The Middle Eastern advisory competition: The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force

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‘Combat units drawn from the conventional brigades and divisions of the IRGC have been fighting on the front lines alongside Syrian and Iraqi militias and Lebanese Hezbollah since October 2015. The units appear to be deploying as cadres – bringing most of their officers… and plugging into Iraqi, Syrian, and Hezbollah militia groups that serve as their foot soldiers.’

Abstract

Western powers are not the only nations attempting to influence the balance of power in the Middle East through ‘train-advise-assist’ missions. After three years of support to the Iraqi military against the Islamic State, it is appropriate to question whether Australia’s strategic objectives have been fulfilled – and the answer is vague indeed. As Iraq moves into a stabilisation phase, we now seek to influence the future Iraqi military and political spheres toward a diplomatically-desirable stable state. Western governments are not, however, the only power vying for influence in Iraq. This article explores Iranian employment of sophisticated and mature Unconventional Warfare to achieve its strategic policy aims. Understanding how and why this form
of warfare is exercised by Iran is a necessity given Australia’s interests in supporting, mentoring and enabling partner forces in the Middle East, many of whom have conflicting or tangential interests to that of Iran.

Introduction

“Hezbollah and Hamas show that there is a ‘middle area’ in the range of military operations between irregular warfare and state conflict. These state-sponsored hybrid adversaries create qualitative challenges, despite their smaller size, because of their: Training, discipline, organisation, and command and control; standoff weapons (ATGMs, MANPADS); use of complex terrain and fighting among the people... They are not insurgencies. They are nationalistic, Islamist political parties that also have military capabilities. Their goal... is to obtain political power”.

In 2014, as the Islamic State (IS) threatened the outskirts of Baghdad, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) answered the call, embedding advisers at the tactical level, enabled with intelligence, surveillance and fires capabilities. The IRGC demonstrated a level of influence supporting the Iraqi Army, Police Forces and militias, that lies in stark contrast to that which Western forces has attained in the same theatre, supposedly for the same mission of defeating IS. Thus, the post-war political environment of Iraq is threatened by strong Shi’a dynamics across the Iraqi Security Forces that threatens a resurgence of Sunni (and Kurdish) political violence and perpetuation of civil war.

Iran’s perceived success encourages its continued pursuit of strategic objectives through Unconventional Warfare (UW) – ‘activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow an occupying power or government by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.’ Iran primarily affects its UW objectives through the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), also known as the Pasradan (Guards in Farsi), delicately avoiding the employment of conventional military forces to constrain escalation. The IRGC pursues national interests via three facets: the shadowy Quds Force pursuing international interests; a military force that controls and exercises anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) weapons; and an informal domestic network and the Basij to exert control over the state.
This article explores the history of the IRGC Quds Force and considers the drivers behind Iranian unconventional approaches to attaining its strategic objectives in the Middle East region. It thus explores the strategic framing of Iran’s UW approach, in the context of exploiting regional dynamics.

**Strategic Background – Politics by other means**

*Iran has a three-layered asymmetric approach to deterrence. The first layer is strategic deterrence, to dissuade US action by threatening its military positions and allies in the region with missiles and terrorism. The second is an anti-access strategy, dissuading US military operations close to Iran’s borders through increasingly lethal anti-ship weapons. The third layer is a cost-imposing strategy, aiming to make a US invasion of Iran unfeasible.*

Robert Kaplan spoke of Iran’s power within the Middle East that leverages its inescapable geography at the intersection of empires and land-bridges, anchoring MacKinder’s Heartland of Eurasia. Iran cultivates this power by virtue of a ‘three-pronged strategy of proxy warfare, asymmetrical weapons and an appeal to the… downtrodden, particularly legions of young and frustrated males.’ This narrative has some merit for a Shi’a population that constitutes approximately fifteen percent of the global Muslim population and approximately fifty percent of the Middle Eastern Muslim population. Outside Iran, Azerbaijan and certain areas of Iraq, the dominant narrative is one of the Shi’a being a beleaguered minority, with Iran as their only protector.

The evolution of Iranian capability toward unconventional approaches originate with the establishment of the IRGC following the Revolution in 1979. The IRGC was created with due recognition of Iran’s enduring geopolitical landscape and domestic cultural influences, tracing their lineage from the Safavid Empire to a deep-seated mistrust of the West as a result of US and UK interference in Iranian (and Persian) politics. Post-Revolution, the baptism of fire served by the Iran-Iraq War; US displays of overwhelming conventional force during Operations Praying Mantis, Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom; and the impacts of globalisation, have all served to temper the IRGC’s unconventional strategy.
Iran’s development of asymmetric strategy gradually evolved within this context. In 1978-79, Syria and Iraq entered into negotiations aimed at unification\(^\text{13}\) that threatened encirclement of Iran with a regional power to the west, equipped and mentored by the Soviets, much like the client Afghan state on its eastern borders. Today, however, encirclement by the Soviets has been replaced by a “Salafi circle,”\(^\text{14}\) and a network of Middle Eastern bases housing approximately 35,000 American troops.\(^\text{15}\) Offsetting these Iranian fears are the strategic prizes of enduring levers of influence that might afford Iran regional hegemony. In this context, it is notable that military presence in Syria and Yemen, afford Iran an ability to ‘threaten three of seven major global maritime trade chokepoints – the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab al Mandab Strait.’\(^\text{16}\)

The broader context for analysis of Iran’s UW approach is the Middle Eastern demographic context (youth bulge dynamics, youth unemployment, increasing sectarianism, etc.) that gives rise to the conditions within which UW can thrive. These conditions challenge the ability for rentier states to provide opportunities for their people and therefore govern effectively.\(^\text{17}\) ‘Between 1995 and 2025, the populations of Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Syria, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Yemen will have doubled.’\(^\text{18}\) It is notable that these locations are generally those that exhibit a Sunni/ Shi’a schism, within which Iran has strategic interests, and where Iran has already demonstrated a willingness to support proxies in support of its own national goals. The Arab Spring demonstrated to these governments the fragility of such dynamics, particularly in combination with unemployment and proliferating globalised communications systems. Furthermore, the concentration of oil in Shi’ite dominant areas inflames this dynamic.\(^\text{19}\) Hence, the Middle East will remain, until at least 2025, a ripe location for the use of unconventional tactics to foment instability.

**The Evolution of Iranian Military Capability.** In the traditional sense of military force, the *Artesh* (Army) seemingly holds the primary role for the security of the Iranian nation.\(^\text{20}\) Prior to the Revolution, the *Artesh* had been supported by the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to Iran.\(^\text{21}\) The *Artesh* was thus a compromised instrument of the nascent revolutionary state. The MAAG noted a broad range of systemic challenges within the *Artesh* and hence its ability to defend the state may have also been apparent to the new Iranian leadership. Thus, the existence of the IRGC must be viewed in this context of revolutionary leader - Ayatollah Khomeni – who needed to marginalise the *Artesh*, to develop an asymmetric
military capability to offset Western technological and materiel advantages, and to avoid an externally sponsored counter-coup d’État.

Khomeni thus needed the IRGC as a counter-weight, now estimated to be between 120,000 and 160,000 in strength drawn from across the joint services. Of this total, the Quds Force is estimated to be approximately several thousand elite soldiers in strength. The Air Force of the IRGC is believed to operate Iran’s three Shahab-3 intermediate-range ballistic missiles units and the IRGC Navy controls Iran’s coastal defense forces, including HY-2 Seersucker land-based anti-ship missile units deployed in sites along the Gulf coast. The IRGC is therefore an inherently joint service that transcends traditional segregation of domains.

Soon after the Revolution, the experience of the Iran-Iraq war hardened the new IRGC leadership, and indeed, Iranian leadership more broadly. This conflict yielded what might be understood as a ‘First World War’ moment, wherein the cost of conventional attritional warfare (estimates exceed half a million Iranians killed in action) shocked the young nation. It further yielded the recognition that Iran can never again tolerate a strong adversarial Iraq. Elsewhere, the indirect strategy of the US/Saudi-supported jihad against the Soviet domination of Afghanistan, was registering strategic success. Late in the war, Iranian forces, vastly outnumbered by Iraqi forces, experimented with unconventional means, including fomenting insurgency in Kurdish and Southern Iraq and commando and amphibious raids. This evolution in strategy indicates that the Iranian leadership consciously sought to avoid such excessive costs in pursuing national interests.

A visceral aversion to conventional warfare is evident in the public commentary of senior Iranian officials. Upon his appointment to the leadership of the IRGC in 2013, General Jafari divided ‘Iran’s military command-and-control into thirty one distinct units, each of which could function independently in the case others were hit or destroyed – a strategy termed “mosaic defense.” This concept uses “mosaic tiles” of localised irregular cells, operating amongst the people. The strategy exploits Iran’s strategic depth, enhances resilience within its command and control structure, mobilises popular resistance and empowers local leaders to exploit opportunities within their geographic region. Jafari also merged the Basij – which can mobilise hundreds of thousands of paramilitary forces – under the Guards command. Iran has also demonstrated that it can credibly enact this strategy:
The IRGC has been systematically equipping, organizing, and retraining its forces to fight decentralized partisan and guerrilla warfare. It has strengthened the anti-tank and anti-helicopter weaponry of IRGC battalions and stressed independent battalion-sized operations… some 2,500 Basij staged such an exercise (involving urban swarming) in the Western suburbs of Tehran in February 2007. Once again, Iran can draw on the lessons of the fighting in Iraq. It also, however, employed such tactics with great success against Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War, and it has closely studied the lessons of urban and built-up area fighting in Somalia and Lebanon.31

The Iranian unconventional warfare strategy is borne from its military experience and the application of lessons observed from the successful application of asymmetric tactics in its near region. It is a unitary operational concept employable domestically and offshore, with common training aims for IRGC operatives. It is inherently scalable, operating similarly whether the threat is a conventional military invasion, or a regional insurrection.32

**The Contemporary Iranian Strategic Context.** Iranian state cohesion is a tripwire to Tehran’s interests due to a history of internal dissent, most recently demonstrated through the globalised connectivity of activists during the Green Revolution of 2009. From the commencement of the Islamic Revolution in 1979; Balouch, Turkmen and Kurd separatism created a clear requirement for the Basij to suppress separatism.33 It is reasonable to conclude that Iran has superimposed this paranoia onto its calculus for how other nations assess strategic policy.

The contemporary Salafist threat clearly unsettles the Iranian regime, being a demonstratable model of what a relatively small group of well-trained, and motivated individuals can accomplish. For a regime founded in revolution, such power poses an existential threat to the cohesion of the state and its interests. Iran may have also concluded that a conventional approach simply will not work in the sensitive Persian Gulf region. Such a conclusion is evidenced through Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait; the difficulty the US has had with using conventional military power against insurgents and terrorists; and Iran’s own long history of confrontation against the US – including the devastation wrought upon its Navy in 1988.34 Within such a construct, it seems logical that Iran sought to develop unconventional means to achieve its strategic ends.
Experimentation in Lebanon. In 1982, “Iran sent approximately 1,500 IRGC officers to Lebanon with Syrian permission to help build and direct a Shi’a militia proxy force to fight the Israelis, the origin of Lebanese Hizbollah.” Hizbollah and IRGC agents paid close attention to actual combat operations, sifting through lessons learned in order to strengthen subsequent attacks. By 1984, the IRGC was operating six training camps in the Bekaa Valley and was providing salaries, medical benefits, and free education for fighters and their families. Throughout this time, the IRGC’s focus remained on acting as a conduit to Hizbollah for Iranian arms, money, and advanced training in guerrilla and terrorist operations.

The tipping point arrived when the 23 October 1983 bombing of the Marine Corps HQ killed 241 and led to the withdrawal of US peacekeeping forces from Lebanon. The following year, the 20 September 1984 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut led President Regan’s National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane to claim: ‘Iranian sponsorship of terrorism is (confirmed by) clear, solid evidence.’ However, by this time, the strategic victory had been secured, with United States military forces withdrawn from the country and reluctant to reengage.

Having splintered from the Amal Movement in the mid-1980s, Hizbollah leaders issued a manifesto, referred to as the ‘Open Letter’ in 1985. In the manifesto they described their ideology in crystal clear terms: they were Islamic, strongly allied with Iran, and utterly determined to reject Lebanese politics… (but in the early 1990s) Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbollah, made the fateful decision to change the group’s ideology in this regard. Hizbollah thereafter ran for seats in the Lebanese parliament and captured an influential sector of the government.

Iran’s development of unconventional strategy can be seen through the lens of operational trial and error within the Lebanese Civil War from 1975-1990, that ultimately saw a terrorist organisation evolve into an effective political party. This party then secured a position within government exploiting its integration into the fabric of the local Lebanese society. This model is echoed in IRGC planning for conducting UW within other conflicts across the Middle East.

Enhancement of the model in Iraq. In February 1983, during the Iran-Iraq War, IRGC officers began organising and training Iraqi expatriates
and prisoners of war to become guerrillas that would eventually evolve into the Badr Organisation. This effort continued until the end of the war, reportedly raising over 6,000 personnel, and establishing a long-term asset for Iran. This asset was mobilised in February 1991, when up to “5,000 Badr operatives – under IRGC control and supervision – entered Iraq as SCIRI tried to commandeer the Shi’a uprising in the south following the end of Operation Desert Storm”. Lacking a mandate to remove Saddam from power, US forces were unable to intervene. Isolated from external support, Badr operatives were crushed in what was seen as a US betrayal.

The subsequent US invasion of Iraq in 2003 proved an opportunity for Iran to apply its lessons from this earlier employment of Badr guerrillas. The rising influence of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army were a facet of increasing influence that ultimately saw Nouri al-Maliki as the Iraqi Prime Minister in a ‘neutralisation’ of Iraq. “Iran’s primary partners in this mission were the large Iraqi nationalist Shia militia Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and its more elite offshoots, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kata’ib Hizbollah (typically referred to as ‘special groups’), which were more directly aligned with the IRGC and Iranian ideology.”

These Iranian proxies sought to limit US influence through tactical attrition – killing approximately 500 US military personnel – to undermine domestic popular opinion regarding the war. The Special Groups were supported in this mission via Quds Force advice, materiel support and training camps. The scale of this support ultimately led General David Petraeus, then Commander US. forces in Iraq, in Sep 2007 to conclude:

_We have no question whatsoever about Iranian weapons being used to kill our soldiers, to kill Iraqi security forces and Iraqi civilians…The explosively formed projectiles…come from Iran. There’s no question about that._

Despite such statements, US military attempts to arrest Quds Force operatives in Iraq on January 20, 2007, led to the IRGC special-group proxy AAH raid at the US joint command centre in Karbala, killing five American soldiers, and serving as a deterrent against further operations to curb Iranian influence. This period coincided with the illumination of the A.Q. Khan nuclear proliferation network, and thereafter Iranian UW in the Middle East became entwined with the strategic debate surrounding the Iranian nuclear program.
**Expansion into Syria.** From 2011 to 2014, ‘traditional’ Iranian efforts through the Quds Force to mobilise proxy forces were employed. Syria is of enormous strategic importance to the leadership in Iran, a bridge that allows it to “keep Hizbollah’s thousands of rockets pointed at Israel.” This importance was evidenced by the rapidity with which Iran deployed IRGC advisers to Damascus (arriving in May 2011) and the mobilisation of Iraqi Shi’a militia forces. Due to the battlefield successes enjoyed by Daesh, Iran clearly identified a need to increase its advisory efforts to reverse this battlefield trend, particularly around the key terrain of Aleppo. This led to the decision to employ IRGC officers in leadership roles - not merely advising – in what might be better termed ‘partnering.’ The Iranian war effort in Syria in 2015 thus evolved to resemble the “train, advise, and assist (TAA) mission that the US and its allies have undertaken in many countries.”

The expanded employment of IRGC cadres, coupled with Russian air support, broke the siege of the Kuweires Airfield and prevented the capture of Aleppo by the rebels. The key difference between the success of this action in Syria and the other fronts held by the regime, was the presence of these IRGC cadres. Iran, in concert with Russia and Syria, likely adopted this strategy as “implanting IRGC command, staff, and cadre into such an amalgam of militias would give it a much greater semblance of cohesion and could even give it unity of command, assuming that the militias were prepared to accept the command of the IRGC officers.” This Iranian (and Russian) support was critical to the “rapid turnaround on the front and the Assad regime’s continued survival.”

Iran has expanded into the employment of a ‘double-proxy’ strategy, leveraging Hizbollah fighters to perform the role of advisors to “Iran’s ‘Shiite Foreign Legion,’ consisting of sectarian militias from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.” Rodger Shanahan of the Lowy Institute notes that: “It is plausible to think of the Hizbullah ‘group’ of organisations where each branch ultimately serves the interests of the IRGC but with close training and logistical support provided by the parent Lebanese Hizbullah or one of the more militarily competent Iraqi groups.” In a similar manner, Iranian support to the Badr Organisation has realised long-term dividends through IRGC Quds Force “covert paramilitary operations in Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s.”

**Economy-of-force in Yemen.** Most recently, Iran opened an economy-of-force effort in support of the al-Houthi in Yemen’s civil war. This effort
has to date remained relatively clandestine, lacking the martyrdom announcements of casualties as is characteristic of operations in Syria, despite forty-four IRGC and Hezbollah operatives having been killed or captured over the last two years. Most concerning about this theatre, however, is that the provision of advice has been in the form of enabling the employment of ballistic missiles, naval mines, suicide boats, and land-based anti-ship missiles.

It is fair to conclude, Iranian UW strategy has expanded over time, and enabled Iran to successfully support its Lebanese, Iraqi, Syrian and Yemeni allies, with a limited cost to the Iranian state in the event of failure. This model allows the IRGC “to weight its regional efforts by deploying relatively low numbers of its own troops to provide exponential increases in the combat capabilities of its proxies at critical moments.”

Lessons / Observations from Iran’s conduct of Unconventional Warfare

Advise. The Quds Force have provided advisory support to Hizbollah, the Assad regime, Iraqi Shi’a militias, al-Houthis and others. The most simple level of support is through the hosting of trainees at training camps within Iran, which over time, might be extended to locations within the target country. In the context of Iran’s pursuit of international prestige, Advising might also be seen as a strategic demonstration, and hence it is unsurprising that senior Iranian generals - including General Qassem Suleimani, the IRGC Quds Force commander – are publicly and prominently photographed advising Iraqi forces and militias.

The picturing of Suleimani with the son of Imad Mughniyeh, who was assassinated in 2008 when he was the Hizbollah military commander, is indicative of personal relationships the Quds Force establish with their proxies (or that they would like people to believe they have with their proxies) and the broader influence objectives pursued through Advisory support. Iran has at times constrained its forces to solely providing advice, as was reported with its deployment of “approximately 200 IRGC troops in Bosnia as of early 1996.” Provision of assistance can, and recently, has, extended to direct leadership of militia forces, as evidenced in Syria and Yemen.
In Syria, operational control of regime forces in southern Syria and around Aleppo was reported in 2014.

In recent years, the IRGC has demonstrated a willingness to expand beyond provision of advice to militias and guerrillas, into support for conventional units. IRGC cadres deployed to Syria have included Armoured, Artillery and Combat Engineer corps, due to the nature of the contest for Syrian cities and the expertise required by Syrian Regime forces. The IRGC has also demonstrated a willingness to use Hizbollah affiliates to advise local militias in Syria and Iraq, thus perpetuating its influence in an efficient manner.

**Assist.** The IRGC, through the Quds Force, has provided materiel to support their proxy forces. The most notable of which was the support to Lebanese Hizbollah prior to the war with Israel in 2006. This assistance expanded beyond Katushya rockets to advanced technologies such as the C-802 anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Such support was significant, in that a C-802 fired by Hizbollah successfully targeted an Israeli Navy Sa’ar-class missile patrol boat.64

The provision of assistance, particularly advanced weaponry, carries a significant risk to the sponsoring nation of ‘blowback’ evidenced by the U.S. provision of Stinger missiles to Afghan mujahideen during the 1980s. There is a risk that when ships such as the Victoria are intercepted, undeniable evidence of state-sponsorship is secured. This has seemingly been a risk Iran is willing to take in support of its proxies.

Assistance may also take the form of political advice and financial support that helps institutionalise the force into the fabric of their local society – as was seen with Hizbollah from the 1980s into a political party in Lebanon.65 This type of societal integration portends significant Western concerns with the future of Iraq’s Hashd al-Sah’abi, or Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). Adoption of the Lebanese Hizbollah model – ‘entailing their transformation into political movements with military and social welfare wings, outside of state control but tolerated by the government’ – is of significant concern as Iran has been attempting to “apply the Hizbollah model in Iraq through its support for groups like Kata’ib Hizballah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq for more than a decade.”66

**Accompany.** Iran has been willing to accompany its proxies in the battlespace, particularly where significant interests are held, inclusive of
providing tactical leadership where required. This has been most notable in Iraq, and particularly those areas of Iraq with a large Shi’a demographic or cultural importance (such as Kabarla or Samarra). These risks are regularly accepted across the Quds Force, evidenced by Suleimani’s regular visits to the Iraqi capital, where he has been a “key player since even before the 2003 US invasion and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.” Even in the event of senior officer fatalities and strategic compromise, such risks have been accepted by the Iranian regime.

In Syria, Iran has accepted the imperative to accompany forces in the field and its commensurate risk. At least 187 casualties were reported among Iranian nationals in Syria during a 5 month period over 2015/2016, inclusive of a Major General equivalent. This same period aligned to the battlefield reversals near Aleppo that seemingly justify the increased risk borne by advisers through resultant battlefield successes. The lesson is one which Western forces are reluctant to adopt:

… to influence your insurgent proxy you need to be there on the ground with them, earn their respect, support them, and demonstrate your ability to improve their chances of success. You do not buy allegiances, you can only rent.

**Adaptability.** Informed by Advisors who have a strong relationship with proxy commanders, the IRGC employs the concept of ‘strategic optionality’ wherein multiple militias are supported simultaneously, sometimes by multiple advisors. In so doing, the IRGC develops a good understanding of the tactical challenges its proxy force faces, whilst concurrently developing trust and influence. Should this come to naught, an alternate partner is already being developed to assume the lead. From March 2004 onward “there was not one insurgency in Iraq, but at least six” demonstrating both the strategic optionality then being employed by Iran, and also the complexity of competing for influence in the Middle East.

Anthony Cordesman of CSIS notes that “the Quds troops are divided into specific groups or ‘corps’ for each country or area in which they operate. There are Directorates for Iraq; Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan; Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India; Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula; Asian countries of the former Soviet Union, Western nations (Europe and North America), and North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, and Morocco).” This regional specialisation allows the development of lifelong regionalised knowledge that
can be drawn upon for adapting to emergent challenges, and seemingly has yielded benefit for Quds Force deployments. This model also allows for the development of loyalty with proxy forces developed through years of engagement, advice and support.

The increased Iranian commitment in Syria in 2014 demonstrated characteristics of “selecting individuals from across Iran as part of training teams” seemingly applying an attributes-based model for deploying advisers. This willingness to screen for Advisors seemingly allows the IRGC to accept greater risk with their employment as tactical leadership for militia forces. Such a model represents an important consideration by the Iranians as the Australian Army develops its Indigenous Capacity Building doctrine.

**Assessment of Iranian Unconventional Warfare Strategy**

Regarding the proxy war in Syria, Emile Hokayem concludes that “Iran has proven considerably more committed, competent and coherent than its Gulf rivals; the expertise, experience and strategic patience it deployed in support of the Syrian regime to a great extent facilitated Assad’s recovery from serious setbacks in 2012.” The self-perpetuating manner in which Iran leverages aligned groups to subsequently pursue its strategic aims is seemingly the strongest benefit of its strategy.

A key factor in the success of Iran’s UW strategies has been the trust it elicits with proxy forces. When Iran accepts the shared risks of accompanying its proxy forces in the field, rapport is built, development of shared interests is possible, and misemployment of assisted materiel is mitigated. This was clearly seen in its willingness to accept risk in Aleppo late in 2015. This recognition is also evidenced by Iranian willingness to trust its Hizbollah proxies to partner with Arab militias in Syria and Iraq. Even where Iran shares religious heritage with its proxies, leverage is slowly gained. This is evidenced by efforts to infiltrate and usurp Iraqi Security Forces and Government architecture into a parallel force not entirely under the control of the Iraqi prime minister or the rule of law. To Western minds that think in terms of binary forces and three to four-year electoral cycles, such insidious fracturing over a long-term advance of influence represents a significant threat.
A pragmatic calculus can be seen within the al-Houthi insurgency in Yemen, perhaps mindful of the Houthi reticence to be cast as a proxy force. As early as 2010, it was reported that al-Houthi militants were being trained (directly or indirectly) by the IRGC in Lebanon and Iran. Hizbollah soon thereafter, reportedly had troops “actively engaged in combat in Yemen, with the al-Houthi rebels in the northern province of Saada along the Saudi border, and have… claimed that its personnel have shot down several Yemeni aircraft using Iranian-manufactured Misagh-1 MANPADS.” To conclude however, that Iran had destabilised Yemen into its current civil war is erroneous – it was highly unstable to begin with – and Iran’s ethnic-religious connection to the Houthis was somewhat tenuous. Hence, the issue of state willingness to support proxies needs to consider the domestic audiences of those proxies, if it is to be conducive to inciting rebellion.

**Conclusion**

*Modern war in general, and this latest Mideast war in particular, is about armed political factions generating political influence and power through force and coercion.*

Iran and its proxy forces demonstrate the Clausewitzian dictum of ‘politics by other means’ by harnessing the disaffected Shi’a community in Arab states and carefully calibrating its military actions with nuanced political objectives. During its period of experimentation in Lebanon, the costs of its unconventional warfare strategy were almost negligible to Iran. During these formative years, Iran witnessed success in its pursuit of developing strategic levers across the Middle East, before the U.S. adoption of the ‘axis of evil’ narrative and efforts to halt the Iranian nuclear program in the 2000s began to manifest in economic sanctions and constraints to its indirect strategy.

This article concludes that Iran is likely to continue to use unconventional means to affect national strategic outcomes, albeit with pragmatic constraints to avoid regional antagonism and military escalation. Iran pursues such aims with realistic expectations, evidenced through recognition that proxies such as the Assad regime, or the Houthis, can not generate enough combat power to achieve desirable ends on their own. Iran demonstrates, through the IRGC, a deliberate strategy and force-generation model, for the employment of advisers to influence proxies to further Iranian national interests.
Over the past decade, the ADF has been consistently tasked by the Australian Government to develop the capacity of partners in the greater Middle East region. This task immediately places Australia as a competitor with other actors vying for influence in the region, such as Iran. The Australian Defence Force can both learn from, and be cautioned by, the Iranian model of Unconventional Warfare as it continues to compete for influence in the Long Wars of the Middle East.

Endnotes


4. With the Iraqi seizure of Kirkuk in November 2017, “Iran’s adroit maneuvering outrivaled America’s diplomatic efforts and allowed Iran to score a triple victory: further distancing the PUK from its Kurdish rival the KDP, re-energizing PMF ascendancy in Iraq, and demonstrating an effective level of influence over Baghdad… Kirkuk’s loss is symbolic of America’s declining influence in Iraq… Iran’s ability to take the lead and have a prevailing influence on Iraqi moves is a watershed moment in the region, with implications all over the Middle East.” Dror Michman and Yael Mizrahi-Arnaud, 2017, Dropping the ball in Kirkuk, The Brookings Institute, Nov 3, at: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/11/03/dropping-the-ball-in-kirkuk/, accessed 5 Nov 2017

6. “The events during the summer of 2014 and the fall of 1998 drive home the consistent theme that the Islamic Republic has not initiated conventional force beyond its borders unless faced with a perceived existential threat, at least since the end of the Iran-Iraq War.” J. Matthew McInnis, 2016, *Iran at war: Understanding why and how Tehran uses military force*, Dec, American Enterprise Institute, p 15


9. The land-bridges between the Caspian and Arabian Seas, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, and the Black and Caspian Seas, have since antiquity controlled the flows of trade and empire across the Eurasia

10. Robert Kaplan, 2013, *‘The revenge of geography: What the map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against fate’*, p 281


12. “Operation Praying Mantis, was decisive. The Iranians lost two platforms, four smaller boats, one frigate, and at least 56 personnel during nine hours of fighting.” J. Matthew McInnis, 2016, *Iran at war: Understanding why and how Tehran uses military force*, Dec, American Enterprise Institute, p 28. This operation was conducted by the United States during the ‘Tanker War’ of 1988, when Iranian unconventional strategies threatened oil tanker passage through the Persian Gulf


14. This description emerged in the period 2001-2010 via Al Qaeda-inspired franchises in Iraq, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus, that have now evolved or in some cases been replaced by Islamic State affiliates


17. Rentier states are those that trade on strategic commodity to provide for their people. They are thus dependent upon external variables to provide fund government services, such as high oil prices or favourable currency exchange rates


19. Discussed at: https://theintercept.com/2016/01/06/one-map-that-explains-the-dangerous-saudi-iranian-conflict/, accessed 16 Jan 2016. Middle Eastern rentier economies are further challenged by recent low oil prices that undermine the ability to use cash inducements to offset popular discontent

20. The founding of the IRGC in 1979, was influenced by the need for a counterbalance the Artesh – ‘whose commitment to the revolution was suspect due to its ties to the Shah’s regime and to the U.S. and British militaries.’ Michael Knights and Michael Eisenstadt, 2017, ‘Mini-Hizballahs, Revolutionary Guard Knock-offs, and the Future of Iran’s Militant Proxies in Iraq,’ War on the Rocks, May 9, at: https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/mini-hizballahs-revolutionary-guard-knock-offs-and-the-future-of-irans-militant-proxies-in-iraq/, accessed 10 May 2017. Thus, the nature of the revolutionary establishment of the Islamic Republic necessitated the establishment of the IRGC


22. Anthony Cordesman, ‘Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces’, 16 Aug 2007, p 3, quotes the IRGC strength at some 125,000 men. The estimates of 120,000 to 160,000 represent the full range of estimates publicly identified


25. Cordesman, 2007, p 6

26. “Iran’s leaders took two lessons from the Iran-Iraq War. The first was that Iran was surrounded by enemies, near and far… The other lesson drawn from the Iran-Iraq War was the futility of fighting a head-to-head confrontation.” Dexter Filkins, 2013, ‘The Shadow Commander,’ The New Yorker, 30 Sep

27. In this context, the view of Iranian leadership was likely influenced by “American and Arab courtship of and support for Saddam throughout the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War [that] cemented American-Iranian, Arab-Iranian and Sunni-Shi’a antagonisms.” Amin Saikal, 2014, Zone of Crisis: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq, IB Taurus and Co Ltd, New York, p 112. Such American and Arab support for Iraq might be plausibly expected in a future challenge to Iranian regional power

28. Quoting IRGC Commander Major General Jafari: “Given the enemy’s numerical or technological superiority, the IRGC would use asymmetrical warfare capabilities, such as those used by Hezbollah in its 2006 war with Israel in Lebanon.” Alireza Nader, 2013, ‘Profile: Revolutionary Guards Chief Gen Jafari’, 22 Jan

29. Alireza Nader, ‘How would Iran fight back?’, 1 Oct, 2012. “This doctrine realigned most IRGC divisions to the provinces and attached the Basij paramilitary organisations to them. It allows for a more decentralised IRGC structure that can better absorb a decapitating strike and invasion and then reconstitute an insurgent army to push the enemy out.” J. Matthew McInnis, 2016, Iran at war: Understanding why and how Tehran uses military force, Dec, American Enterprise Institute, p 39

31. Anthony Cordesman, 2007, ‘Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces’, 16 Aug, pp 5-6

32. “Aside from ideological motivations, the formation of Basij was also a response to perceived domestic and external threats. The rebellions in various parts of the country (Khuze instantaneous, Kurdistan, and Torkaman Sahra), uncertainty about the ability of the regular military to deal with these threats, and, after the onset of the hostage crisis, the perceived threat from America, all acted as catalysts in the formation of Basej”. Kamran Taremi, 2014, ‘Iranian Strategic Culture: The Impact of Ayatollah Khomenini’s Interpretation of Shiite Islam’, p 10

33. Demonstrative of this state paranoia is the RAND observation that: “Reflecting its original charter of defending the revolution, there are IRGC installations in all of Iran’s major cities, organised into quick-reaction groups that serve as a reserve against unrest”. Wehrey et al, 2009, ‘The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’, p 8


35. J Matthew McInnis, 2016, Iran at war: Understanding why and how Tehran uses military force, Dec, American Enterprise Institute, p 17


37. ARIS, 2013, pp 97-98

38. A Jafarzadeh, 2018, The Iran Threat: President Amadinejad and the coming nuclear crisis, p 67

39. ARIS, 2013, p 5
40. “Over the last fifteen years Hezbollah has evolved from an Iranian-influenced conspiratorial terrorist group rejecting participation in Lebanese politics, to a party with considerable autonomy and a talent for playing politics and winning elections. The Shi‘i party is now part of the Lebanese government but simultaneously adopts an opposition demeanor, with a Janus-faced profile that infuriates detractors while seeming perfectly reasonable to its defenders and supporters.” Augustus Richard Norton, 2007. *Hezbollah*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p 6

41. “Syria’s civil war and the Lebanon-Syria insecurity nexus complicate and inform every aspect of sectarian and factional competition in Lebanon in ways that neither the Lebanese nor their regional and international allies seem to have fully accounted for.” Aram Nerguizian, 2017, *The Lebanese Armed Forces, Hezbollah and the Race to Defeat ISIS*, Working Draft, Center for Security and International Studies, 31 Jul, p 8


43. McInnis, 2016, p 18

44. McInnis, 2016, p 19

45. “In the course of the campaign... 196 US personnel [were] killed and 861 injured [just] in EFP [Explosively-Formed Projectile] attacks.”, McInnis, 2016, p 20

46. Quoted within A Jafarzadeh, 2008, *The Iran Threat: President Amadinejad and the coming nuclear crisis*


50. “Beginning in early 2012, Iraqi Shi‘a fighters started to trickle into Syria. Participating Iraqi groups include Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hizb Allah, the Badr Organisation, Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba, and Katib Sayyid al-Shuhada... Their training, tactics and weapons further point to how


58. It is notable that early IRGC and Hezbollah efforts seem to have been in training and equipping Houthi forces, perhaps demonstrating the perception of low strategic yield for Tehran. Recently, however, this calculus seems to have reversed with evidence of direct Iranian leadership of Houthi forces in the field. Joshua Koontz, 2017, ‘Iran’s Growing Casualty Count in Yemen,’ *War on the Rocks*, 1 Jun, at: https://warontherocks.com/2017/06_irans-growing-casualty-count-in-yemen/, accessed 3 Jun 2017
59. ‘Sa’ada-based IRGC advisers oversee the design, maintenance, and implementation of ballistic missile systems for Houthi missile brigades, according to debriefings with captured Houthi field commanders.’ Joshua Koontz, 2017, ‘Iran’s Growing Casualty Count in Yemen,’ *War on the Rocks*, 1 Jun, at: https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/irans-growing-casualty-count-in-yemen/, accessed 3 June 2017


63. This conclusion is evidenced by a raid against the al-Alab command center, Saudi Arabia on March 21, 2017, in which an IRGC officer and 40 Houthis were killed and a further 12 Houthis were wounded. Paul Bucala and Frederick Kagan, 2016, *Iran’s Evolving Way of War: How the IRGC Fights in Syria*, AEI Critical Threats, Mar, at: www.criticalthreats.org, accessed 14 April 2017, p 13

64. Hizbollah’s employment of the C-802 missile system was also a lesson in Information Operations (IO). “Shortly after Nasrallah’s offices were bombed on July 14 [2006], Hizbollah released a recorded statement from Nasrallah… ‘You wanted an open war, and we are heading for an open war. We are ready for it.’ Nasrallah invited listeners to look to the sea, and with perfect theatrical timing an explosion on the horizon rocked the INS Hanit, an Israeli naval vessel that was hit by an Iranian-produced C-802 Noor guided missile.” Augustus Richard Norton, 2007, *Hezbollah*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p 136
65. “The Hizballah model refers to the techniques used by that group to garner influence and gain power in Lebanon. First, it used the credibility conferred by armed ‘resistance’ and social welfare activities to establish itself as the dominant actor in the Shiite community and to garner support among non-Shiite constituencies at home and abroad. Second, it used this popular support to gain a foothold in the political system through elections to ensure that the party’s interests could not be harmed by the state. And third, it used its access to and influence over critical ministries and state agencies to protect and advance the party’s interests, and those of its Iranian patron, while preserving the paramilitary and social welfare organisations that undergird its parallel shadow state.” Michael Knights and Michael Eisenstadt, 2017, ‘Mini-Hizballahs, Revolutionary Guard Knock-offs, and the Future of Iran’s Militant Proxies in Iraq,’ War on the Rocks, 9 May, at: https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/mini-hizballahs-revolutionary-guard-knock-offs-and-the-future-of-irans-militant-proxies-in-iraq/, accessed 10 May 2017


68. Brigadier General Hamid Taqavi was killed in December 2014: “Taqavi became a martyr while fulfilling his duty as a military adviser in the fight against Daesh (IS) revisionist terrorists, a glorious end to a long valuable service to advance the cause of (Iran’s 1979) Islamic revolution.” Reuters, 2014, ‘Iranian general killed by sniper bullet in embattled Iraqi city’, 28 Dec, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/28/us-mideast-crisis-iran-idUSKBN0K60F020141228, retrieved 14 Apr 15


71. “Strategic optionality is best described as the deliberate employment of multiple, parallel efforts to shape the environment and the behaviour of actors within it… Additionally, it comes with the intent of selectively switching support as a campaign unfolds: abandoning ineffective or counterproductive efforts in order to increase support for effective ones”. Jan Gleiman, 2014, ‘Unconventional warfare and strategic optionality,’ ASPI Strategist, 1 Oct, http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/unconventional-warfare-and-strategic-optionality/ retrieved 4 Oct 14

72. “On the Shi’a side were communitarian militias, Iranian proxies, and the Sadrists of the Mahdi Army, a movement of poor, pious Shi’a, engaged as much in social revolution as in sectarian warfare. On the Sunni side were jihadists like Zarqawi, secular Sunni nationalists, who rejected the transformation of Iraq into what they was as an Iranian satellite, and former regime elements… As well as the politically-motivated groups, criminal networks… Each group had its factions, and its factions-within-factions – I counted more than 150 separate militant groups at one point in 2007. And then there were the Kurds.” David Kilcullen, 2016, Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terrorism, Black Inc Books, London, pp 27-28

73. Anthony Cordesman, 2007, ‘Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces’, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 16 Aug, p 9


75. Bucala and Kagan, 2016, p 19, “An officer-centric model for advisor support is evidenced by casualty figures between October 2015 and February 2016, of which, officers accounted for about 60 per cent of all Iranian casualties” pp 19-20

76. The Australian Army has not employed a ‘selection’ process for those personnel deployed to Advisor positions over the past decade, despite this consideration being a common observation within academic writing on the subject, see Tom Fram ed, 2017, The Long Road: Australia’s train, advise and assist missions, UNSW Press, Apr
77. Emile Hokayem, 2014, ‘Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War’, Dec

78. “There are already indications that some more proficient Iraqi members of *khat al-Hizbullah* groups are being used in ‘assist and advise’ role in the same way that selected Lebanese Hizbullah members have been utilised for some years.” Rodger Shanahan, 2017, ‘Hizbullah as a regional brand: not all parties are equal,’ *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 71, No 2, Apr, p 213


79. The leader of the Badr Organisation, Hadi al-Amiri has gone from being a guerrilla fighting on behalf of Iran against his home country: Iraq; to notorious militia leader accused of running ‘death squads’; to parliament member in Baghdad.” Susannah George, 2014, ‘Breaking Badr,’ *Foreign Policy*, 6 Nov, at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/, accessed 17 October 2017. Susannah George goes on to quote a 2009 U.S. Embassy cable released by WikiLeaks that Amiri may have been personally responsible for ordering the deaths of up to 2,000 Sunnis.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, head of the Popular Mobilisation Committee was formerly a commander in Kata-ib Hizbollah and associated with the IRGC. He was convicted to death in absentia by a court in Kuwait for involvement in the 1983 Kuwait bombings. The presence of such actors participating and manipulating Iraqi politics does not augur well for Western ideals of inclusive, representative government and the long-term stability of the Iraqi state

82. Jan Gleiman, 2014, *Iran’s war: from the ground up*, ASPI Strategist, 10 Nov
84. Rodger Shanahan, 2016, ‘First we take Aleppo, then we take Idlib,’ *The Interpreter*, 6 Dec, at: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/first-we-take-aleppo-then-we-take-idlib, accessed 10 May 2017

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