic policy is disseminated through the military-operations axis and the Dawah axis. The geographic deployment of the Iranian networks and the presence of proxies such as Hezbollah in many countries around the world provide a power multiple for the military-operations axis in gathering pre op intelligence, planning and executing terror attacks. The advancement of technology magnified Iran's spheres of influence via Islamic social entrepreneurs operating out of Iran as well as proxy terror organizations. The above enables activists' recruitment not just to the terror apparatus but also to the extensive international criminal array operated by Hezbollah and other organizations.

Alongside the physical medium presence (e.g. from mosques through proxy organizations) one can observe an extensive Iranian threat network online. In depth analysis of the above infrastructure, knowledge of the agitators of the discourse and its influencers, analysis of the behavioral patterns

of the social entrepreneurs, the Dawah systems and locating their geographic deployment will assist with the thwarting efforts and reduce Iran's and its proxies' global sphere of influence.

To date, most of the activity against Iran and its proxies focuses on hitting the physical networks, money transfers and armament. Yet, in our opinion, contending with the ideology promoted by Iran is equally important. Within this framework, hitting the digital ITN will significantly curb Iran (and Hezbollah's) ability to ideologically mobilize young Shiite and recruit them to act within the framework of ITN.

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