

Iranian Proxy Warfare in Iraq and Yemen

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I. Introduction

As the US Congress in early fall 2015 prepared to approve the “historic deal that will prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon,” the nature of Tehran’s foreign policy and its regional ambitions were a regular point of contention between proponents and critics of the nuclear agreement.¹

Among its opponents, one of the frequently cited critiques was the fear that Iran will use the sanctions relief to bolster its military capabilities and facilitate terrorism across the region in order to pursue its interests.² On the other hand, the Islamic Republic’s leadership and some of its apologists in the West, among them – curiously – many European conspiracy theorists, have made every effort to assert that Iran is anything but a villain and that any claim to the contrary is purely based on “US propaganda.”³ As Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei declared in a televised speech in April 2015, “Iran has never invaded a country and never will.”⁴ Variations of this argument, such as that Iran has never launched an aggressive war in modern history, have been published in liberal media outlets such as Salon.⁵

While it is true that Iran has not launched a *conventional* war against its neighbors or any other countries since the Islamic revolution in 1979, the matter gets more complicated when it comes to warfare that does not meet the threshold of conventional interstate war. Over the past decades, various terms have been introduced to describe this phenomenon. Some scholars and military experts have referred to it as unconventional,

¹ "The Historic Deal that Will Prevent Iran from Acquiring a Nuclear Weapon," The White House, accessed March 31, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy/iran-deal>.

² David Makovsky and Matthew Levitt, "Keeping Iran’s Feet to the Fire," *Foreign Policy*, July 14, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/14/the-nuclear-deal-doesnt-mean-the-end-of-sanctions-iran/>.

³ Juan Cole, "Khamenei: US Invented Nuclear Myth; Iran Will Never Invade Another Country," *Informed Comment*, April 20, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.juancole.com/2015/04/khamenei-invented-another.html>; as for the connections between Iran and European conspiracy theorists, cf. (in German) Simone Schmid, "Warum Die Schweizer Rechten Den Iran Mögen," *Tagesanzeiger*, April 25, 2014, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/schweiz/standard/Warum-die-Schweizer-Rechten-den-Iran-moegen/story/22351264>.

⁴ Cole, "Khamenei: US Invented Nuclear Myth."

⁵ cf. Juan Cole, "The Top Ten Things You Didn’t Know about Iran," *Salon*, October 1, 2009, accessed March 31, 2016. http://www.salon.com/2009/10/01/cole_12/.

asymmetric, or irregular warfare; others have described them as low-intensity conflict, small wars, or hybrid warfare.⁶ Most recently, the term “gray zone challenges” has sought to capture the elusive and ambiguous nature of conflict which the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) defines as “competitive interactions among and within [sic] state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality.”⁷ According to SOCOM, such a challenge can be characterized by “some level of *aggression*”, which is necessary to shift it from the white zone of peacetime competition to the gray zone; perspective-dependency, meaning that every actor may interpret the nature of a gray zone challenge differently (some view it closer to white zone competition, others closer to a black zone war) which will affect its level commitment; as well as “ambiguity regarding the nature of conflict, the parties involved or the relevant policy and legal frameworks.”⁸ As the SOCOM white paper notes, these types of conflicts have indeed become the norm.⁹

At the same time, however, the concept of warfare that does not meet the threshold of conventional inter-state war is hardly a new invention. In a formerly top secret memorandum from April 30, 1948, then-director of the Policy Planning Staff George Kennan outlined his vision for the role of the newly founded CIA: the conduct of organized political warfare. “Political warfare”, according to Kennan, “is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.”¹⁰ Kennan distinguishes between two major types of

⁶ Teodor Frunzeti, "Asymmetric, Unconventional, and Hybrid Actions in 21st Century Warfare," *Strategic Impact* 46 (2013); Eric V. Larson et al, *Assessing Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Intelligence Analysis* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008); Arnold Milton and Walt Berkovski, eds., *Irregular Warfare: Strategy and Considerations* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2012); for a historical perspective, cf. John Arquilla, *Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits: How Masters of Irregular Warfare Have Shaped Our World* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011); Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Liveright Pub., 2013).

⁷ "The Gray Zone," September 9, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/6891151/Gray%20Zones%20-%20USSOCOM%20White%20Paper%209%20Sep%202015.pdf>.

⁸ "The Gray Zone."

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ "George F. Kennan on Organizing Political Warfare," accessed March 31, 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320>.

political warfare, overt and covert. The latter includes “clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements [...] and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.”¹¹

1.1 Research Question

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the Islamic Republic of Iran has successfully employed such means of irregular warfare and continues to do so. More particularly, it explores how Iran conducts proxy interventions in Iraq and Yemen, two current theaters of war with obvious, if not necessarily officially acknowledged, Iranian involvement.¹² Indeed, Iranian involvement in these two theaters provides an excellent example of what Kennan envisioned as “clandestine support” as well as “the ambiguity” mentioned in SOCOM’s “Gray Zone” white paper which allows actors “to avoid accountability for their actions.”¹³

Besides providing an overview of the concept of proxy warfare and discussing its continuous appeal to Iranian foreign policy, the paper examines the specific forms of the Iranian interventions in Iraq and Yemen and how they are motivated.¹⁴

The reader might ask why the Iranian intervention in Syria is not being considered by this research paper. There are three reasons: First, the war in Syria has received a much higher attention than the Iranian intervention in Yemen, therefore examining the case study in Yemen and comparing it to the Iranian intervention in Iraq offers more added value. Second, as some scholars would argue, the Iranian support for the embattled Assad regime does not qualify as proxy warfare. As Bar-Siman-Tov notes, a major power who “intervene[s] militarily in a local war to prevent the defeat of its client or ally [...]”

¹¹ "George F. Kennan on Organizing Political Warfare,"

¹² cf. Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 8, 2014, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-expanding-military-role-in-iraq>; Andrew W. Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," *Orbis* 58 (2014).

¹³ "The Gray Zone."

¹⁴ The terms „proxy warfare“ and „proxy intervention will be used interchangeably throughout the paper.

may, therefore, be treated as an attempt to actualize commitments to the small state rather than as a war by proxy.”¹⁵ Third, while the author does not necessarily agree with Bar-Siman-Tov’s assertion, there are indications that the Iranian involvement in Syria has long crossed the threshold of proxy warfare and that Iranian soldiers, both from IRGC divisions as well as from conventional brigades, are fighting on the frontlines in Syria.¹⁶

I.II Importance of Research

As will be discussed in the following chapter, the bulk of literature on proxy warfare as a standalone phenomenon is relatively recent but burgeoning. So far, however, only a few authors have applied the theoretical framework of proxy warfare to Iranian activities in the Middle East, some minor exceptions such as Andrew Mumford’s short case study of Iranian Proxy Warfare in Iraq since 2003 aside.¹⁷

On the other hand, a number of scholars have published important research on Iranian proxy groups in Iraq and Syria. However, they have done so without applying a rigorous theoretical framework centering on the issue of proxy warfare to their case studies.¹⁸ Therefore, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between these two fields by building upon the theoretical framework of proxy warfare and applying it to the Iranian proxy interventions in Iraq and Yemen. Given that irregular warfare plays a major role in the Iranian military doctrine, understanding how Iran carries out proxy interventions may help to further the understanding how Tehran seeks to pursue its interests in the region.¹⁹

On the macro level, proxy warfare is “relevant to the current

¹⁵ Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Strategy Of War By Proxy," *Cooperation and Conflict* 19 (1984), 266.

¹⁶ Paul Bucala and Frederick W. Kagan, "Iran’s Evolving Way of War - How the IRGC Fights in Syria," (Washington DC: AEI/Critical Threats, March 2016).

¹⁷ Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013), 51-53.

¹⁸ cf. Jonathan Spyer & Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "How Iraq Became a Proxy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *The Tower Magazine*, Issue 21, December 2014, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.thetower.org/article/how-iraq-became-a-wholly-owned-subsi-dary-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran/>.

¹⁹ Michael Connell, "Iran’s Military Doctrine," *Iran Primer*, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>; Steven R. Ward, "The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine," *Middle East Journal* 59 (2005).

security firstly because the increasing prevalence of intra-state (as opposed to inter-state) wars [...] and also because many internal conflicts (insurgencies, civil wars etc. possess an external dimension.²⁰

As proxy interventions will remain a prevalent form of conflict in the decades to come, the scholarship on this phenomenon continues to suffer from ambiguity and conceptual gaps. While this research paper does not aim at bridging them, identifying some areas of contention may contribute to further advancing the study of proxy warfare. Similarly, the examination of the Iranian interventions in Iraq and Yemen may yield generally applicable insights into how proxy warfare is conducted and point to new avenues of research.

I.III Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this research paper is organized as follows: chapter II reviews the literature on proxy warfare and discusses its conceptual framework as well as it points out some areas of contention. Chapter III examines the appeal of proxy warfare for Iran by tracing the evolution of post-revolutionary Iranian foreign policy and proxy interventions. It also highlights the importance of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and especially the role of the Qods Force (IRGC-QF) as a critical component in Iranian proxy interventions. The methodology which will be used to analyze the case study of Iraq and Yemen is briefly described in chapter IV. Chapter V and VI are devoted to the two case studies of Iranian interventions Iraq and Yemen before they are compared to each other in chapter VII. Finally, the paper will offer some concluding remarks in chapter VIII.

II. Proxy Warfare

The idea that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” is a concept which can be traced back as far as to the ancient Indian philosopher Kautilya’s “Arthashastra”, a treatise on statecraft

²⁰ Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy’s Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*, (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 14.

written in the 4th century BC.²¹ The Greek philosopher and historian Thucydides described how the backing of the warring factions in the civil war of Corcyra by the Peloponnesian and the Delian leagues, two rival associations of city-states in ancient Greece, triggered the Peloponnesian War.²² Two millennia afterward, both Machiavelli and – another three centuries later – Clausewitz made observations about conflict parties receiving outside support.²³ Therefore, Loveman’s assertion that supporting “a third party engaged in a conflict with one’s enemy” only started “as soon as the international system and the necessary technology were sufficiently advanced” at the very least needs to be scrutinized if not outright rejected.²⁴ Rather, proxy warfare may in fact represent “a perennial strand in the history of warfare” as proposed by Andrew Mumford.²⁵ Indeed, the 30 Year-War in Europe, during which French Protestants and Spanish Catholics supported their co-religionists can be seen through the prism of war by proxy, just like Britain’s support for the Southern Confederation during the American Civil War, or the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.²⁶

Given the enormous destructive potential unleashed in the Second World War as well as the dawn of the nuclear era, which made conventional interstate confrontations between East and West too great a risk, the means of proxy intervention became a useful alternative for pursuing strategic interests whilst minimizing the risks of global conflict escalation; including the possible deployment of nuclear weapons.²⁷ As Mumford argues, proxy warfare, while utilized throughout history, in 20th century transformed into a prolific form of conflict; in fact, direct superpower intervention (such as

²¹ „The king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror's territory is termed the enemy. The king who is likewise situated close to the enemy, but separated from the conqueror only by the enemy, is termed the friend (of the conqueror).“ (Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, trans. R. Shamasastri (Mysore: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1929), 296).

²² Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1996), 169-175.

²³ Niccolo Machiavelli (trans. George Bull), *The Prince* (London: Penguin, 1981), 119; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 483.

²⁴ Chris Loveman, "Assessing the phenomenon of proxy intervention," *Conflict, Security & Development* 2 (2002), 30.

²⁵ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 1.

²⁶ *ibid*, 11, 26-29.

²⁷ Loveman, 30; Mumford, 3.

the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) became the exception rather than the rule. In the meantime, however, “proxy interference from a distance had established itself as the norm.”²⁸

Given the prevalence of proxy conflicts in the East-West confrontation during the Cold War, one would be forgiven expecting to find a vast academic literature on the subject. However, as Mumford contends, “stand-alone analysis of proxy wars has been largely overlooked” by “a significant portion of theoretical, causal quantitative studies of war in the modern world” which fail to “promulgate a conceptual understanding of proxy war”.²⁹ Other authors such as Hughes and Craig offer a more nuanced view. They argue that while specific cases of proxy conflicts have been the subject of numerous books and articles, there is a gap when it comes to the conceptual understanding of proxy warfare, its causes, and consequences.³⁰

There are a few exceptions such as Bertil Dunér or the Israeli scholar Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov who in 1984 published an article that sought to conceptualize proxy warfare.³¹ Asking nine key questions, Bar-Siman-Tov tried to define the phenomenon and characterized it as a “unique category of war”.³² These exceptions asides, it was only the last fifteen years that saw increasing efforts to conceptualize the phenomenon of proxy interventions; most likely spurred by the experiences of US and coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and the renewed interest in insurgency and counterinsurgency doctrine to which proxy war is – more often than not – closely related.³³ One should also mention Byman’s study of state-sponsored terrorism which, although he does

²⁸ Mumford, 12.

²⁹ *ibid.* 2.

³⁰ Dylan Craig, "State Security Policy and Proxy Wars in Africa," *Strategic Insights* 9 (2010), 5; Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 5.

³¹ Bertil Dunér, "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 18 (1981); Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Strategy Of War By Proxy."

³² Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Strategy Of War By Proxy," 264.

³³ Among the more compelling books are Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*; Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*; Michael A. Innes (ed.), *Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates & the Use of Force*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012); and Ariel I. Ahram, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-sponsored Militias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). In addition, two articles need to be mentioned: Loveman, "Assessing the phenomenon of proxy intervention"; and Craig, "State Security Policy."

not explicitly refer to it, shares many striking similarities with the conceptual framework of proxy warfare.³⁴

II.1 What is Proxy Warfare

There is not a single valid definition of proxy warfare to be found. While most recent conceptualizations of refer to a certain set of common characteristics, there are also several points of contentions among the scholar writing about proxy warfare. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer an own comprehensive conceptualization. Instead, the aim of the following section is to point out common traits as well as to make the reader aware of the ambiguity that not only surrounds the issue of proxy warfare but the issue of irregular warfare in general.

Proxy warfare distinguishes itself from other forms of warfare in that the principal actor chooses not to engage a target directly, i.e. by deploying his own forces. Instead, a proxy intervention is based on the *relationship* of at least two distinctive actors, a *principal* on the one hand and a *proxy* on the other. This characteristic is already emphasized in the studies of Dunér and Bar-Siman-Tov, although their approach is arguably too state-centric as it only envisions nation states in the role of both principal and proxy. Dunér distinguishes between two types of proxy interventions, depending upon whether a proxy receives (and is dependent upon aid) or not. In both cases, Dunér argues, the relationship between the two actors is coercive, i.e. the proxy is forced by the principal to intervene.³⁵ Bar-Siman-Tov, on the other hand, distinguishes between voluntary and coerced proxies. At the same time, however, he argues that both of them only act because they are being asked to do so by their principals.³⁶ In addition, although the relationship usually favors the principal, it is still defined by a certain reciprocity, in which “the superior power uses his resources to provide protection and

³⁴ cf. Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁵ Dunér, "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars," 358.

³⁶ Bar-Siman-Tov, "Strategy Of War By Proxy," 267, 272.

material aid – economic and military – in exchange for a special service.”³⁷

The current scholarship on proxy warfare, which emerged over the past 15 years, conceptualizes this relationship between principal and proxy in a way which resembles Siman-Tov’s deliberations. According to Mumford, proxy wars are “the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome” and they are “constitutive of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and their chosen proxies who are the conduit for weapons, training and funding from the benefactor.”³⁸ Similarly, Hughes defines a proxy as a “non-state paramilitary group receiving direct assistance from an external power.”³⁹

However, there is disagreement regarding the nature of principals and proxies. In Hughes definition, the role of the proxy is reserved for non-state actors only.⁴⁰ While it might reflect the reality of most current proxy conflicts, such a definition seems too narrow. Loveman, on the other hand, argues that proxies can be either a “second state, armed opposition movement or para-state” but only considers state actors as principals whereas Mumford, contends that both states and non-state actors can act as principals as well as proxies, meaning that there are four possible cases: 1. a state using another state as a proxy; 2. a state using a non-state actor as a proxy; 3. a non-state actor using a state as a proxy; and 4. a non-state actor using another non-state actor as a proxy.⁴¹ Out of these four, however, especially the third case seems rather problematic to imagine, particularly in light of the fact that Mumford rules out non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and as international organizations (IOs) as potential proxy war-wagers since they “are fundamentally dedicated to the alleviation of suffering within war- torn communities and to bringing about swift and peaceful resolutions to ongoing violence [and] [t]heir goals are not

³⁷ Bar-Siman-Tov, "Strategy Of War By Proxy," 269.

³⁸ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 11.

³⁹ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 11.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Loveman, "Assessing the phenomenon of proxy intervention," 32; Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 45.

to bring about the victory of one side over another.”⁴² Perhaps unsurprisingly, the author fails to provide an example of a non-state actor principal using a state as a proxy.

Another point of contention in defining the parameters of proxy warfare is the question whether – and to what degree – the interests of principal and proxy are aligned. Bar-Siman-Tov notes the possibility of mutual interests but does not perceive them as a requirement for a proxy relation.⁴³ More important to him are *compatible interests* with regard to the *outcome* of the war.⁴⁴ On the other hand, both Hughes and Loveman argue that principal and proxy need to have a *common enemy* (i.e. the target of the intervention) whereas according to the latter, their ideologies, motives, and concerns may diverge.⁴⁵ Mumford, citing the US’s toppling of Saddam Hussein as fulfilling a long-term Iranian ambition, even argues that a proxy might act unwittingly and against its own interests.⁴⁶ However, this assertion is contradicted by his own definition of proxy war being “constitutive of a relationship between a benefactor [...] and their chosen proxies who are the conduit for weapons, training and funding.”⁴⁷ Indeed, as Bar-Siman-Tov contends, “the fact that an external power may profit from [a] war is not enough to define [it] as a war by proxy.”⁴⁸

The above-mentioned characteristics are not exhaustive (there is, for example, the question regarding the minimal duration of the relationship between principal and proxy) and it should have become apparent that defining proxy warfare struggles with a fair amount of elusiveness. This is further compounded by the fluidity of both the relationship between principal and proxy as well as the size and scope of proxy interventions.⁴⁹ A principal may choose to abandon a proxy if it no longer serves his interests. On the other hand, a proxy might be able to expand

⁴² Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 45.

⁴³ Bar-Siman-Tov, "Strategy Of War By Proxy," 268, 270.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 271-272.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 12; Loveman, "Assessing the phenomenon of proxy intervention," 32.

⁴⁶ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 17.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁸ Bar-Siman-Tov, "Strategy Of War By Proxy," 265.

⁴⁹ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 19.

his leverage over time and shift the power in the relationship to the benefactor in his favor.⁵⁰ As for the actual interventions, their size and scope will often not remain static and a small scale proxy conflict might evolve into a large-scale proxy war or even lead to a direct intervention by the principal as evidenced in the Vietnam War.⁵¹ The fact that proxy warfare is often (but not necessarily) conducted covertly – in order to grant the principal plausible deniability and that a conflict may be perceived differently by different actors (similar to gray zone conflicts as discussed in the introduction) make the task of defining proxy warfare even more challenging.

II.II Why Engage in Proxy Wars

The literature on proxy warfare identifies a host of reasons why principals opt to conduct proxy interventions. These reasons may be divided into three broad major categories, namely *risk, interest, and ideology*.

Risk: Perhaps one of the strongest motivators to adopt a proxy warfare strategy is the desire to reduce potential costs and risks. Using proxy forces is a valuable alternative if the *political constraints* on direct military action such as the prospect of international condemnation, high financial costs, or casualty sensitivity are too high.⁵² Avoiding *conflict escalation* is another reason why a principal may choose to engage in proxy warfare.⁵³ Undertaking a covert proxy intervention may grant a principal *plausible deniability* and allow him to avoid a direct confrontation with the target and its allies.⁵⁴ However, as Hughes points out, a principal may also try to avoid a conflict by threatening the use of a proxy as a *deterrent*, such as Iran which threatened to unleash its surrogates such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and others should the United

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 20.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 41; Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 23-24.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 26; Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 42-43.

⁵⁴ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 43.; Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 26-27.

State or Israel dare to attack its nuclear facilities.⁵⁵ Additionally, the utilization may help to *gather intelligence* in areas that are inaccessible (or too risky to access) to the principal.⁵⁶

Interest: Another set of reasons for a principal to utilize proxy are related to the principal's strategic interests. One of these interests might be the desire to *preserve or enhance spheres of influence*.⁵⁷ A proxy strategy may allow accomplishing that without committing one's own forces. Similarly, a principal might be concerned that a target state could threaten regional stability and thus base his decision to engage in a proxy intervention on *security considerations*.⁵⁸ A proxy intervention can also *assist a military campaign* of the principal by fueling internal conflict in order to divert the enemy's resources.⁵⁹

Ideology: Finally, the decision to wage a proxy war might be related to ideology. According to Hughes, a principal may choose to support proxy out of *ideological solidarity*, as evidenced, for example, by Cuba's support for left-wing insurgencies in the Latin America or Africa.⁶⁰ Similarly, the relationship between principal and proxy can be rooted in the presence of *national and religious ties*. A principal might decide that there is a need to "protect" a minority of common ethnicity or religion from persecution in the target state by establishing a proxy force.⁶¹ Finally, a state which recently experienced a successful revolution could be prompted to spread its ideology by exporting its revolution as will be discussed in more detail later on.

It seems reasonable to assume that these reasons are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the decision to utilize a proxy will most likely depend upon a combination of these factors. For example, while the decision to protect a minority by proxy might be rooted in ideological or

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 28-29.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁸ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 24-25.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 27-28.

⁶⁰ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 25-26.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

national considerations, it will likely be supplemented by additional factors such as strategic interests and the calculation of potential costs and risks. Take for instance the Russian proxy intervention in the Spanish Civil War which was motivated simultaneously by interest and ideology: to halt the spread of fascism and to gain control over the anti-fascist movement in Spain.⁶² In addition, given that risk, interest, and ideology are all intertwined to a certain degree, the above-mentioned factors are often characterized by a certain fluidity and might be assigned to more than one major category at once. Finally, the above-mentioned list is not exhaustive. For example, Hughes mentions greed and revenge as additional factors, both of which might be included in more than a single category.⁶³

II.III Different Forms of Proxy Interventions

As we have seen in the preceding section, a principal's provision of assistance to a proxy is widely regarded as one of the core characteristics of proxy warfare. The current scholarship on proxy warfare distinguishes between various types of assistance which will be briefly reviewed, based upon Mumford's distinction of four major types of support as well as Byman et al.'s study on outside support for insurgencies.⁶⁴

II.IIIa Manpower and Training

As Mumford argues, proxy wars are similar to other forms of war inasmuch as manpower is "seen as essential to the outcome."⁶⁵ Principals can support their proxies by deploying surrogate forces (i.e. another third party actor such as Cuban forces acting on behalf of the Soviet Union in Third World conflicts or Hezbollah on behalf of Iran as the case studies will

⁶² Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 32.

⁶³ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 30, 32.

⁶⁴ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 61; Daniel Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001).

⁶⁵ Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*.

demonstrate) or by augmenting proxy forces with non-combatant “military advisors” in order to train and supervise them.⁶⁶

II.IIIb Material Support

Providing weapons, ammunition and other materials to proxy forces is another major way for a principal to intervene in a conflict. During the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the United States supplied proxy forces with material worth billions of dollars.⁶⁷

While the end of the Cold War led to a surplus of small arms which made it easier and cheaper for proxy forces to arm themselves, external support may still be valuable if a group does not have full access to the desired range of military hardware and equipment. In addition, outside material support also means that proxies can use their funds for other purposes such as recruitment or propaganda.⁶⁸

II.IIIc Financial Assistance

According to Mumford, sending money to a warring faction in a conflict can be seen as another form of proxy intervention if the motives for doing so “are not explicitly humanitarian or for development reasons and are perceived to be for the broader strategic reasons of furthering a war aim.”⁶⁹ During the Cold War, the Soviet Union reportedly provided up to \$51 billion to its proxies in the Third World (not including its primary clients Cuba, Vietnam, and North Korea).⁷⁰

But major powers are not the only benefactors to utilize large sums in order to support their proxies. According to conservative estimates, Iran provided Hezbollah for many years with \$100 million a year.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 62-63.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 64.

⁶⁸ Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, 95.

⁶⁹ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 65.

⁷⁰ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 65.

⁷¹ Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, 87.

II.IIIId Non-Military Assistance

In some cases, a benefactor might choose to launch a proxy intervention based on non-military means instead of or in addition to tangible material or military support. Mumford invokes Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power", the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" which "arises out of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies."⁷²

Mumford contends that non-military assistance may include the spread of propaganda intended to aid a chosen proxy by highlighting its legitimacy or, just as importantly, discrediting its enemies.⁷³ Another possibility would be to offer vocal support to a proxy in order to deter an adversary from reacting in a certain way (although Mumford acknowledges that coercion and deterrence do not really fit Nye's concept of soft power).⁷⁴

It goes without saying that these different forms of interventions are – just like the motivations to conduct proxy wars – not mutually exclusive. Instead, a benefactor may choose a combination of different forms of assistance to his proxy or he may initially rely on one only and later introduce other means of support to his proxy.

III. The Continuous Appeal of Proxy Warfare to Iran

As this paper argues, proxy warfare is a the fairly consistent component in the foreign policy toolkit of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Before analyzing two cases of Iranian interventions in more detail, this section explores why Iran has repeatedly resorted to war by proxy. In order to do so, it examines sources and motives of Iranian foreign policy and security decision

⁷² Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 66.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

making and outlines how Iran's approach towards irregular warfare and proxy intervention has constantly evolved since the revolution in 1979.

III.I Iran's Foreign Policy – Between Ideology and Realpolitik

The nature of the Iranian regime and its foreign policies are highly contested among both scholars and policy makers. On the one hand, as Afshon Ostovar point out, many studies characterize the regime as “fanatic” and “fundamentalist” without further defining those terms, thus “[perpetuating] the belief held by many policy makers and analysts that Iran's leaders and policies are driven in toto by an implacable irrationality that can neither be understood nor engaged toward any meaningful end.”⁷⁵ Indeed, pundits have repeatedly characterized the Iranian leadership as “apocalyptic” and “messianic” and argued that Iran “resembles a medieval European state more than a modern secularized democracy.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, a number of scholars have argued that Iran's foreign policy, although in the guise of religious rhetoric, is mostly guided by realism and “Iran is best understood as a conservative, and at times, defensive state that is motivated by traditional national interests more so than religious ideology [and whose] first priority is self-preservation.”⁷⁷

While a detailed analysis of the power structure of the Islamic Republic is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to understand that its leadership and institutions are anything but monolithic and instead shaped by a high-degree factionalism, with the consequence “that the actual issues debated are secondary to the larger prizes of patronage, power, and privilege” according to anonymous Iranian scholar interviewed by RAND.⁷⁸

While the most important figure political

⁷⁵ Afshon P. Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution: Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power in Iran (1979–2009)" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 2.

⁷⁶ Denis MacEoin, "What the White House Might Not See about Iran," *Gatestone Institute*, March 31, 2015, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/5359/iran-nuclear-theology>.

⁷⁷ Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan, "Islamic Realpolitik: Two-Level Iranian Foreign Policy," *International Journal on World Peace* 26 (2009), 29.

⁷⁸ Frederic Wehrey et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent - Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 22.

figure is the Iranian supreme leader who has the power to declare war and controls the armed forces, Iran's foreign policy is also shaped by other politicians such as the respective president and his corresponding faction.⁷⁹ The current political factions in Iran may be broadly generalized as (*traditional*) *conservatives*, who have pursued a less confrontational foreign policy and mainly care about consolidating the revolution's gains and keeping Iran self-sufficient and independent; *moderates* and *reformists*, who – to a varying degree – try to improve Iran's relations with the outside world; and finally *hardliners*, who favor a confrontational foreign policy based on the principles of exporting the revolution.⁸⁰

But

factionalism also affects those institutions in charge of implementing foreign policy. According to a study by RAND, the sidelining of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the late stages of Khatami's presidency led to an intensified competition between the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s Qods Force. Both organizations were vying for agents and influence over paramilitary and terrorist groups in places such as Afghanistan and ultimately pushed Iranian foreign policy towards a more confrontational stance.⁸¹

III.II The IRGC – Iran's "Other" Armed Forces

Another important factor to consider is the role the *Pasdaran*, the Guardians of the Iranian Revolution. Established by supreme leader Khomeini on May 5, 1979, the IRGC's main task initially was to protect the newly established Islamic rule by providing internal security and combating counterrevolutionary elements.⁸² Since then, the IRGC have become Iran's primary internal and external security force, thereby eclipsing the conventional armed forces (*artesh*), operating independent land, sea, and air components and fielding around 150'000

⁷⁹ Rieffer-Flanagan, "Islamic Realpolitik," 9.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Wehrey, *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 29.

⁸² Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 47.

soldiers.⁸³ The IRGC also operates the majority of Iran's surface-to-surface missiles and is closely linked to the Iranian nuclear program, to the extent that the IRGC leadership was singled out under UN Security Council resolutions in 2006 and 2007 and their assets were frozen.⁸⁴

Officially, the IRGC reports to a subset of the Supreme Council for National Security, which includes the supreme leader, the president, and the minister of intelligence.⁸⁵ However, not only are informal ties such as personal networks usually stronger than institutions, the IRGC also benefits from direct access to the office of the supreme leader and its contacts to the conservative clergy and their considerable influence on various ministries and institutions.⁸⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the IRGC has thus managed to amass tremendous political influence. This was evident in the presidential elections of 2009 when senior IRGC leaders indicated they will not accept a reformist president such as former president and Ahmadinejad's main rival Mir Hossein Mousavi.⁸⁷ While not a monolithic organization and made up of different factions, the IRGC is nowadays most strongly affiliated with conservatives and hardliners that deeply oppose political reforms and opening towards the West and especially the United States.⁸⁸

Besides its role in Iranian security, the IRGC has also become the largest economic power in Iran, "[dominating] most sectors of the economy, from energy to construction, telecommunication to auto making, and even banking and finance."⁸⁹ The Revolutionary Guards are linked to "dozens, perhaps even hundreds" of purportedly private companies that are actually controlled by veterans of the IRGC.⁹⁰ An instrumental factor in the 2005 election of President Ahmadinejad, the IRGC were rewarded by the latter with even more government loans and contracts (besides occupying key positions

⁸³ Alireza Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards," *Iran Primer*, August 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-guards>.

⁸⁴ Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces," Working Draft (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), 3.

⁸⁵ Daniel Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 23.

⁸⁶ Byman et al., *Iran's Security Policy*.

⁸⁷ Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards."

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Nader, "The Revolutionary Guards."

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

in various ministries). The organization arguably also profited from the international sanctions regime which hurt its business competitors while the IRGC was able to access state funds and vast independent resources.⁹¹

III.III The Qods Force – IRGC's External Arm

Ever since its inception, the IRGC has had another crucial role, which is especially important in the context of proxy warfare: it was tasked with supporting foreign liberation movements outside of Iran.⁹² Initially, this interventionism was primarily motivated by ideological zeal although it has faded over time on behalf of more realist aims. However, while its motivation may have changed, Iran continues to engage in proxy interventions abroad.

The most important Iranian component in its proxy war strategy is the so-called Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Information about this unit is scarce and Iran has in the past not officially acknowledged its existence.⁹³ As indicated by some reports, the classified budget of the Qods Forces is directly controlled by Khamenei and is not reflected in Iran's general budget.⁹⁴

While some experts argue that the Qods Force was formed as a part of IRGC during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran expert Afshon P. Ostovar notes that the post-war reorganization of the military sector led to an expansion of the IRGC, bringing the Qods Forces (and additionally the Basij Resistance Forces) under its command.⁹⁵

The unit is commanded by Major General Qassem Soleimani who took control, according to *The New Yorker* correspondent Dexter Filkins, around the year 2008 and has directed the Qods Force ever since.⁹⁶ Reportedly, Soleimani has direct access to the Iranian

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 47

⁹³ Ben Smith, "The Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard," Standard Note SN/IA/4494 (London: House of Commons, Library, 2007), 2.

⁹⁴ Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," 8-9.

⁹⁵ Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 136.

⁹⁶ Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>.

supreme leader Khamenei.⁹⁷

The exact number of Qods Force operatives is unknown, although according to some estimates, the SCNS decided in January 2006 to increase the size the unit to 15'000.⁹⁸ According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Qods Force is divided into several "directorates" according to the respective countries in which it operates. In addition, the unit has offices or "sections" in many Iranian embassies abroad which are off-limits to other embassy personnel.⁹⁹

The Qods Force primary role is to support Shi'a militias and other non-state actors abroad that are sympathetic to Iran and provide them with weapons, funds, and training.¹⁰⁰ This task is also reflected by a statement of former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei who described the Qods Force's responsibilities as follows: "[T]he Qods Force, which is for assisting Muslims, Islamic states or Islamic governments, should they ask for help in training or advice. That is now a global custom. If an Islamic state, government or people need to be put through some training, well, the corps will go there and give them training; it will take measures to provide training support for world Muslims or Islamic states. There was a need for a force to perform this task, and the Eminent Leader commanded the corps to set it up. This force is now being set up and is mainly for helping Islamic governments and Islamic nations when there is a need to train them and transfer experience to them."¹⁰¹ In line with that, the Qods Forces has reportedly supported Iranian proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Gaza, Syria and Yemen.¹⁰² As the two case studies will show, there is also reason to believe that the unit provided training in unconventional warfare to Iranian proxy elements in

⁹⁷ Smith, "The Quds Force," 2.

⁹⁸ Smith, "The Quds Force," 2.

⁹⁹ Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," 9.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰¹ Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 137.

¹⁰² Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," 8-9; Smith, "The Quds Force;" Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria;" Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen."

training camps within Iran that are controlled by the Qods Force.¹⁰³

Finally, the Qods Force is also accused of directing and supporting acts of terrorism such as the bombing of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the AMIA community center in 1994, both in Buenos Aires. While Iran has vehemently denied such claims, then-director of the Defense Intelligence Agency Michael D. Maples alleged that the Qods Force takes the lead in Iran's transnational terrorist activities, in conjunction with Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's MOIS.¹⁰⁴

III.IV The Evolution of Iranian Interventionism

In the first decade after the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian foreign policy was defined by what could be paradigmatically summarized as “Neither East nor West, but the Islamic Republic” and the “Export of the Revolution” (*sodour-e enqelab*).¹⁰⁵ One of the vocal proponents of interventionism was the IRGC which declared prior to the Iraq war that “we will export our revolution throughout the world. As our revolution is Islamic, the struggle will continue until the call of ‘*There is no God but God . . .*’ echoes around the globe.”¹⁰⁶ To this end, the IRGC established the Office of Liberation Movements (OLM) whose primary mission was to develop contacts between the Guards and Muslim organizations abroad that were “fighting for freedom from the servitude and fetters of Western and Eastern imperialism and global Zionism.”¹⁰⁷

It is important to note that the desire to export its own ideology is by no means limited to Iran but can be found among other states who experienced successful revolutions, for example the Soviet Union or Cuba.¹⁰⁸ Fred Halliday refers to this phenomenon as “revolutionary internationalism” and argues that one of its characteristics is

¹⁰³ Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," 9.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ cf. Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Iran's Export of the Revolution: Its Politics, Ends and Means," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 13 (1989); Eva Patricia Rakel, "Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6 (2007), 167; Gary Sick, "Iran: The Adolescent Revolution," *Journal of International Affairs* 49 (1995).

¹⁰⁶ Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 89.

¹⁰⁷ Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 90.

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 26.

the assistance and collaboration with external “insurrectionary groups.”¹⁰⁹ According to Halliday, not only do revolutionaries “proclaim the international relevance of their revolution and a duty to assist those struggling elsewhere” but they also believe that the fate of revolutions is tied to international factors and the “character and shape of post-revolutionary societies is greatly affected by the international context in which they find themselves.”¹¹⁰

In the case of Iran, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War in 1982 provided the IRGC with an excellent opportunity to put its interventionist ambitions into practice. The result was the creation of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Party of God, which emerged out of the training camps set up by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel in the Beqaa Valley.¹¹¹ Until today, Hezbollah is Iran’s most valued proxy organization and – as the case studies will show – itself a vital part in establishing and training new Iranian proxies.

Iran sought to emulate its Lebanese strategy by supporting or establishing radical Shi’a factions and at times augmenting them with IRGC personnel, or by amplifying the “fiery rhetoric” of Shia dissident movements in countries such as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Turkmenistan, and Saudi-Arabia. However, in most cases, these efforts were met with little success.¹¹² One of these examples is the establishment of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) which will be discussed further in the case study on Iraq.

In 1985, Iran began to pull out most of its IRGC troops from Lebanon although a small presence remains until today.¹¹³ The reason for the drawdown was a rift within the Iranian regime after Tehran had faced increased international pressure for its role in Lebanon. While the leftist elements of the Khomeinist block still favored interventionism, the

¹⁰⁹ Fred Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism,” *International Affairs* (1988), 196.

¹¹⁰ Halliday, “Three Concepts of Internationalism,” 196-197.

¹¹¹ Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States*, 82-83; Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 12; Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 29-46.

¹¹² Sick, “Iran: The Adolescent Revolution,” 149; Ramazani, “Iran’s Export of the Revolution,” 85.

¹¹³ Ostovar, “Guardians of the Islamic Revolution,” 97.

conservative faction led by future president Rafsanjani regarded foreign involvement as distractions from the ongoing war against Iraq and harmful to Iran's international standing.¹¹⁴ For almost two decades, overt interventionism became somewhat of an anathema to Iran's foreign policy although there is good reason to assume that Tehran was involved in a number of international terrorist attacks such as the aforementioned terror attacks in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994 and the bombing of the Khobar Towers in 1997.¹¹⁵

However, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 prompted Iran once again to adopt a more hardline and activist foreign policy, particularly after the election of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad in 2005.¹¹⁶ According to US congressional testimonies, the IRGC's Qods Force began to turn "Shia militia extremists in Iraq into a Hezbollah-like force that could serve Iranian interests" in Iraq.¹¹⁷ In addition to Hezbollah and Shia Militias in Iraq, Iran also utilized Palestinian terror organizations such as Hamas for its proxy war against Israel and provided them with training and weaponry.¹¹⁸

The aftermath of the Arab uprisings starting in 2011 led to several Iranian interventions in countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, two of which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. There is also some evidence that Iran may be involved in protests and social unrest Bahrain.¹¹⁹

III.V Why Proxy Warfare Appeals to Iran

The specific reasons for Iran to choose a proxy warfare strategy will be discussed in more detail when analyzing the two case studies.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* 98.

¹¹⁵ cf. Levitt, *Hezbollah*.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, 176-177.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, 182.

¹¹⁸ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 55-56.

¹¹⁹ cf. Jason Rivera, "Iran's Involvement in Bahrain: A Battleground as Part of the Islamic Regime's Larger Existential Conflict," *Small Wars Journal*, March 11, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/iran%E2%80%99s-involvement-in-bahrain>.

Arguably, ideology nowadays plays a less dominant role than during the first decade following the revolution. While its influence cannot be discounted completely, the decision for Iran to intervene abroad are first and foremost based on a *realpolitik* calculus, taking into account Iranian interests such as deterrence or gaining legitimacy among Arab audiences (while the recent interventions have proven counterproductive in this regard, hard interests such preserving areas of influence are likely to be considered more important by Iran's leadership).¹²⁰ As the case studies will show, Tehran has been willing and able to exploit emerging opportunities such the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Houthi rebellion in Yemen.¹²¹

Arguably the main reason for Iran to choose proxy interventions over other modes of warfare is its relative weak conventional military. Thus it tries to compensate this weakness with its asymmetric capabilities.¹²² Iranian defense doctrine emphasizes deterrence in order to guarantee regime survival but at the same time, it also aims at positioning Iran as a "first power" in the region and on the global stage.¹²³

Iran realizes it cannot confront the United States – its perceived main enemy – or its regional allies conventionally. Instead, it seeks to avoid direct confrontation and to use asymmetric warfare capabilities in order "to deter aggression in the first place and enhance Iran's declared status as a dominant regional power."¹²⁴ As such, proxy warfare is one of the means Iran can, perhaps even successfully, employ in a conflict with its adversaries.¹²⁵

IV. Methodology

In order to analyze and assess how Iran conducts proxy interventions in Iraq and Yemen, this paper will utilize the method of the structured, focused comparison. A set of general questions

¹²⁰ Wehrey, *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 34.

¹²¹ Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 177; Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen."

¹²² Steven R. Ward, "The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine," 573-574.

¹²³ Wehrey, *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent*, 41.

¹²⁴ Wehrey, *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent.*, 49.

¹²⁵ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 14.

that reflect the research objective will be applied to both case studies which will make it possible to compare them systematically and to cumulate findings, as opposed to traditional intensive single case studies.¹²⁶ In addition, the method is focused in that it only addresses a particular aspect of a phenomenon.¹²⁷

The method requires defining the class or sub-class of events it intends to analyze.¹²⁸ In this case, it will be the phenomenon of proxy interventions. The set of questions that will be used to analyze and compare the cases has to be grounded in the theoretical perspectives and the research objectives of the study.¹²⁹ Therefore, the analysis of both case studies will be structured as follows: The first part provides a short background on the history of Iranian involvement in the countries and the events leading up to the respective Iranian proxy intervention. The second part deals with motivations and objectives for the intervention, based on the examination of potential motives in chapter II.II. Finally, the third part examines how Iran is carrying out these interventions, i.e. what forms of assistance the Iranians is providing to its proxies as discussed in chapter II.III.

V. Case Study: Iraq

V.I Background

Iran has been seeking to influence Iraq ever since the Islamic revolution in 1979. In the early 1980s, after the war with Iraq had begun, Iran played a major role in establishing the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its military wing, the Badr Corps.¹³⁰ Both SCIRI and Badr accepted the Khomeinist doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, the adherence to a

¹²⁶ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 68-70.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 70.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 69.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*,

¹³⁰ Frederick W. Kagan et al., "Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan" (Washington D.C.: Institute for the Study of War/American Enterprise Institute, May 2012), 63.

clerical ruler as the supreme leader of an Islamic state.¹³¹ Iran had very close ties to SCIRI/Badr and the latter has operated as a part of the Iranian Qods Force.¹³² In addition, Iran also supported the Islamic Da'wa Party although its leaders were more divided over the question of accepting Iranian supreme rule.¹³³ Although the Da'wa carried out several high-profile terrorist attacks such as the 1983 bombings of the US and French embassies in Kuwait, the Badr Corps remained Iran's main client in Iraq and played an important role in the uprisings that followed the First Gulf War in 1991.¹³⁴ Iran maintained its support for the Badr Corps over the 1990s and the group established an extensive network all over Iraq which would play an important role in the future.¹³⁵

Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran expanded its support and assisted a variety of groups such as the Jaysh al-Mahdi army (JAM), Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), among others.¹³⁶ After the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the subsequent rise of ISIS both in Iraq and Syria, Iran once again bolstered its involvement in the neighboring country.¹³⁷

V.II Reasons for the Intervention

Iranian intervention in Iraq has been guided by various motivations and it can be assumed that many of them have changed or evolved over time.

Ideology: Initially, the establishment of the first Iranian proxies was likely inspired by the revolutionary zeal emanating from the fusion of anti-Imperialism and the *velayat-e faqih*

¹³¹ Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq – Politics and Other Means," Occasional Paper Series (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, October 13, 2008), 14, 19-20.

¹³² Kagan et al, "Iranian Influence," 63.

¹³³ *ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁴ Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 20.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, 20-21; Kagan et al, "Iranian Influence," 63.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, 63-65.

¹³⁷ Nadimi, "Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq."

doctrine.¹³⁸ The name of the SCIRI, which puts forward the idea of an Islamic Revolution in Iraq akin to the one in Iran, is testament to that.

Interest: As the war intensified, supporting the Badr Corps and other organizations to take action against Saddam Hussein's regime likely became foremost a matter of interest rather than ideology.¹³⁹ Indeed, the Iranians may have hoped to utilize a proxy in enemy territory in order to assist their military operations by forcing the Iraq to divide its military resources.

Since the U.S. occupation, the Iranian rationale for intervening in Iraq has been motivated primarily by interest. On the one hand, Iran wants to make sure that Iraq will never again pose a military threat as it had under Saddam Hussein.¹⁴⁰ On the other hand, Iran has an interest in maintaining a weak and fractured Iraqi government dominated by Shia which can be influenced by Tehran and is sympathetic towards the Iranian objectives in the region.¹⁴¹

Since Iran perceives the US as a direct threat, waging a proxy warfare may have also served as a means of deterrence.¹⁴²

Risk: As discussed in section II.III, interest is usually intertwined with an effort to reduce risk. Given Iran's weak conventional capabilities, confronting the coalition forces directly would have been too great a risk.¹⁴³ Instead, Iran opted for a proxy intervention in order to minimize its costs and the potential of a conflict escalation. Indeed, Iran was able to at least partially parry Western accusations of supplying insurgents with weapons, and was thus able to benefit from ambiguity which is one of the characteristics of proxy interventions allowing to claim plausible deniability.¹⁴⁴ Currently, the need for secrecy is of secondary importance and Iran has even made overtures to regional Sunni states in a bid to officially join the international coalition against ISIS while openly sending large contingents of military advisors and

¹³⁸ Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 14.

¹³⁹ Kagan et al, "Iranian Influence," 63.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴² Ward, "The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine," 566.

¹⁴³ Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 13.

¹⁴⁴ Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 71-72.

hardware to Iraq.¹⁴⁵

It is interesting to note that the religious ties to Iraq's Shia community apparently played only a minor role if at all. Shia militants detained by coalition forces stated that Iran was not interested in fighting Al-Qaeda and the training it provided to them was solely focused on evicting the Western coalition, not on stoking sectarian flames.¹⁴⁶ Iran also makes sure not to frame the current fight against the Islamic State in any overtly sectarian tones and instead refers to ISIS as "terrorists" or "takfiris".¹⁴⁷

V.III Forms of Intervention

V.IIIa Manpower and Training

Iran has provided extensive training and manpower to its proxies in Iraq for decades. Members of the abovementioned Badr Corps learned their skills in training camps in Iran during the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁴⁸ After the US invasion, Iran utilized the Qods Force to provide training to several Shia militia groups. In addition, it outsourced some of the training to agents of the Lebanese Hezbollah who instructed Iraqi militants in both Iran and Lebanon.¹⁴⁹ For example, the Hezbollah instructors provided training in "guerrilla warfare, explosives, and various weapons (including missiles, mortars, and sniper rifles) against coalition forces" to members of Kataib Hezbollah and other Iraqi Shia militant groups.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Kim Sengupta, "War with Isis: Iran seeks to join international coalition battling militants as part of significant shift in its foreign policy," *The Independent*, August 15, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-iran-seeks-to-join-international-coalition-battling-militants-as-part-of-significant-10461307.html>; Ryan and Morris, "The U.S. and Iran are aligned in Iraq."

¹⁴⁶ Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 56.

¹⁴⁷ Mohsen Milani, "Tehran Doubles Down," *Foreign Affairs*, June 22, 2014, accessed January 8, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2014-06-22/tehran-doubles-down>.

¹⁴⁸ Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 20-21.

¹⁴⁹ Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 56.

¹⁵⁰ Matthew Levitt and Philip Smyth, "Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 5, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kataib-al-imam-ali-portrait-of-an-iraqi-shiite-militant-group-fighting-isis>.

While the number of Iranian personnel on the ground remained limited during the US occupation, Iran has increasingly stepped up its efforts since the US withdrawal and the rapid gains of the Islamic State in summer 2014. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, Iran had deployed more than 1.000 military advisors by the end of 2014 but insisted that none of them took part in actual combat although there are rumors about the Quds Forces carrying out special operations.¹⁵¹

V.IIIb Material Support

Besides training militants and deploying military advisors to Iraq, Iran also has a history of providing weaponry and other military equipment to Iraqi Shiite militias although it denied such allegations during the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Instead, Tehran argued that Iranian weapons that were found in the country were remains of the Iraq-Iran war.¹⁵² However, there is no doubt that Iran supplied Iraqi militants with weaponry, including weapons that had been manufactured after the Iraq-Iran war ended and in some cases even after the 2003 invasion of Iraq.¹⁵³ The Qods Force provided Iraqi militants with mortars, rockets, RPGs, and various other small arms.¹⁵⁴ But the deadliest supply were Iranian-made IEDs, known as explosively-formed penetrators (EFP), which were used not only against Western coalition forces but also in attacks against Iraqi government officials.¹⁵⁵

The current war against ISIS has been accompanied by an increased supply of military hardware to Iraq. Iran has reportedly spent more than \$1billion on military aid and

¹⁵¹ Missy Ryan and Loveday Morris, "The U.S. and Iran are aligned in Iraq against the Islamic State – for now," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2014, accessed March 31, 2016,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-us-and-iran-are-aligned-in-iraq-against-the-islamic-state--for-now/2014/12/27/353a748c-8d0d-11e4-a085-34e9b9f09a58_story.html.

¹⁵² Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 71-72.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, 72-73.

¹⁵⁴ Kagan et al, "Iranian Influence," 64.

¹⁵⁵ Kagan et al, "Iranian Influence," 64; Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 77-80.

has even supplied reconnaissance and possibly strike drone. One of these drones, sporting Iraqi markers, was downed in July 2014 by Sunni Jihadists.¹⁵⁶

V.IIIc Financial Support

Funding is a third important aspect of the Iranian proxy intervention in Iraq and predates the U.S. invasion of 2003. According to Iraqi intelligence documents, the Qods Force provided approximately \$20 million a year to the Badr Corps until at least 2001.¹⁵⁷

Given the nature of this support, precise numbers are impossible to come by but evidence suggests that Tehran expanded its financial support for its proxies during the U.S. occupation. By March 2007, Asaib Ahl al-Haq alone, which is only one group among many to depend on Iranian support, reportedly received between \$750,000 - \$3 million per month in arms and financial support.¹⁵⁸ US Vice President Joe Biden estimated in 2010 that Iran spent \$100 million on its Iraqi proxies.¹⁵⁹

Data on the current financial support to Iraqi proxy groups are not publicly available but the above mentioned \$1 billion in military aid, which likely includes direct financial assistance, could indicate that Iran has further expanded its funding to Shia militias in Iraq.¹⁶⁰

V.IIId Non-Military Assistance

Iran has actively encouraged Shia political parties such as SCIRI (later renamed in ISCI) or the Islamic Da'wa Party to participate in the democratic elections following the U.S. invasion of 2003 and used its influence to mediate between the sometimes warring Shia factions.¹⁶¹

Furthermore, Iran also tried to influence the Iraqi government via their Iraqi proxy groups as

¹⁵⁶ Nadimi, "Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq."

¹⁵⁷ Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 21.

¹⁵⁸ Kagan et al, "Iranian Influence," 67.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Eisenstadt, "The Regional Impact of Additional Iranian Money," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 28, 2015, accessed January 8, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-regional-impact-of-additional-iranian-money>.

¹⁶⁰ Ryan and Morris, "The U.S. and Iran are aligned in Iraq."

¹⁶¹ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 52.

several arrests of Iranian agents towards the end of 2006 alleged.¹⁶² The provision of religious training for Shia militants may also count as non-military assistance although such practices were not necessarily appreciated by the militia members who felt Iran is trying to indoctrinate them.¹⁶³

Following the rise of ISIS in Iraq, Iranian politicians publicly expressed their support for the Iraqi militias fighting against the “takfiris”, thereby carefully avoiding sectarian rhetoric.¹⁶⁴

As this case study shows, Iran has utilized a broad range of proxy warfare strategies in Iraq, ranging from the provision of manpower and training over military and financial support to non-military assistance. It is important to note that Iran has consistently increased its assistance to Iranian proxies during the U.S. occupation and especially since ISIS took over large parts of Iraq in summer 2014. Perhaps most tellingly and unlike during the period from 2003 to 2011, Iran now openly acknowledges its assistance for its Shia proxy forces in Iraq.

VI. Case Study: Yemen

VI.I Background

Over the past decades, Yemen has been plagued by internal strife, domestic repression, and a weak economy.¹⁶⁵ Besides the continuous fight against the local Al Qaeda affiliates AQAP and violent protests during the Arab uprisings in 2011 which led to the ouster of President Saleh, Yemen has also experienced a decade-long armed conflict. This conflict has its roots in the governorate Sadaa which, located in north-western Yemen, borders Saudi-Arabia.¹⁶⁶

It was ignited by a rebel movement first headed by former parliament member

¹⁶² Fishman and Felter, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq," 49.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 66-67.

¹⁶⁴ Milani, "Tehran Doubles Down."

¹⁶⁵ International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb," Middle East Report No. 86 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 27, 2009), 2.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*; Sami Kronenfeld and Yoel Guzansky, "Yemen: A Mirror to the Future of the Arab Spring," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 6 (2014), 80-81.

Husein al-Houthi who was killed in September 2004.¹⁶⁷ His kin, part of a larger revivalist Zayidi-movement (a branch of Shia Islam which distinct of Iran's Twelver-Shiism) carried on and fought a low-intensity conflict against the Yemenite government for several years).¹⁶⁸ When Houthi rebels in 2009 infiltrated Saudi territory and killed several border guards, Saudi-Arabia launched its largest military offensive since the First Gulf War. It ended only after a ceasefire was brokered in February 2010.¹⁶⁹

The turmoil in the course of the Arab Spring provided the Houthis with an opportunity to expand their control in the Saada province and in 2014, after Saleh's successor Hadi fled the country, they managed to take over the Capital Sana'a and large parts of northern and central Yemen.¹⁷⁰ The Houthi insurgency prompted a Saudi-led Arab coalition to intervene and the fighting between the two sides is still ongoing.¹⁷¹

Allegations of Iranian support have been made by the Yemeni government ever since the Houthi rebellion emerged but both the Houthis and Iran have repeatedly denied those claims.¹⁷² However, there is evidence pointing to a stronger Iranian involvement since at approximately 2011.¹⁷³

V.II Reasons for the Intervention

Interest: Most analysts writing on the subject point to two major reasons for the Iranian proxy intervention in Yemen. First, Iran has been concerned about the Assad's regime survival for a while and the consequences of its demise. A strong presence in the Houthi territory would

¹⁶⁷ International Crisis Group, "Yemen," 3.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*,

¹⁶⁹ Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," 433.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*; Roland Popp, "War in Yemen: Revolution and Saudi Intervention," CSS Analyses in Security Policy No. 175 (Zurich: Center for Security Studies, June 2015), 1.

¹⁷¹ "Yemen," *The New York Times*, accessed March 31, 2016,

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/yemen/index.html>.

¹⁷² Hakim Al Masmari, "Houthi official denies receiving arms from Iran," *The National*, March 16, 2012, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/houthi-official-denies-receiving-arms-from-iran>; Angus McDowal, "Yemen security chief tells Iran to stop backing rebels," *Reuters*, December 9, 2012, accessed January 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-qaeda-idUSBRE8B80AG20121209>.

¹⁷³ Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," 439.

enable to establish an “intelligence outpost and covert weapons distribution network for supporting its interests in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa” and provide “the Iranians with strategic options in their shadow war with Israel, including increasing arms shipments to Israel’s enemies at times of Tehran’s choosing.”¹⁷⁴

Perhaps more importantly, Yemen would provide a base to pressure and contain Saudi and Salafist influence in the Arab peninsula.¹⁷⁵ Iran itself has repeatedly vowed it will not let “regional powers” (an obvious reference to Saudi-Arabia) jeopardize its security interests in Yemen.¹⁷⁶ It appears that the Iranian proxy intervention in Yemen is mainly motivated by Iranian interests regarding its maintaining its influence in the region rather than ideology.

Ideology: While some Iranian ayatollahs had in the past invoked religious themes such as the Mahdi’s return from Yemen, such motives are unlikely to have any bigger influence on Iranian foreign policy although Tehran may very well exploit it in order to advance its regional interests.¹⁷⁷

Risk: As in the case of Iraq, part of the Iranian decision to resort proxy to warfare is likely tied to its benefits such as the creation of ambiguity which allows for plausible deniability. As mentioned before, Iran has continuously denied any involvement in Yemen. A covert proxy strategy also avoids potential costs which may be incurred by an overt intervention such as international condemnation or a more decisive response by the Arab coalition, especially at a time when Iran was involved in the nuclear negotiations with the West.

VI.III Forms of Intervention

VI.IIIa Manpower and Training

¹⁷⁴ Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," 431.

¹⁷⁵ Abdelkhah, "Iranian Perspectives on Yemen’s Houthis," 5.

¹⁷⁶ "Iran vows to protect interests in Yemen," *Al Arabiya News*, May 2, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/05/02/Iran-vows-to-protect-interests-in-Yemen-.html>.

¹⁷⁷ Abdelkhah, "Iranian Perspectives on Yemen’s Houthis," 4; Mehdi Khalaji, "Yemen's Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yemens-zaidis-a-window-for-iranian-influence>.

Already in 2009, the Yemenite government accused Iran of providing training to Houthi rebels. Yemen's press claimed they had received training in an Iranian-run camp in Eritrea whereas former president Saleh alleged they were taught by members of the Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁷⁸ These allegations have not been confirmed by independent observers, however, in 2012, then-U.S. ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein stated that "we believe that [the Iranians] are providing military support and training to radical elements in diverse groups, especially the Houthis."¹⁷⁹

Such accusations have become more frequent and in December 2014, the news agency Reuters cited an anonymous senior Iranian official as well as a Western source who claimed that Houthi rebels had received training in Lebanon by Hezbollah as well as in Iran in an IRGC base near Qom.¹⁸⁰ The Iranian official also alleged that Qods Force military advisors were training Houthis in Yemen.¹⁸¹

In March 2015, Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel Al-Jubeir claimed in an interview that Hezbollah was operating in Yemen alongside the Houthis.¹⁸² Interestingly, the Lebanese newspaper al-Mustaqbal wrote in April 2014 that several Hezbollah fighters had been killed in Yemen.¹⁸³ While Hezbollah disputed it had lost fighters in Yemen, it stopped short of denying any involvement in Yemen.¹⁸⁴

Allegations of Iranian provision of manpower and training for the Houthis are hard to verify and should, therefore, be taken with a grain of salt. However, the increasing frequency of claims, such as the reported capture of two Qods Force

¹⁷⁸ "Pity those caught in the Middle," *The Economist*, November 19, 2009, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/node/14920092>.

¹⁷⁹ Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," 436.

¹⁸⁰ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Iranian support seen crucial for Yemen's Houthis," *Reuters*, December 15, 2014, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-houthis-iran-insight-idUSKBN0JT17A20141215>.

¹⁸¹ Bayoumy and Ghobari, "Iranian support seen crucial for Yemen's Houthis."

¹⁸² Siraj Wahab, "Hezbollah 'operating in Yemen' with Houthis," *Arab News*, March 28, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/724391>.

¹⁸³ Ari Soffer, "Hezbollah Backing Houthi Rebels in Yemen, According to Reports," *Arutz Sheva*, April 12, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/193896#.Vo5nro9OKUI>.

¹⁸⁴ Soffer, "Hezbollah Backing Houthi Rebels in Yemen."

members in April 2015 by local militias, at the very least indicates that the Iran has expanded its involvement in Yemen and may have indeed deployed military advisors and Hezbollah surrogate forces to aid the Houthis.¹⁸⁵

VI.IIIb Material Support

Just like allegations of Iranian training and funding, claims that Tehran provides weapons for the rebels are as old as the Houthi insurgency. However, there is mounting evidence that starting in 2011, Iran has increased its support to the Houthis and has provided them with weapons such as AK-47 and RPGs.¹⁸⁶ According to a report in the *New York Times*, Iran also tried to deliver equipment to Yemen which would allow producing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) similarly to those used in Iraq.¹⁸⁷

In January 2013, the Yemeni Coast Guard, supported by a U.S. warship, boarded a vessel operating under the Panamanian flag which carried small arms and ammunition, C4 explosives, 122 mm rockets, bomb-making equipment in order to assemble IEDs, and night-vision-goggles made in Iran.¹⁸⁸ In addition, the boarding party also found shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles which appeared to be of Iranian origin.¹⁸⁹ While Tehran acknowledged that some of these weapons may have been produced in Iran, it denied any involvement in the shipment.

VI.IIIc Financial Support

As with the provision of military hardware, evidence of Iranian financial support to the Houthis has been mounting over the last couple of years. Houthi officials have acknowledged

¹⁸⁵ Mohammed Mukhashaf, "Yemeni militiamen say captured two Iranian officers in Aden," *Reuters*, April 11, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-airstrikes-idUSKBN0N207I20150411>.

¹⁸⁶ Eric Schmitt and Robert Worth, "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2012, accessed March 31, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html?_r=0.

¹⁸⁷ Schmitt and Worth, "Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role."

¹⁸⁸ Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," 436.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

they have received financial assistance from Iran since 2007. They also confirmed that the support as sharply increased since December 2011 and has been provided by a third party.¹⁹⁰

An anonymous Western source alleged in 2014 to Reuters that at least some of the money is channeled via Hezbollah.¹⁹¹ According to U.S. intelligence sources speaking to the New York Times in 2011, Iran had supplied the Houthis with millions of dollars.¹⁹²

VI.IIIId Non-Military Assistance

Iran has consistently provided the Houthi's with diplomatic and rhetorical support such as in January 2010 when then-President Mahmud Ahmadinejad condemned Saudi-Arabia for waging war "against Muslims."¹⁹³ In 2015, in the context of the Arab military intervention against the Houthis, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei accused Saudi-Arabia of genocide.¹⁹⁴

In addition, Iran has provided the Houthis with propaganda support and the pro-Houthi satellite channel Al Maseera reportedly broadcasts from a Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut.¹⁹⁵ During the Arab coalition operation in Yemen in 2015, Iranian state-media increased its anti-Saudi rhetoric whereas the Iranian clergy openly declared their support for the Houthis.¹⁹⁶ Since the beginning of the Saudi-led intervention, Iran has increased its pro-Houthi and anti-Saudi rhetoric, with high-ranking IRGC members declaring their support for the rebel movement.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁰ Al Masmari, "Houthi official denies receiving arms from Iran."

¹⁹¹ Bayoumy and Ghobari, "Iranian support seen crucial for Yemen's Houthis."

¹⁹² Terrill, "Iranian Involvement in Yemen," 436.

¹⁹³ David Schenker, "Who's behind the Houthis?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 22, 2010, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/whos-behind-the-houthis>.

¹⁹⁴ Tom Kutsch, "US says Houthis 'obviously' receive Iran support, but experts not so sure," *Al Jazeera America*, April 10, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/10/kerry-accuses-iran-of-yemen-meddling-but-level-of-its-support-unclear.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Khairallah Khairallah, "Nasrallah's speech reveals Iran's shock over the Yemen crisis," *Al Arabiya News*, April 24, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2015/04/24/Nasrallah-s-speech-reveals-iran-s-shock-over-the-Yemen-crisis.html>.

¹⁹⁶ Mehdi Khalaji, "Yemen War Heats Up Iran's Anti-Saudi Rhetoric," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 18, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yemen-war-heats-up-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric>.

¹⁹⁷ Nima Abdelkhal, "Iranian Perspectives on Yemen's Houthis," *Terrorism Monitor* 13 (2015): 4.

Similar to its proxy intervention in Iraq, Iran assists the Houthis in Yemen in a variety of ways, albeit arguably at a considerably lower level. According to statements by Houthi officials, financial assistance has been provided to the rebel movement since 2007 and it looks like Iran has escalated its involvement starting in 2011. Over the last couple years, Iran has likely supplied the Houthis with an increasing amount of military hardware and funds. There is also mounting evidence that IRGC and Hezbollah provided training and that Qods Force military advisors and possibly Hezbollah operatives deployed to Yemen. However, the scope of the Iranian proxy intervention remains much more limited than Iraq and there is no evidence that IRGC has direct command and control over Houthis.¹⁹⁸

VII. Comparison between Iraq and Yemen

As the two case studies have demonstrated, Iran engages in proxy warfare in both Iraq and Yemen. The Iranian strategies range in each case from the provision of manpower and training over material and financial support to non-military means. In both interventions, the IRGC's Qods force and Hezbollah seem to play a crucial role in training Iranian proxy forces and providing them with weapons and funds.

While the scope of the Iranian intervention in Iraq currently exceeds one in Yemen by far, it cannot be ruled out that Iran will further escalate its support to the Houthis if promising opportunities emerge. This will largely depend upon future developments in Yemen and the relations between Iran and the Gulf countries.

As the case studies show, Iran conducts its proxy interventions carefully and systematically, in a bid to not overplay its hand. This means that Iran will use plausible deniability whenever possible and it also implies that Tehran will escalate its involvement only if there are opportunities such as the U.S. invasion or later the rise of ISIS in Iraq, or after the Houthis were able to take over Saana and large parts of the country. Future

¹⁹⁸ Abdelkhah, "Iranian Perspectives on Yemen's Houthis," 5.

developments in Yemen may well see a further intensification of Iranian efforts just as emerging opportunities in other countries with Shia minorities such as Bahrain or Saudi Arabia may lead to further proxy war efforts by Iran.

Finally, it is also interesting to note that the two proxy interventions seem to be mainly motivated by Iranian interests such as the preservation and expansion of its sphere of influence or security concerns such as deterrence. Unlike in the early 1980s, religious ties and ideology seem to play a lesser role and are, at best, an opportunity for Iran to justify its meddling into the affairs of other countries.¹⁹⁹

VIII. Conclusion

Iran may not launch conventional wars. But as this study shows, it does not refrain from conducting proxy interventions if it deems it necessary to pursue its interests. This interests not only include the preservation of its current regime but also its ambition to become a “first power”, not only regionally but even on a global scale.

Thus, critics of the nuclear agreement may well be right that the sanction relief will allow Iran to further increase its involvement in various regional conflicts. And even if Iran was to spend these funds otherwise, its proxy strategy is unlikely to be scaled down anytime soon. Instead, the most recent tensions between Saudi-Arabia and Iran may lead to increased proxy war efforts on both sides, potentially bringing further conflict and instability to an already volatile and chaotic region.²⁰⁰

In addition, should Iran become emboldened by a number of successful proxy interventions, it may also be inclined to adopt an increasingly confrontational stance towards Western interests in the region. Such a scenario could be further compounded by a power struggle within the Iranian regime where the faction of conservative hardliners and IRGC

¹⁹⁹ Khalaji, "Yemen's Zaidis."

²⁰⁰ James B. Smith, "Former U.S. Ambassador: What the Saudi Arabia-Iran Conflict Means for Stability," *Time*, January 5, 2016, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://time.com/4167026/saudi-arabia-iran-conflict-and-stability/>.

officials staunchly oppose President Rouhani's overtures to the West.²⁰¹ As the former director of the CIA David Petraeus remarked in 2015, Iran ultimately remains a part of the problem, not of the solution.²⁰²

Understanding Iranian motivations to resort to proxy warfare, grasping how Tehran carries out these interventions, and understanding how they undermine stability and order in the Middle East may be a first step - not only towards countering Iranian influence but also changing the trajectory of a troubled region.

²⁰¹ Arash Karami, "Rouhani criticizes IRGC's arrest of journalists," *Al-Monitor*, November 5, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/rouhani-irgc-arrests.html#>.

²⁰² Liz Sly, "Petraeus: The Islamic State isn't our biggest problem in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/20/petraeus-the-islamic-state-isnt-our-biggest-problem-in-iraq/>.

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