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Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Iran's historical and strategic ties to the Levant and argues that its objectives can characterized as multifaceted, diversified and pragmatic in orientation. Mindful of its strategic calculations and taking advantage of regional events, Iran operates as an opportunistic and adept regional actor having increased its foothold in Lebanon and Syria by supporting its axis of resistance partners Hezbollah and Bashar al Assad in their common goals of survival, stability and anti-Israeli and American sentiments. While Tehran's strategy has, for the time being, strengthened its influence in the Levant, this paper observes that it has simultaneously resulted in the creation of anti-Iran regional alliance that could ultimately undermine Tehran's regional position. Understanding Tehran's strategic calculus in the Levant can shed light on its long-term objectives and potential outcome.

Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Bashar al Assad, Strategic Depth, Axis of Resistance.

Tahran'ın Levant'taki Uzun Soluklu Oyununu Anlamak

ÖZET

Bu makale, İran'ın Levant'la tarihi ve stratejik bağlarını incelemekte ve İran'ın hedeflerinin çok yönlü, çeşitlilik içeren ve pragmatik yönelimli şeklinde nitelendirilebileceğini savunmaktadır. Stratejik hesapları göz önünde bulunduran ve bölgesel gelişmelerin sunduğu avantajlardan faydalanan fırsatçı ve hünerli bir bölgesel aktör olarak İran, direniş ekseni ortakları olan Hizbullah ve Beşar Esad'ı beka, istikrar ve İsrail-ABD karşıtı duygulardan oluşan ortak hedefleri çerçevesinde desteklemiş, Lübnan ve Suriye'deki nüfuzunu artırmıştır. Bu makale, Tahran'ın stratejisinin şu ana dek İran'ın Levant'taki nüfuzunu artırdığını belirtmekle birlikte, eş zamanlı biçimde Tahran'ın bölgesel konumuna nihayetinde zarar verebilecek İran karşıtı bölgesel bir ittifakın oluşmasıyla sonuçlandığını ileri sürmektedir. Tahran'ın Levant'taki stratejik hesaplarını anlamak, uzun vadeli hedefleri ve olası sonuçlarını da açıklığa kavuşturacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran İslam Cumhuriyeti, Suriye, Hizbullah, Beşar Esad, Stratejik Derinlik, Direniş Ekseni.

Introduction

Iran's increasing influence and interference in the Levant, seen through its support for Lebanese Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and Palestinian groups such as Hamas, has been both an opportunity and a challenge for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The increase in Iranian ties to state and non-state actors has posed reputational costs for Tehran, but has also provided strategic depth and deterrence capabilities for the Islamic Republic. The result of which on the one hand has entrenched Tehran's reach and leverage in the Levant and on the other hand sparked calls from the international community, particularly the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel to limit the Islamic Republic's malign influence on the region.[1] The Trump Administration in the U.S., in concert with regional allies, seeks to reverse Iran's relevance and multifaceted influence.[2] Understanding Iran's diversified foreign relations strategy in the context of regional change can better explain Tehran's motivations as well as the challenges ahead.

While Iran has had longstanding ties to the Levant, these connections have ebbed and expanded and been heavily influenced by regional events as well as changes in Iran's domestic political landscape and priorities. The evolution of Iranian linkages to the Levant can be categorized as multifaceted, diversified and strategic. Relations range from historical, political, economic, religious, and cultural linkages that have increased in scope and scale since the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a means to expand and extend Iranian influence beyond its borders. Specifically, Iran's relations with Syria and with the Lebanese group Hezbollah have been the nexus linking Tehran, Damascus and Beirut. Moral, financial and military support for Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have played an important role too, as has the presence and use of militia and proxy groups sponsored by Tehran in the aforementioned countries.[3] Although these relationships have not always been strong or consistent, this axis has proven resilient to the pressures of time, regional events and international opposition. Common goals of security, regime stability and relevance as well as anti-Israeli and anti-American animus have united these actors and maintained Tehran's reach into the Levant.

Regional events have also provided Tehran with opportunities to increase its foothold. From 2001 to 2009, Tehran gained much traction throughout the region by taking advantage of frustration on the Arab street over the pervasive nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S. policy towards the Middle East following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks that resulted in the 2001 Afghan war and 2003 invasion of Iraq. Tehran benefitted from the removal of two erstwhile enemies —Saddam Hussein and the Taliban — in its neighboring states of Iraq and Afghanistan. In both countries, in order to counter the U.S. presence, Tehran implemented a deftly implemented diversified strategy, supporting state and non-state actors.[4] During this period, Iranian support for Hezbollah proved decisive in the 2006 Lebanon War,[5] where Hezbollah was able to hold off Israeli attacks. Popular

1 Afshon Ostovar, "Why its tough to get tough on Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 October 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-10-25/why-its-tough-get-tough-iran, (Accessed on 18 September 2018).

2 *Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy*, 13 October 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/, (Accessed on 14 September 2018).

3 Kenneth Kenneth, "Iran's Foreign and Defence Policies", *Congressional Research Service Report*, No.22, 2017, http://www.refworld.org/docid/59e8856e4.html, (Accessed on 23 September 2017).

4 Afshon Ostovar, "Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_CP288_Ostovar_Sectarianism_Final.pdf, (Accessed on 10 September 2017).

5 Emile Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon", Robin Wright (Ed.), *The Iran Primer; Power, Politics, and US Policy,* Washington D.C., United States Institute for Peace Press, 2010, p.178-181.

support for Hezbollah and Iran soared on the streets of the Middle East and Tehran was buoyed by its successful regional approach.

The tide turned against Iran after its domestic crackdown following the 2009 Green Movement protests. Another shift for Tehran was the conclusion of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran nuclear agreement signed between Iran and the countries known as the P5+1 (the 5 members of the UN Security Council plus Germany).[6] The transactional agreement resulted in Iranian compromises to its nuclear energy program in exchange for sanctions relief, but was perceived by regional actors as an opportunity for greater Iranian empowerment at the expense of Saudi Arabia, Israel and other Persian Gulf countries.[7] The outbreak of the 2011 Arab Spring protests was another critical turning point. With violence impacting Iran's longtime Syrian ally, Iran chose to stand by Assad —a decisive strategic calculation that would have wider sectarian consequences.

These shifts both challenged and increased Iran's sense of security and provided the Islamic Republic with unique circumstances to increase its regional footprint. The consequences of Iranian involvement in Syria however have spilled over, unleashing wider sectarian and regional challenges. As the conflict has waged on, Iran's justification for its activities in Syria has shifted, taking on existential dimensions for Tehran. Seven years after the outbreak of the conflict, it remains to be seen if Iran's investment and support for the Assad regime will pay off.

This paper will present a strategic view of Tehran's engagement in the Levant as well as a historical one. Taken together, Tehran's strategy, threat perceptions, history in the Levant and current standing on the ground are key to deciphering its current and future engagement in the wider Levantine theatre.

Historical Backdrop

Iran has had deep historical ties to the Levant. These ties have ebbed and flowed through the cycles of history as empires have risen and receded. Important to note is the durability and evolutionary nature of these relations. During the Achaemenid and Phoenician times from 539 to 332 BC, trade and political interests brought Iranian influence to the Mediterranean. The Phoenician coastal city-states of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos and Arvad were launching grounds for Persian-Hellenic battles. Indeed, the Phoenicians, capitalizing early on their skill as traders, benefited from the vastness of the Persian Empire.[8] Under the Safavid Shahs, Shia clergy from the mountains of Jabil Amil immigrated to Persia taking part in a Safavid conversionary mission that gradually brought Shia Islam to Iran. This mutually beneficial relationship was marked by the assistance and, more importantly, the legitimization that the Shiite religious leaders granted to the Safavid dynasty. Indeed, a *quid pro quo* of sorts developed between the clergy and the crown: The Lebanese clerics legitimized Safavid dynastic rule in exchange for clerical influence over conversion and education.[9]

6 "Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report", *International Crisis Group*, Report No.173, 16 January 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/173-implementing-iran-nuclear-deal-status-report, (Accessed on 29 August 2017).

7 Ibid.

8 Houchang Chehabi and Hassan I. Mneimneh, "Five Centuries of Lebanese-Iranian Encounters", Houchang Chehabi (Ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2006, p.2.

9 Ibid p.3-7.

Beyond the clerical migration that laid the foundation for this relationship was the constant student moves to the region. Iranian students began to attend the alluring Protestant and Jesuit colleges that had opened in the Levant; "Going to study in Beirut was for a young Iranian a way to get a modern Western education without leaving the Muslim world."[10] Many of the Iranian elite from the Hoveyda brothers to Shapour Bakhtiar[11] studied in Beirut. The city was a multicultural, pluralistic landscape that opened avenues to both the East and West. Over the years, Beirut provided refuge to many of Iran's political and religious activists. The Bahai community found sanctuary among Lebanon's Cedars, as did many opponents of the Pahlavi Mohammad Reza Shah.[12]

While Mohammad Reza Pahlavi pursued a foreign policy based on *realpolitik*, Iran's Shia connections also played a part in his international relations. The shah maintained contact with prominent Shia such as Musa al Sadr, as well as the Maronite community of Lebanon, which also quietly encouraged Shia empowerment in Iran. Similar to Iran's use of Hezbollah today, the reliance on Maronite Christian leaders[13] for its own purposes reveals the importance of pragmatic, strategic interests. These ties were limited, however, by the tide of Arab nationalism that swept over the country.[14]

Needless to say, the Shah's support of the Shia cleric Musa al-Sadr represents the quintessential link between the two countries.[15] Musa Sadr, while born in Qom, traced his lineage back to the Jabil Amili clerics who migrated to Iran during the Safavid era. Sadr eagerly returned to the land of his ancestors as an Iranian clerical envoy in 1959.[16] While Sadr and oppositionists[17] were struggling to advance their own interests amidst the wider regional political struggles in Palestine, Lebanon and Iran, Sadr directed his effort towards Shia empowerment in 1974, founding *Amal* or hope to assist the Movement of the Disinherited.[18] The groups' military wing was formed during the Lebanese Civil War and lives on today as one of the two Shia political parties in Lebanon. Indeed, the inter-Shia squabbles between Sadr, the Shah and Khomeini reveal much about the tension and ideological disunity that existed within the pre-1979 revolutionary movement.[19]

Iranian revolutionaries sought refuge in Lebanon inspired by Palestinian and Shia activism during this time. From Mostafa Chamran, who worked intimately with Sadr through the revolution, to Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, who assisted in the creation of Hezbollah, the Iranian dissidents used

10 Ibid, p.14.

11 Amir Abbas Hoveyda and Shahpour Bakhtiar were two Iranian prime ministers.

12 Richard Hollinger, "An Iranian Enclave in Lebanon: Bahai Students in Beirut, 1906-40", Chehabi, *Distant Relations*, p.96-98.

13 During this period, Lebanese Christians and Shia found common cause in opposing Palestinian, Arab nationalist forces and Sunni groups in Lebanon.

14 For more on this period, see Abbas William Samii, "The Security Relationship between Lebanon and Pre-revolutionary Iran", Chehabi, *Distant Relation,* p.162-179.

15 For more on Musa al Sadr see Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon,* Cornell, Cornell University Press, 2000.

16 Ibid., p.23.

17 Iranian exiles along with Palestinian groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) became active in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s taking advantage of the weak Lebanese government and geographic diversity to assert their political agendas.

18 Houchang Chehabi and Majid Tafreshi, "Musa Sadr and Iran", Chehabi, *Distant Relations,* p.155.

19 Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of the Imperial Iran,* New York Henry Holt & Co, 2016 provides rigorous detail on this relationship.

the linkages between the two societies to plant an Iranian foothold in the hills of Jabil Amil.[20] It was through these bonds that Iran gained further entrée into Lebanon in the aftermath of its 1979 Islamic revolution.

Understanding Iran's Strategic Worldview since 1979

Important to this narrative is Iran's regional foreign policy that has been driven by its history, post-revolutionary ideology of independence, and by domestic political considerations. These themes form the backbone of Iran's strategy in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic's primary impulses consist of regime preservation and the restoration of Iran's regional relevance. While the former is drawn from Iran's post revolutionary history, the latter has been a continuous trend in Iranian policy since the days of the Pahlavi monarchy, predating the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Issues of regime security however are most poignantly rooted in the national memory of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War where Iran's neighbors, the United States and many European countries collectively supported Iraq against Iran.[21] During this period, which dovetailed with the consolidation of the Revolution, Iran experienced regional and international isolation and encirclement that instituted a profound sense of security paranoia among the political elite. Continued U.S. opposition to the Islamic Republic and implicit support for regime change in Tehran, evidenced in statements such as "all options remain on the table," has fueled this paranoia.[22] President Trump's recent Iran strategy goes over further; "It is time for the entire world to join us in demanding that Iran's government end its pursuit of death and destruction."[23] After decades of perpetual enmity with the U.S, Iran's sense of strategic isolation is now imbued in the national political culture and seen in the dominant themes of political, national and economic resistance. In the same context, the notion of resistance is also played out in the region through Tehran's axis of resistance bringing together Hezbollah and Syria in a nexus.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign policy orientation has been predicated on the concept of independence. The revolutionary slogans of "independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic" and "neither East nor West" were emblematic of this ideology and vision. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolutionary founding father of Iran's new political system, captured this philosophy stating, "If we cannot live up to the tough measure of 'neither East nor West' and have not made Iran truly independent, then we have not achieved anything."[24]

Part of Iran's quest for independence is tied to the belief that the U.S. presence and involvement in Iran and the wider Middle East has been decidedly negative and designed to contain Iran. From Tehran's perspective, this is evidenced in the unstable outcome of the regional wars such as the 1980 Iran-Iraq war, 1990 Persian Gulf war, the 2001 Afghan war, the 2003 Iraq war, 2012 Libya

20 Houchang Chehabi, "The Anti-Shah Opposition and Lebanon", Chehabi, *Distant Relations,* p.182-188.

21 Syria was the only regional country that supported Iran during the war. Oman declared its neutrality in the conflict.

22 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran/U.S.: Bush Says All Options On the Table for Tehran's Nuclear Program", *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, 18 January 2005, https://www.rferl.org/a/1056924.html (Accessed on 20 September 2017).

23 *President Donald J. Trump's New Strategy on Iran*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-new-strategy-iran/ 13 October 2017 (Accessed on 12 November 2017).

24 Quoted in Farhang Rajaee, "Why Alone?", Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi (Eds.,) *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001: Alone in the World*, London, Routledge, 2013.

campaign, and support for the 2015 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led Yemen war.[25] Based on this interpretation of regional history, Iranian understanding espouses that the Middle Eastern security should be managed from within the region rather than through U.S. interference and balancing efforts.[26] This vision contrasts that of Saudi Arabia and GCC states that have traditionally relied on the U.S. to protect their security interests. This strategic difference is among the many exacerbating tensions between Riyadh and Tehran, ultimately also impacting relations in the Levant where both countries have supported opposing groups, parties and individuals.[27]

To offset the increased American regional presence, demonstrated most recently in the 2001 US led war on terror and 2003 Iraq war, Iran has worked through a strategy of diplomatic, economic, religious, and military support for state and non-state actors. After years of sanctions and arms embargoes, Iran's military capability is weaker than that of its neighbors. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "data make[s] a conclusive case that the Arab Gulf states have an overwhelming advantage of Iran in both military spending and access to modern arms."[28] Although Iran's capabilities are strengthened by its ballistic missile program, Tehran's primary military strength stems from its asymmetric and deterrent strategy that relies on the irregular warfare and support for proxy and non-state actors.[29] While Tehran views this "forward defence strategy" as protective, Iran's neighbors see Tehran as expansionist and aggressive, thereby exacerbating regional tensions.[30]

Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy

Over a number of decades, Tehran has built on these relationships using a multipronged regional strategy. Important to Iran's regional approach is the domestic narrative and vision justifying Tehran's presence abroad. Pan-Islamism, strategic depth and counter terror justifications are three of the most relevant pillars that have been used by Tehran to overcome regional divides and explain Iran's growing visibility.[31] These narratives are regularly invoked by Iran's foreign policy establishment to explain its regional goals and strategic objectives. It is however important to note here is that Tehran is opportunistic as a foreign policy actor. It is only able to exert its influence through the mistakes and missteps of other regional players. In most circumstances, Tehran has capitalized on opportunities left by the vacuum and withdrawal of the US, and the Islamic Republic has proven to be adept at taking advantage of regional events such as the 2003 Iraq war and 2011 Syrian Civil War.

25 Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, "What Trump Needs to Know About Iran", *Huffington Post*, 1 January 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-iran-facts_us_586fb7bae4b02b5f85886829?guccounter=1 (Accessed on 25 September 2017).

26 Saudi Arabia by contrast sought U.S. regional protection as a counterweight to Iran.

27 Sanam Vakil, *The American Shadow over the Iranian Elections,* Report, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 18 May 2017, https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/american-shadow-over-iranian-elections-16509 (Accessed on 22 September 2017).

28 Anthony Cordesman, "Military Spending and Arms Sales in the Gulf: How the Arab Gulf States Dominate the Changes in the Military Balance", Report, Center for Strategic International Studies, 24 April 2014, https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-spending-and-arms-sales-gulf (Accessed on 25 September 2017).

29 Aram Nerguizian, "The Struggle for the Levant: Geopolitical Battles and the Quest for Stability", CSIS, 18 September 2014, p.245, https://www.csis.org/analysis/struggle-levant-geopolitical-battles-and-quest-stability (Accessed on 30 September 2017).

30 Ali Vaez, "Trump Can't Deal with Iran if He Doesn't Understand It," *Foreign Policy,* 23 February 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/23/trump-cant-deal-with-iran-if-he-doesnt-understand-it/ (Accessed on 17 September 2017).

31 Kenneth Katzman, *Iran's Foreign and Defence Policies,* Congressional Research Service Report, No.22, 2017, http://www.refworld.org/docid/59e8856e4.html (Accessed on 23 September 2017).

Unlike other regional powers, Iran pursues a diversified "whole of government" long term approach, cultivating relations with state and non-state actors.[32] This strategy, as articulated by the Iranian foreign policy establishment, uses a mix of political support and relationships at the diplomatic level, soft power activities of trade and investment, cultural and religious ties, as well as the creation and training of militia groups.[33] Tehran implemented this strategy most effectively after the 2003 Iraq war by building a diversified network with leaders from Shia, Kurdish and Sunni groups at a political level, while also building its soft power influence through increased trade and religious ties. Military relations and sustained support for militia groups known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have been instrumental in further cementing Iranian influence throughout the country. For Tehran, creating indispensable ties beyond its borders would provide strategic lines of defense and influence. After the outbreak the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Iran would replicate this approach with even greater rigor.

The Pillar of Strategic Depth

Iran's forward defence strategy is based on the concept of strategic depth. To compensate for its sense of encirclement by U.S. forces and pro-U.S. states and its inferior conventional military capacity compared with that of its neighbours, Iran has carefully cultivated a diverse array of regional relationships to push threats away from its borders.[34] The Iranian military establishment has publicly acknowledged this strategy. Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Deputy Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami has commented that Iran's military is present in Iraq and Syria, because of "[Iran's] strategic depth, and their security is Iran's security."[35]

Strategic depth is attained through diversified, mutual relationships in multiple arenas. The countries of the Levant, as neighbours to Israel, have played a particular role in providing Iran with such depth by allowing Tehran to extend its influence through relations with state and non-state actors. Here Iran has maintained longstanding ties with the Syrian state. At the same time, it has cultivated a network of non-state groups. Part of the success of Iran's support for non-state actors is that such support is predicated on Iran's tolerance of each partner's domestic priorities. Iran perceives the unconditional nature of its support as the strength behind these relationships.[36] Iran does not dictate nor maintain the upper hand in these relationships, but rather recognizes local autonomy and local priorities of each group. Each relationship is unique. Some groups claim to support Iran's model of Islamic government known as the *velayate-faqih,*[37] but by no means, is it a prerequisite of Iranian support.

32 Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights and Ahmad Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Iran's Whole of Government Approach", *Policy Focus*, No.11, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2011, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus111.pdf (Accessed on 14 September 2017).

33 Ibid., p.ix-xi.

34 Gawdat Baghat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Iran's Defense Strategy: The Navy, Ballistic Missiles and Cyberspace*, Vol.24, No.3, Fall 2017, p.89–103.

35 Sardar Salimi, "Iran considers Syria, Iraq as its 'strategic depth': IRGC deputy cmdr", *Mehr News Agency,* 4 February 2018, https://www.mehrnews.com/ (Accessed on 1 October 2017).

36 Vaez, "Trump can't deal with Iran".

37 The *Velayat-e -faqih*, Iran's form of Islamic government invented by Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini is based on the concept of rule of a clerical jurisprudent. The model is designed to provide an ideal Islamic system of government based on social justice. Under such a system, the leading clerical authority, or Supreme Leader, rules in absence of the 12th Shia Imam who went into occultation in the 12th century. For more on this system see Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, New York, Basic Books, 1990.

The case of Hezbollah is a good example to draw upon. For decades, Iran has provided Hezbollah with significant economic and military support. Hezbollah's stronghold on the Israeli-Lebanese border has from Tehran's perspective protected Iran from an Israeli attack, giving the Islamic Republic greater leverage and a *de facto* presence in the Levant. Hezbollah claims to support the *velayat-e-faqih,* but there is clarity among them that this model is not an appropriate system of governance for Lebanon.[38] However, "Support for Hezbollah does not necessarily translate into allegiance to or unequivocal support for Iran … Hezbollah's power also relies on its standing at home and regional image, both of which have suffered from appearing to be a mere proxy of Iran."[39] Tehran has also privately stated that Hezbollah's decision to enter the 2011 Syrian Civil War was made independently of Iran.[40] Under such conditions, proxies and partners do not always act in accordance with Iranian interests. Yet, the mere presence of the network does present Tehran with a strengthened level of influence and potential for leverage should it be necessary.

Iran provides diverse support for non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and Palestine. In addition to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, the *Badr* Organization, *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (KHA), *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH), and *Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas* (LAFA) in Syria, Hamas and PIJ in Palestine are some of the organizations that have benefitted from Iranian patronage. These relationships, while not equal nor as successful to that of Hezbollah, seek to provide similar levers of influence while also deterring and challenging Iran's adversaries. Ultimately, they give Tehran access and relevance beyond its borders.

The Pillars of Pan-Islamism & the Axis of Resistance

Iran's pan-Islamic orientation promoted in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution was designed as a policy to build bridges between Tehran and its regional neighbors as co-religionists.[41] Through the prism of opposition to Israel, Tehran sought to appeal to wider Arab and Muslim sentiments on Palestinian self-determination. Unable to develop meaningful relations and alliances with its neighbors, most of whom felt threatened by Iran's post-revolutionary ideology and plans to export its revolution, Tehran cultivated a network with non-state actors. This strategy led Iran to support the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, PIJ, the *Al Quds* Brigade, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) among others to create an axis of resistance against Israel.[42]

Iran has long pledged military and financial support for Palestinian groups — reportedly $30 million annually — as well as advanced military training for thousands of Hamas activists at Revolutionary Guard bases in Iran and Lebanon.[43] In 2011, Hamas had opened an office in Tehran and declared that Iran and Hamas shared an "identical view in the strategic outlook toward the Palestinian cause in its

38 Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon".

39 Ibid.

40 International Crisis Group, *Hezbollah's Syrian Conundrum*, Report No.175, 14 March 2017 https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hizbollah-s-syria-conundrum (Accessed on 24 September 2017).

41 Mehdi Khalaji, "Dilemmas of Pan-Islamic Unity", *The Hudson Institute*, 27 November 2009, https://www.hudson.org/research/9859-the-dilemmas-of-pan-islamic-unity- (Accessed on 12 October 2017).

42 *Annual Report on the Military Power of Iran*, Washington D.C., Department of Defense, 2012.

43 Rachel Brandenburg, "Iran and the Palestinians", *The Iran Primer,* 25 January 2016, http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians (Accessed on 15 September 2017).

Islamic dimension."[44] Iran has also supported PIJ and reportedly provided military aid and training for dozens of men in Hamas' military wing, the *Izz ad-Din al Qassam* Brigades.[45] Iran also allegedly supplied much of the military equipment that Hamas used against Israel during its Operation Cast Lead in the December 2008.[46] Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal visited Tehran in February 2009, after the operation ended, to thank Iran for its help during the conflict, citing Iran as a "partner in victory."[47]

But the eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011 caused a rift between Tehran and Hamas. Although they had previously overlooked sectarian differences, the relationship became complicated when Tehran backed Syrian President Bashar al Assad, from the Alawite sect, and Hamas aligned with Sunni rebels. In 2012, Hamas began looking to Qatar as an alternative financial backer and its leaders relocated to Qatar from Syria. However, with Assad in a stronger military position in 2018, relations between the parties are warming again, suggesting that the pragmatic nature of the relationship might have won out.

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and the increase of regional sectarian politics, however, have exposed the limits of Iran's pan-Islamic policy. Pan-Islamism has failed to provide Iran with sustained regional support and legitimacy, especially because Tehran is perceived to have supported Bashar al Assad against the will of the Syrian people. Tension between Tehran and Hamas over Iran's support for Bashar al Assad led to the fracturing of the resistance coalition for a period of time. Wider Arab, GCC and Saudi opposition to Iran's regional expansionism have also ruptured Iran's credibility and pan-Islamic cover. As such, Tehran has been forced to pivot away from an ideological justification for its presence in Syria towards national interests.

Lebanon's Hezbollah and Syria were also part of this multi-confessional alignment, the heart of which came to be known as the resistance axis, which has united them together with Iran in an anti-Israeli and anti-American alliance. Drawing from the strength of Hezbollah's 2006 victory against Israel and opportunities to exert influence in post-war Iraq, the axis has grown as part of a "transnational, multi-ethnic, and cross-confessional political and security network."[48] The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, coupled with the emergence of ISIS in 2014, however, has forced the resistance axis to rebrand itself inadvertently in sectarian terms. Doing so has enabled them to attract Shia recruits in the fight against Sunni extremism. At the same time, taking the lead in the fight against ISIS' terror has enabled the Islamic Republic to "widen their appeal of resistance to non-Islamic religions and minorities in the region, such as Christians, the Druze, Yazidis, and Kurds, as well as to secular regimes, such as Egypt, as an attractive partner for fighting terrorism."[49] The cost of this strategy has exposed Iran to sectarian criticism but at the same has enabled Iran to pivot towards the "war on terror narrative" to justify its increased regional role.[50]

44 Karl Yambert, *Security Issues in the Greater Middle East,* New York Prager, 31 March 2016, p.64.

45 Brandenburg, "Iran and the Palestinians".

46 Yambert, *Security Issues in the Greater Middle East*, p.133.

47 Mathew Levitt, "Iran's Support for Terrorism under the JCPOA", *Policywatch,* No.2648, Washington Institute, 8 July 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-support-for-terrorism-under-the-jcpoa (Accessed on 25 September 2017).

48 Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance: How its forging a new Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-24/irans-axis-resistance-rises (Accessed on 3 October 2017).

49 Ibid.

50 Arianne Tabatabai, "Other side of the Iranian coin: Iran's counterterrorism apparatus", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.41, No.1-2, 2018, p.181-207.

The Pillar of Counter Terrorism

Due to limitations of the Pan-Islamist and axis of resistance strategies and in conjunction with the emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Iran reframed its regional narrative by attempting to position itself at the forefront of the "global war on terror." By shifting public statements and its focus towards combating the presence of ISIS and *takfiri* groups,[51] Tehran attempted to pivot away from solely supporting the Assad regime. The geographical and ideological success of ISIS posed a strategic challenge for Tehran. In 2014, ISIS' territory extended to a fifty-mile distance to the Iranian border. Tehran also worried about ISIS' potential to recruit among Iran's disgruntled and marginalized Sunni population. Thus with this strategic shift, Iran has tried to justify its military presence in Iraq and Syria both regionally and for a domestic audience. At the same time, this strategy also served to challenge the GCC position of perceived support for terror groups. ISIS' direct targeting of Iran and Shia groups added fuel to Iran's counter terror efforts.

The fight against terror has validated increased security and anti-terror measures over Tehran's own domestic minority groups. Under the umbrella of the leading sponsor of counter-terrorism, Iran sought to stand up to terror to ultimately protect its regional interests and to prevent terror groups from operating within Iranian territory.[52] Kurdish support for Salafi jihadi ideology has increased in Iran since 2001,[53] as was evidenced by the June 2017 terror attacks in Tehran.[54] Despite government efforts to stave off attacks inside Iran, in June 2017, ISIS carried out two simultaneous attacks on symbolic institutions: Iran's parliament and mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, leaving 17 civilians dead. Many Iranian Sunnis have travelled through Turkey to join ISIS and other jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria, often facing the IRGC commanders aiding Iraqi and Syrian forces on the front lines.[55]

Historical Links since 1979

In tandem with the strategic vision guiding its foreign policy, a historical approach is also useful to explain the growth and expansion of Iran's ties to the Levant. The 1979 Iranian Revolution cemented Iran's link to Lebanon. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), a time of regional isolation for Tehran, Khomeini saw Lebanon as the ideal outlet for successfully exporting Iran's "model".[56] Tehran's crowning achievement was the 1982 creation and 1985 institutionalization of Hezbollah or Party of God.[57] The IRGC provided the model, method and money to create Hezbollah in Iran's image.[58]

51 Muslim groups who accuse other Muslims of apostasy.

52 Tabatabai, "Other side of the Iranian coin".

53 Fazel Hawramay, "Iran's Jihadi Gambit", *Al Monitor*, 10 January 2018, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/iran-jihadi-gambit.html (Accessed on 15 October 2017).

54 Ibid.

55 Fazel Hawramay, "How Iran's Military Strategy Against IS May Backfire", *Al Monitor*, 17 April 2017, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iran-islamic-state-kurdistan-recruitment-jihadism-at-home.html (Accessed on 12 October 2017).

56 Mohammad Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon", *Middle East Policy*, Vol.XX, Summer 2013, https://www.mepc.org/revolutionary-irans-1979-endeavor-lebanon (Accessed on 10 October 2017).

57 Differing accounts on the emergence of Hezbollah exist with some scholars pinpointing 1982 as the founding year while others believe that in 1985 Shia groups unified under the banner of Hezbollah. For more on Hezbollah, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah A Short History,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

58 Steven Ward, "Axis of Resistance: The Hezbollah-Iran-Syria Relationship", *The Cipher Brief,* 14 June 2016, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/axis-of-resistance-the-hezbollah-iran-syria-relationship (Accessed on 12 October 2017).

Hezbollah served as a political, charitable and military group within the Lebanese polity, whose mission was directed to empowering Lebanese Shia and countering Israel's presence in southern Lebanon. To counter Israeli forces that had invaded Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah and *Amal*, from 1983 onwards, launched asymmetric attacks in the form of suicide bombings, assassination attempts and kidnappings. Hezbollah was also responsible for the 1983 and 1984 American embassy bombings in Beirut and for regular attacks Israeli military posts in southern Lebanon until its withdrawal in 1985.[59]

The Hezbollah-Iran nexus cannot be understood in a vacuum, and analysis must also include the prism of the Syria-Lebanon-Iran triangle. The triangle has grown in reaction to regional events. Iran and Syria, to the surprise of many, developed a rather resilient alliance in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Both countries were regionally isolated and came together opportunistically against the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein in 1979.[60] Damascus and Tehran also experienced a deterioration of relations with the United States during this period.[61] At the outset of the war, Iran was regionally isolated as all neighbouring Arab states, threatened by the Iranian revolutionary ideology, supported Iraq during the war. It was Hafez al Assad's regime that provided military, intelligence and diplomatic support, enabling Iran to expel Iraqi forces from Iranian territory in 1982. For Tehran, the relationship also helped broaden its network beyond sectarian actors.

Throughout the 1980s, the relationship expanded beyond the Iraqi theatre when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 challenged Syria's foothold in that country.[62] With Assad's blessing, Iran helped mobilize and organize Shia groups against the Israeli presence, resulting in the emergence of Hezbollah. Through the remaining war years, with Syrian support, Iran was able to remain active and physically present in Lebanon. Syria too benefitted from Iran's relationship with Shiite groups and used their nascent ties to support anti-Israeli and anti-American policies.[63]

By the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Syrian-Iranian axis evolved and adapted to the geopolitical realities of the day. The demise of the USSR, the emergence of pax-Americana and the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provided new fodder, keeping the relationship alive. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provided an opportunity for both Tehran and Damascus to improve relations with their Arab neighbours.[64] Despite the conclusion of the Lebanese Civil War and the 1989 Taif Accords,[65] Tehran and Damascus maintained their inter-Lebanese links. With Syrian backing, Hezbollah, unlike other militias, was permitted to remain armed. As a result, while publically renouncing its sectarian agenda and becoming a viable political player in Lebanese politics, Hezbollah was simultaneously able to maintain guerrilla tactics against Israel. Thus, throughout the 1990s, Hezbollah resisted Israeli attacks and gained moral strength and support as a party and a movement. This strategy helped facilitate the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

59 Emile Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon", *The Iran Primer,* United States Institute for Peace, 2015.

60 Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power in the Politics of the Middle East*, London I. B. Tauris, 2009, p.58.

61 Ibid.

62 Syria invaded Lebanon in 1976 during the Lebanese Civil War and remained as a political actor in the country until its forced departure in 2005. Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon: 1970-1985*, Cornell, Cornell Univeristy Press, 1985.

63 Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p.60-61.

64 Ibid., p.75.

65 Two UNSC resolutions have since called for the disarmament of Hezbollah. Resolution 1559 of 2004 calls for "the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias," and resolution 1701 of 2006 calls for "the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that …there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state." See "Security Council Calls for the Disarming of Hezbollah", United National Security Council Press Release, 11 August 2006, https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8808.doc.htm.

Military cooperation among the axis continued afterwards. Since then, Damascus and Tehran have engaged in ballistic missile development and used their access to military technology to fund and funnel weapons to Hezbollah and Palestinian groups.[66] Iran has also transferred much weaponry to Hezbollah. Doing so has enabled it to maintain proximity to Israel where deter an Israeli attack. Indeed, the Islamic Republic believes that its support for Hezbollah has protected Iran from Israeli attack, particularly during Iran's standoff over its nuclear program.[67] Thus, Hezbollah's arsenal has expanded through the years. While it had 15,000 missiles in 2006,[68] today it is believed it has 130,000.[69]

The Hezbollah leadership subscribes to Ayatollah Khomeini's model of Islamic governance known as the *velayat-e-faqih,* but recognizes the limitations of applying this model within the Lebanese polity. Hezbollah has long used its struggle against Israel as justification for its existence and continued military capabilities.[70] Tehran, having nurtured this proxy in its own ideological image, is thought to have significant political influence on the actions of Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.[71] Elected to parliament in 1992, Hezbollah has transformed into a legitimate and successful political party representative of the Shia in Lebanon's multi-confessional system. It has held repeated positions in the government since 2005 and has expanded its activities to include social welfare provisions as a means to increase popular support within the Shia community. Its television station *Al Manar* broadcasts Hezbollah propaganda.

Economic, energy and military cooperation has also been essential to the Tehran-Damascus relationship. Bound by a number of bilateral economic agreements, Tehran has used its position of strength *vis-à-vis* Damascus to bolster relations. Energy, trade, banking and electricity cooperation, while not overwhelming, have laid the foundation for moderate economic ties. It was reported that Iran invested over $1 billion in foreign direct investment to Syria in 2008 alone.[72] While hard to measure the impact, educational, cultural and religious links have also been part of the relationship.

Both Iran and Syria shared similar concerns about the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. While they celebrated the removal of Saddam Hussein, Tehran and Damascus feared the impact and scope of the "war on terror" and tried to balance against American gains by supporting an array of Iraqi political and informal groups.[73] Tehran perceived its diversified strategy of support for state and non-state actors in Iraq as a success to be replicated in other contexts.[74]

66 Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p.87.

67 Israel threatened to attack Iranian nuclear sites on numerous occasions. See, Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Radicalism or Realpolitik?: The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Babylon: The Nordic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.8, No.2, 2010, p.88; and Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p.xiv.

68 "Three-Way Bet: Hizbullah's Strategic Dilemma in Lebanon", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 2011, p.30, http://www.janes.com/images/assets/885/68885/Hizbullahs_expanded_role_in_Syria_threatens_Israel.pdf (Accessed on 15 September 2017).

69 "Israel raises Hezbollah rocket estimate to 150,000", *Times of Israel*, 12 November 2015, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-raises-hezbollah-rocket-estimate-to-150000/ (Accessed on 27 September 2017).

70 Emile Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon", *The Iran Primer*, USIP, 11 October 2010.

71 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, London, Routledge, 2002, p.140.

72 "Iranian Influence in the Levant: Egypt Iraq and Afghanistan", *American Enterprise Institute Report for the Institute of War*, May 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianInfluenceLevantEgyptIraqAfghanistan.pdf (Accessed on 10 September 2017).

73 Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p.293.

74 Eisenstadt, Knights and Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq".

The Syrian Civil War

The opportunity emerged in the 2011 Arab Spring protests and the following eruption of violence in Syria. The quick spread of the war throughout Syria forced Tehran to make a critical choice to support Assad. Tehran's decision lead to deeper expansion and investment in the Levant and a cementing of ties between Hezbollah, Damascus and Tehran into the "axis of resistance."[75] Nevertheless, Tehran took months to gamble on Assad. Internal debates weighed the consequences of supporting Assad versus the prospect of losing Iran's longstanding ally.[76] Tehran also miscalculated, believing that its military and tactical support would lead to a quick resolution of the conflict. For Tehran, having an ally in Damascus was critical to maintaining access to Hezbollah where it could project power on the Israeli border. Also, Tehran sought to protect the *status quo ante* through preservation of Syrian territorial integrity.[77] A third motivation for Iran's involvement was fear that instability in Syria would have a domino effect in Lebanon and Iraq, weakening Iranian influence regionally. The ability to also lead in the fight against ISIS bolstered Tehran's credibility in its domestic arena.

Thus, Iran initially responded in 2012 by quietly sending aid, loans, military support and equipment to bolster Assad's defence. Over time, that support increased to include a more overt military presence of the IRGC. The role of the IRGC intelligence and training in Syria has become especially critical.[78] Drawing from its experience in Iraq, the IRGC has helped to create the National Defense Forces (NDF) — a group of nearly 80,000 Alawites, Shiites, and regime loyalists — to assist the Syrian army in combat.[79] *Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas* (LAFA) is perhaps the most important Iranian proxy in Syria. It first made its appearance in the fall of 2012, fighting under the pretense of defending the Sayideh Zainab Shrine and surrounding Shia neighborhoods in southern Damascus.[80] To assist overextended forces in Syria, the IRGC also developed the *Fatimaiyun Brigade,* composed of between 3,000 and 13,000 Afghan immigrants. The *Zaynabiyun Brigade*, an analogous unit, is composed of several hundred to a few thousand Shia Pakistanis based in Iran.[81] Israeli officials have estimated that Iran has over 80,000 militiamen under its command in Syria.[82] While Tehran's strategy and future plans for these militias are unknown, one could assume that they could be used to replicate the Hezbollah model in Lebanon.

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75 Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance: How its forging a new Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January 2017.

76 Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, Occasional Paper, London, RUSI, August 2016, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf (Accessed on 21 September 2017).

77 Ibid.

78 To date, the IRGC has acknowledged the loss of 2,100 fighters in this war.

79 Jubin M. Goodarzi, "The Syrian-Iranian Alliance: Whither the Damascus-Tehran Axis?", *Singapore Middle East Papers*, Vol.6, No.2, July 2014, https://meisingapore.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/smep-6-2-goodarzi2.pdf (Accessed on 30 September 2017).

80 Phillip Smyth, "How Iran is Building its Syrian Hezbollah", *Policy Watch,* No.2580, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 March 2016. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah (Accessed on 2 October 2017).

81 Afshon Ostovar, "Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288 (Accessed on 25 September 2018).

82 Judah Ari Gross, "Israel at UN: Iran has more than 80,000 fighters in Syria", *Times of Israel*, 26 April 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-at-un-iran-has-more-than-80000-fighters-in-syria/ (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

This strategy further includes the creation of a corridor linking Iranian territory to the Mediterranean through the Levant.[83] It is suggested by Israeli security analysts that, with the support of proxy groups, Tehran will protect its access to this corridor and potentially its long-term presence in the country.[84] By doing so, Tehran seeks to project its strength and challenge Israel not just through Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also along Israel's northern border. Israel has consistently stated that it will not permit Iran to establish bases in Syria.[85]

By 2014, Tehran believed its support for Assad was no longer solely about its own vision of strategic depth, but also tied to fighting Islamic extremism, wider regional tensions with Saudi Arabia and Iran's sense of survival.[86] This broadened sense of the crisis was captured by an Iranian official speaking anonymously;

> Iran's struggle in Syria is different from others: It's an existential war with no choice for us but to win. All the other parties fighting in Syria can afford to win or lose, except Iran. Not winning this war will have dire consequences not only for Iran but also for the Shiites of the world. Therefore, it was the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who took the decision to help Syria. It was both a religious and a political decision.[87]

Khamenei also weighed in on the *zero-sum* nature of the conflict stating, "If the ill-wishers and seditionists, who are the puppets of the US and Zionism, had not been confronted [in Syria], we would have to stood against them in Tehran, Fars, Khorasan and Isfahan."[88]

To strengthen Iran's commitment, Syria has received a package of $5.4 billion in government loans, economic investment and military support and training.[89] The estimated Syrian post-war reconstruction costs are around $250 billion and Iran is well positioned to obtain a share of this. In this context, Iran was awarded a mobile phone contract in early 2017.[90] Damascus also committed to give Iran 5,000 hectares of land for farming, and 1,000 hectares for setting up oil and gas terminals, according to Iran's state news agency IRNA.[91] A deal was also signed that will provide land for animal husbandry.[92] Ultimately, Iran's investments are designed to protect Assad's power and by virtue of that

83 Ehud Yaari presents this idea in his "Iran's Ambitions in the Levant", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-05-01/irans-ambitions-levant (Accessed on 22 September 2017).

84 Ibid.

85 "Israel is determined to stop Iran from establishing bases in Syria", *The Economist*, 12 April 2018, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/04/12/israel-is-determined-to-stop-iran-from-establishing-bases-in-syria (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

86 Yaari, "Iran's Ambitions in the Levant".

87 Ali Hashem, "In Syria, Iran sees Necessary War", *Al Monitor.com*, 16 March 2017, https://geopolitics.co/2017/03/19/in-syria-iran-sees-necessary-war/ (Accessed on 30 September 2017).

88 "Khamenei: If not in Syria, Iran Had to Fight Enemy on Its Soil", *AlSharq al Awasat*, January 2017, https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/adel-al-salmi/news-middle-east/khamenei-not-syria-iran-fight-enemy-soil (Accessed on 20 September 2017).

89 Salam al Saadi, "Iran's Stakes in Syria's Economy", *Sada Journal*, Carnegie Endowment, 2 June 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/60280 (Accessed on 15 October 2017).

90 Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards reaps economic rewards in Syria", *Reuters*, 17 January 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/irans-revolutionary-guards-reaps-economic-rewards-in-syria-idUSKBN1531TO (Accessed on 12 October 2017).

91 "Iranian Private Sector on top of Syrian Reconstruction", *Tabnak*, 12 December 2015, http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/761606/%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AA (Accessed on 13 October 2017).

92 Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict", *Occasional Paper*, London, RUSI, August 2016, p.6. https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf (Accessed on 21 September 2017).

guarantee Iran's long-term strategic place in Syria. Together with Russia, who intervened in 2015 to assist Assad, Tehran has fully entrenched itself in the conflict.[93]

Iran has also extended similar services to Hezbollah with financial, military, logistical and tactical support, mainly using Syria as a conduit.[94] Their shared goals led to their joint intervention in the conflict.[95] In 2016, Hezbollah publically confirmed the extent of Iran's support, stating that the group receives "budget, salaries, funds, food, drink, weapons all from Iran."[96] Beyond this, Iran supports Hezbollah through an intangible amount of logistical and training provisions. Tehran also welcomed the formation of a new Lebanese government in 2016 that included an alliance of Hezbollah and allies. Together, Tehran and Hezbollah's support for Bashar al Assad's government in Syria have further cemented their ties and commitment to the axis of resistance. While the outcome of the war remains far from certain, it is clear that Iran has further embedded its influence in the Levant.

Conclusion

The consequences of Iranian involvement in Syria have not come without risks. The emergence of Sunni extremist groups such as ISIS as well as the support provided by the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries for the Syrian opposition groups exacerbated regional tensions and unleashed dangerous sectarian divisions across the Middle East. Tensions between Tehran and Riyadh have also increased proportionately, with Saudi Arabia calling for a unified front to confront Iran's expansion and support for extremism.[97] The Trump Administration, too, has been working in concert with its allies in Israel to contain the breadth and depth of Iran's reach. Israel has quietly but consistently been striking Iranian targets in Syria to ultimately prevent Tehran from further institutionalising its military capability there.[98] Part of the Trump Administration's strategy is to exert maximum pressure against Tehran by encircling Hezbollah, marginalizing Assad and severing Iran's influence to the region.[99] Washington's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal has further exacerbated these dynamics and heightened fears that regional tensions will escalate.

Against this backdrop, the trilateral talks, known as the Astana process, between Russia, Turkey and Iran are aimed at de-escalation. Practically, however, this Russian-led initiative has given Iran a stake in the conflict resolution process and the ability to protect its gains and wider objectives in the Levant while also solidifying its relationship with the "axis of resistance." These strategic goals should be questioned though in the context of U.S., Israeli, and Saudi Arabian unity against Iran. The damage

93 Charles Lister, "Russia's Intervention in Syria: Protracting an already endless conflict", Oped, *Brookings Institution,* 21 October 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/russias-intervention-in-syria-protracting-an-already-endless-conflict/ (Accessed on 23 October 2017).

94 Nicholas Blanford, "Iran & Region IV: Lebanon's Hezbollah", *The Iran Primer,* 28 January 2015, http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/jan/28/iran-region-iv-lebanons-hezbollah (Accessed on 5 October 2017).

95 Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, Adelphi Papers, No.2013/438, London, IISS, 2013.

96 Analysts estimate these funding amounts to about $200 million annually.

97 John Irish, "Saudi Arabia, Israel present defacto united front against Iran", *Reuters,* 19 February 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iran-idUSKBN15Y09R (Accessed on 25 September 2017).

98 "Israel strikes Iranian targets in Syria in response to rocket fire", *BBC News,* 10 May 2018, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-44063022 (Accessed on 27 May 2018).

99 Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy, 13 October 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/ (Accessed on 27 September 2017).

to Tehran's regional reputation has come at a significant cost. In the face of this unity and forthcoming plans to pressure Iran, the financial burden of Tehran's support for Assad and Hezbollah could also waver.

Nevertheless, Iran's position in the Levant appears deep-rooted, strategic and guided by a long-term, diversified foreign policy perspective and approach. Tehran is cognizant of its historical bonds to the Levant and has placed importance on the durability of its alliances and relationships that have been nurtured over decades. Moreover, Tehran, as an opportunistic regional actor, has taken advantage of conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War to pursue its strategic objectives of obtaining strategic depth, fighting against terrorism and maintaining its resistance axis in the Levant. While its priorities and purpose has shifted in reaction to regional events and facts on the ground, Tehran has remained steadfast in its approach, seeing its Levantine ties as existential and essential for the strength and durability of the Islamic Republic. Compared to its neighbours, Tehran has mastered the long game in the Levant. Unravelling the ties that bind it to the region will be harder than expected.