
**FRIENDS
OF ISRAEL
INITIATIVE**

**Iran's Strategy of Revolutionary
Warfare and its Impact on Israel
and the Region:
an Updated Assessment**

Dr. Jonathan Spyer

**Paper No. 54
September 10, 2019**

Iran's Strategy of Revolutionary Warfare and its Impact on Israel and the Region: an Updated Assessment

Tensions between the west and the Islamic Republic of Iran are currently at an unprecedented point. Facing for the first time a serious attempt by the US and its allies to push back at its regional advance of recent years, Iran is responding with controlled aggression.

The pace of events has been rapid. An Iranian attack on May 12 on four oil tankers off the UAE port of Fujairah was followed a day later by an Iranian drone attack on Saudi oil infrastructure, launched from Iraqi soil, by pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias. Rocket attacks near the US Embassy on May 13 and near US military bases between May 19 and June 19 followed. Two more oil tankers were attacked on June 13. A US RQ-4 Global Hawk drone was downed by the IRGC on June 20th. Two more oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman on June 13. A series of unclaimed attacks on US targets in Iraq in June and July, (including the Balad air base on June 14, the Taji base on June 17, the presidential palace at Mosul on June 18,) and the impounding of the British flagged oil tanker Stena Impero on July 19th all form part of this Iranian effort.

The current direction of events has important implications for Israel and its national security. Teheran sees the destruction of Israel as a strategic goal. The advances made by Iran in building its presence and influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, meanwhile, have brought the Iranians closer to achieving a contiguous area of de facto territorial control stretching from the Iraq-Iran border to Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria. This 'land corridor' would constitute a serious threat to Israel's security if the Iranians succeed in consolidating and entrenching it. As such, Israel is today engaged in an ongoing military campaign to disrupt and turn back this effort.

To understand Teheran's recent actions against western targets in the Gulf waterways and in Iraq, and its parallel effort to build its capacity for aggression against Israel, it is important to place these within the larger context of 1. Iranian regional strategy and ambitions and 2. The Iranian practice of asymmetrical and revolutionary warfare, as a primary means for the realization of these ambitions. Only thus may the direction of events be grasped, and a coherent counter strategy to that of the Iranians be formulated and enacted. This paper will look at the latest developments in this ongoing contest, with a particular focus on their implications for Israel.

Iranian hegemonic goals

The Iranian perception with regard to the US and the west is that the US on a strategic level is a declining power. As Iranian analyst Amir Taheri notes in his book 'The Persian Night: Iran and the Khomeinist Revolution,'the Iran regime regards itself as a 'tolu'ee' (Sunrise) power, whereas the United States is a 'ofuli' (Sunset) power, in the final stages of its dominance. According to Dr.

Hassan Abbasi, a professor of Strategy at the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps University, the United States lacks the stamina for a long conflict and will eventually withdraw from the Middle East. Abbasi, nicknamed the 'Kissinger of Islam', was the principal 'expert' on American affairs during the incumbency of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad as Iranian president.' This view, deeply held within the Iranian regime, of Iran's slow and inevitable rise, is echoed in the recent statement by Foreign Minister Mohammed Javid Zarif according to which Iran's 'time slots are in millennia.'

The Islamic Republic of Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region against the backdrop of this perceived western decline are directed towards three key strategic goals.

The first is an objective that has informed Persian empires since antiquity – to achieve access to the Mediterranean. Today, Iran seeks to do this not by conventional military conquest of the countries located between Iran's borders and the sea – Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Rather, Teheran is close to achieving its goal as a result of its employment of the methods of revolutionary warfare favored by the IRGC, and specifically the establishment and support of proxy political-military organizations within these countries. As will be seen below, the IRGC does not utilize a 'one size fits all' method in its creation and sponsorship of proxies. Rather, its methods are adapted to the specific and differing contexts of the countries within which it operates.

The second goal is to replace the United States as the guarantor of security in the vital waterways of the Persian Gulf. This waterway, through which one quarter of the world's seaborne oil and one third of its seaborne natural gas must pass, is the key strategic space in the Middle East. While the Iranians hope eventually to isolate Saudi Arabia and cause the Gulf states to abandon their links with the US and to instead come under Iranian protection, this moment is far away in terms of the current balance of power because of Iran's limited military capacities. At present, therefore, the Iranian aim is to establish a situation in which only with their permission, obtained through concessions to them, can other countries peacefully navigate the Gulf waterways vital to global energy supplies and hence to the global economy.

The notion of an eventual US departure or partial withdrawal from the task of policing the Gulf waterway is not far-fetched. The US is on the way to energy independence and is no longer among the main consumers of Gulf oil. President Trump has himself commented regarding the need for major consumers such as China to play a greater role in ensuring the security of vessels passing through the area.

In regional capitals both sympathetic to and opposed to Iran, the US decision to avoid significant retaliation for the Iranian downing of a US RQ-4A Global Hawk surveillance drone over the Persian Gulf on July 18 has led to a perception that the US wishes to avoid confrontation over the issue of the Gulf and Iran's encroachments. If left unpunished for its recent attacks on shipping, Teheran is likely to continue and increase its activities in this regard. The recent trip by officials of the United Arab Emirates to Iran to discuss the issue of maritime security is an indicator of the conviction also by US regional allies of a certain absence of determination and clarity of purpose on the part of the US with regard to the Gulf.

A third goal, constantly referred to in statements by Iranian leaders, is the destruction of the State of Israel. Some analysis locates a pragmatic motivation for this: Iran wishes to establish itself as a hegemon in a predominantly Arabic-speaking and Sunni Muslim region. Adoption of the Palestinian cause may help fill the 'legitimacy gap' from which Iran suffers in this context as a non-Arab and non-Sunni power and society. But while there may well be some truth to this account, it should be noted that focus on and support for the Palestinian cause and the destruction of Israel were prominent in the writings and speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini and his associates, the founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In September 1977, for example, two years before the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini wrote 'the Jews have grasped the world with both hands and are devouring it with an insatiable appetite. They are devouring America and have now turned their attention to Iran and still they are not satisfied.' In August 1978, shortly before the

revolution, a close associate of Khomeini's, Haji Mahdi Araqi, financed a Farsi language version of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

This notion of a long war against an inevitably declining western enemy is paralleled in the Iranian view of Israel. Iranian propaganda seeks to portray Israel as a weak, hollow state whose formal technological superiority is belied by its lack of rootedness and hence of stamina. This conception lies at the root of the Iranian notion of an open-ended, asymmetrical conflict designed to wear away at Israeli society and expose its supposed contradictions.

These three goals are not a matter for debate within the Iranian regime, though the methods for achieving them, the immediate priorities and the timeline are a subject of discussion, and a variety of perspectives exist. It is worth noting that Iranian spokesmen in justifying Iran's hegemonic ambitions often use defensive language. Iran is depicted as surrounded by hostile countries, seeking security for itself etc. But in a pattern familiar to history, the minimum conditions acceptable to the Iranian regime for its 'security' require the upending of the current regional power structure and its replacement by Iranian domination of both the Gulf and the Levant.

Some debate exists among analysts of Iran as to whether the motivating force for this hegemonic ambition lies in historic Persian/Iranian ambitions, or in the desire to spread the power and influence of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In practice, however, Iranian geo-strategic goals and Islamist justification sit comfortably with one another. Indeed, the one reinforces the other. As Henry Kissinger put it, the Iranian objective is to "reconstruct the ancient Persian Empire, this time under a Shia label."

Iranian asymmetrical warfare strategy

Iran lacks conventional military power to advance its regional ambitions. It seeks to overcome this disadvantage through the development of its ballistic missile programme, through its nuclear ambitions and through its efforts in asymmetric conflict.

The methods Teheran has developed in recent decades to advance this project prioritise the establishment, and use of proxies, and asymmetrical methods. If in the past, militias, political-military organizations and attritional, asymmetrical methods were associated with stateless or revolutionary movements, Iran has pioneered the use of revolutionary warfare to advance the conventional, imperial interests of an existing state.

In the organizational form of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its expeditionary Qods (Jerusalem) Force, Iran possesses an agency unique in its nature, which has proven uniquely useful in the context of the current fragmented and strife-ridden Middle East. The Qods Force is an organization whose specific skill set is the establishment, sponsorship and direction of proxy political-military franchise organizations, in neighboring states. No other regional state possesses such an organization, whose entire orientation is in irregular and revolutionary warfare.

The use of asymmetrical power is of direct relevance also regarding events in the Gulf. The IRGC naval force has in past years invested in small fast attack craft, used for [asymmetric hit-and-run attacks](#), coastal defense and anti-ship missiles and mines, and UAVs. Among the naval craft possessed by the IRGC are the Iranian-made IPS-16 Peykaap class Zolfighar patrol boats, IPS 18 torpedo boats, Thondar-class missile boats and inflatable zodiac commando boats. The Iranians cannot of course hope to challenge western forces in conventional naval combat. But the force they possess, as seen in recent weeks, is able to play a hit-and-run disruptive role, while stopping just short of actions likely to trigger a conventional response. Iranian tactics in the Gulf constitute the application of IRGC asymmetrical warfare thinking to the naval context.

Iran gains through the application of IRGC asymmetrical methods in the context of the weakened Mid-East state system

When the Arab state system was strong, Iran's asymmetrical strategy had only limited application and limited success. It may be observed that when the IRGC attempts to apply its methods of creating and supporting proxy groups in states that are relatively well ordered, success has tended to be limited. In Shia-majority Bahrain, in Kuwait with its large Shia minority, and in eastern Saudi Arabia, the security agencies of these states have successfully prevented the emergence of significant Iranian proxy forces.

But where the state became weak, and in particular where there was a significant Shia presence, there the IRGC's methods have flourished.

The instability in the Arab world of the last decade and a half has resulted in the severe weakening and partial fragmentation of a number of Arab states. Iran has emerged as the main beneficiary in these spaces.

Lebanon

The first Arab state to suffer fragmentation and partial collapse was Lebanon, as a result of its civil war 1975-90. Lebanese Hizballah was established in 1982, after the dispatching of 1500 IRGC operatives to the Bekaa Valley, where they began the process of organizing the then disparate Shia Islamist forces into a coherent unit.

This movement was the first to implement the IRGC combination of political and military activity in the Arab context. Today, nearly forty years later, Hizballah is the most powerful political and military force in Lebanon. It controls the largest bloc in the 128 member Lebanese parliament. It controls a majority in the Cabinet. All four heads of Lebanon's intelligence services are associates or allies of the movement.

A Hizballah member is minister of public health. The new minister, Jamil Jabak, is the former personal physician of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, according to a recent report by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. The ministry's budget is the fourth largest in the country. Nasrallah, when announcing the appointment, stressed that Jabak is not a member of the movement, though he was, according to the Hizballah leader, 'a brother and friend...close and trusted.' Jabak's formal lack of membership in the movement is clearly intended to ensure that he will be able to travel in the context of performing his duties, without being impeded by Hizballah's designation as a terror group. However, Nasrallah's words confirm that he is an appointee and to all intents and purposes a functionary of Hizballah.

Lebanese Hizballah's political advance is mirrored by its military strength. According to a Janes' estimate, Hizballah has around 25000 full time fighters, along with 20-30,000 reservists. They possess a large rocket arsenal, reckoned by Israeli estimates to reach 150,000 rockets. They also have thousands of anti-tank missiles and a number of anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles. The movement has an extensive independently controlled military infrastructure in the south and east of Lebanon. It also has a small heavy armor force of T-55 and T-72 tanks and BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles stationed in Syria. Such a force would be of little or no use in a war against a modern western armed force like the IDF, but could be of relevance in a future internal challenge to Hizballah.

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) on paper is larger than Hizballah (LAF – 72,000 personnel) and possesses an air and naval capacity. In practice, however, Hizballah is a more cohesive and united force than the LAF, which is riven by sectarian divisions.

As may be seen in the examples of the 2006 war with Israel and the post-2012 intervention into Syria, Hizballah's force is able to go to war without consultation of any kind with the official Lebanese state. In its political form, it is also dominant within the structures of government. Lebanon is the country where the Iranian system for the hollowing out of regional states, and the insertion into them of an IRGC controlled 'deep state' has reached its most accomplished point.

Iraq

In Iraq, following the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime, IRGC associated militias such as the Badr Organization, Ktaeb Hizballah, Hizballah al Nujaba and Asaib Ahl Al-Haq proliferated, and took part in attacks on western forces. Collectively, these organizations were responsible for hundreds of coalition deaths. Asaib Ahl al-Haq claimed more than 6,000 such attacks between its creation in 2006 and the U.S. withdrawal in 2011—an average of more than three per day, every day, for five years.

The IRGC played a key role in facilitating these attacks, particularly with the provision of Iranian made Explosively Formed Projectiles (EFPs) able to pierce the armor of Coalition military vehicles.

In 2014, following the ISIS invasion of Iraq from Syria and the 'jihad fatwa' of revered Shia Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Shia militias mobilized again, establishing the 'Hashd al-Shaabi', or Popular Mobilization Units. The PMU played a significant role in the successful campaign against the ISIS 'Caliphate' in Iraq. It has since remained mobilized, as a powerful military and political asset of the IRGC in Iraq. It played a key role in destroying Kurdish hopes for independence in October, 2017. One of the most powerful of its component militias, Badr, controls the interior and transportation ministries. The strategic goal of the militias was outlined to this author by a Badr officer in the organization's HQ in Baghdad in July, 2015: in this officer's words: 'Just like in Iran you have the Artesh (army) to protect the borders and the IRGC to protect the regime, so it will be in Iraq with the army and the Hashd al-Shaabi.'

Four years on, the PMU has advanced further along the road towards this goal. They are now a permanently mobilized, officially recognized part of the Iraqi security forces. At the same time, the command line that goes from the commanders of Badr and Ktaeb Hizballah, Hadi al-Ameri and Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, respectively, via General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, to the office of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, remains in existence. Iran today controls a powerful, independent political, military and economic force in Iraq.

A sharp increase in anonymous attacks almost certainly carried out by the militias on US targets in Iraq has taken place in recent weeks. These included: a mortar attack on the Balad air base in Iraq's Salah al-Din Province on June 14 (the base hosts US troops), a mortar attack on the Taji base, which also hosts US advisers, on June 17, and a Katyusha missile attack on the Burjesia site on June 19 – this area hosts facilities maintained by a number of global oil companies, including Exxon Mobil.

While no group claimed responsibility for the attacks, there is no real suspect other than the Shia militias. (ISIS, which remains active in Iraq, is currently otherwise engaged – in rebuilding its networks in Sunni central Iraq and reimposing its hold on the Sunni population in its rural heartlands).

The attacks on US facilities have been accompanied by increased rhetorical threats against the US and Israel from militia leaders. Nasir al-Shamari, assistant secretary general of the Hizballah

Nujaba militia, stated that ‘confrontation with the US will stop only when it is eliminated from the region, along with the Zionist entity.’

Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the Badr Organization and perhaps the most powerful pro-Iranian political and military leader in Iraq, expressed his views in a recent interview with the Farsi-language, IRGC associated Fars News Agency regarding the US and Israel in the following terms:

‘There is no doubt that ISIS is a bastard child of the United States. I and my comrades will never surrender to the involvement of the United States and its allies in Iraq, and this was our position from the beginning....(ISIS’) main designers and the creators were the United States and their master, Israel.’

A recent decree by Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi ordered the absorption of the Shia militias in Iraq into the official security forces. Few observers of Iraq consider, however, that this decree will result in the disappearance of Iran’s armed capacity in Iraq.

The first such law making the militias part of the Iraqi security forces was passed in November, 2016. From that time on, they have constituted a part of the state security apparatus. Formally, the militias report directly to and are under the authority of the Prime Minister. In practice, they have continued to function as independent political-military units under the control of the IRGC.

As a result of the blurring of the boundaries between the state army and the Shia militias, however, Iran’s fighters gained welcome access to the resources available to the official security forces.

These included state of the art US equipment – such as the nine M1A1 Abrams tanks that the militias used against (pro-US) Kurdish forces in the assault against Iraqi Kurdistan following the Kurdish bid for independence from Iraq in late 2017. The latter operation was planned by Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani.

So in Iraq as in Lebanon, Iran possesses a powerful independent military force, linked to an influential political structure. Unlike in Lebanon, this mechanism has not yet succeeded in establishing itself as the de facto hegemonic power in the country.

Syria

In Syria, too, the vital Iranian contribution to the survival and victory of the Bashar Assad regime has meant that Teheran has established an independent military and paramilitary infrastructure in that country. Since Syria, unlike Lebanon and Iraq, does not have notionally representative institutions, the Iranian effort in that country takes the form of paramilitary groupings that are part of the official state security forces, as well as locally recruited embryonic Hizballah type formations. The National Defense Force and Local Defense Force are examples of the former type of group, the 313 Battalion, Quwaat al Ridha and Liwa al Baqir are examples of the latter. The military organization goes together with efforts to spread the message of the Islamic Revolution via the establishment of educational and religious centers known as ‘Husseniyat’. There is also evidence of Iranian efforts at demographic change in Syria, with poor Iraqi and Afghan Shias settled in formerly Sunni parts of Damascus and Homs Provinces.

It has become a cliché to talk about the Syrian civil war ‘winding down’ or reaching conclusion. But in this regard, it is vital to note that the strong authoritarian state that preceded the war is not yet returning into being. Rather, the Assad regime remains a weak and almost hollow shell. Within this shell, the real contenders for power and influence are the Russians and their allies, and the organizations and structures created by Iran.

Iran’s focus in this regard is southern Syria, where it is seeking to construct a contiguous area of exclusive Iranian control, stretching from the Iraq-Iran border to the border with the Golan

Heights, and to the border with Lebanon. The purpose of this project is to enable a land supply line to Iran's client militia Hizballah in Lebanon, and a direct line to the border with the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, which Iran wants to turn into an active zone of conflict with Israel resembling the Lebanese border.

As an example of how this is being pursued, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recently issued a report showing details of the Revolutionary Guard Corps's efforts to entrench its presence in a single, significant Syrian town: al-Mayadin, west of the strategically important Albukamal border crossing between Iraq and Syria, and just west of the Euphrates River.

The Observatory described extensive recruitment of local Syrians, including individuals who were formerly involved with the armed opposition, into the ranks of Iran's various paramilitary "Syrian Hezbollah" type structures that have been established in Syria. The report noted that the incentives given to entice individuals into these structures included a monthly salary of between \$150-300, allowing individuals a variety of options as to where they wish to serve, and immunity from arrest at the hands of regime security forces.

The report also noted that the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah have positioned themselves in key areas of al-Mayadin, and are maintaining exclusive control of these areas (i.e., without cooperation with, or permission sought from, the forces of the Assad regime).

Control of al-Mayadin and its environs matters because it is located along Highway 4, which is the only road leading out of the Albukamal border crossing, which is currently controlled by the IRGC and its allies. From al-Mayadin, Route 4 reaches Deir al-Zor, where it connects to the M20 highway, which heads west in the direction of Damascus, or, if a traveler prefers, toward al-Qusayr and the Lebanese border.

Because of the US presence at the al-Tanf base, which blocks the direct road from Albukamal eastwards, this road constitutes a vital artery in the land corridor that the Iranians are currently building.

Mayadin offers an example of the methods being used currently by the IRGC in the specific context of Syria. Iran is activating a variety of tools below, within and above the structures of the Syrian state. The intention is to achieve a level of penetration and influence that will make their ambitions invulnerable both to superior Israeli air power and intelligence, and to the opposing project for domination of Syria currently being undertaken by Russia.

Taken together, what this long IRGC project in fractured Lebanon, Syria and Iraq means is that, as Mossad Head Yossi Cohen said recently, Qods Force commander General Qassem Soleimani could today set out in his car from Teheran and reach the coast of the Mediterranean without once leaving territory controlled by his organization. This reality is testimony both to the efficacy of the IRGC's methods, and to the weakness and lack of focus of their enemies.

Yemen

The Ansar Allah movement in Yemen, popularly known as the Houthis after the family that created and controls the movement, are an IRGC supported paramilitary formation that has captured a large swathe of the country, including the capital, Sana'a, from Yemen's internationally recognized government. A Saudi and Emirati intervention from September 2015 prevented the strategically vital Strait of Bab El-Mandeb from falling into the Houthis' and hence Iran's) hands. The IRGC, however, have provided the Houthis with a ballistic missile and drone capability. The Houthis, in turn, have in recent months on a number of occasions targeted sites in Saudi Arabia – specifically the cities of Najran and Jizan. Since April 2017, the Houthis have carried out an average of six strikes per month using unmanned aerial vehicles, and have used

Iranian Shark-33 drone boats to mount attacks on a Saudi frigate and oil terminal in the Red Sea. This activity is part of Iran's campaign of pressure on Saudi Arabia, alongside the militia attacks on US facilities in Iraq in May and June, and of course the attacks on Emirati and British shipping, and the downing of the US Global 4 Drone.

An Iranian official told Reuters that "Yemen is where the real proxy war is going on ... winning the battle in Yemen will help define the balance of power in the Middle East." Another said that Iran's plan was now "to create a Hezbollah-like militia in Yemen to confront Riyadh's hostile policies."

Palestinians

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement is a fully operated franchise of the IRGC. The Iranian relationship with Hamas is more complex. Hamas is a genuine and rooted Palestinian movement, emerging from the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas bet badly during the period of the Arab Spring, believing that a new, Sunni Islamist power bloc was emerging, and distancing itself from the Iran led regional axis. In the event, the Sunni Islamists lost power in Egypt, and failed to gain it in Syria. The movement is currently in the process of rebuilding its relations with Teheran.

Recently, delegations led by senior Hamas operatives Salah al Arouri and Ismail Haniyeh visited Iran. There remain some divisions within the movement as to whether it should adopt the path of 'resistance' as encouraged by Iran or seek to focus for the moment on developing the Gaza Strip while consolidating its control there. But as of now the pro-Iranian element appears to be ascendant. As a result, Iran recently agreed to a significant increase in funding for Hamas, in return for the movement providing intelligence on Israel's missile facilities. Hamas is now set to receive \$30 million per month from Teheran, according to Israeli media reports. Israeli media so reported that Hamas and Iran have reached an agreement whereby Hamas will open a southern front from the Gaza Strip in the event of a war between Israel and Iran and its proxy militias in the core area of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Implications for Israel of the Iranian advance

As noted above, the strategic goal of the destruction of Israel is an important and integral factor in Iran's larger strategy for regional hegemony. Israel has watched with concern as Iran has deepened and expanded its political and military networks in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. Israeli strategic planners regard this Iranian project as the main strategic challenge currently facing Israel. The Israeli response differs in each country. The main focus in recent years has been Syria. The state of civil war in that country, and the vital role played by Iran in ensuring the survival of the client Assad regime, have led to the rapid expansion and deepening of the Iranian project in Syria. Israel has been acting directly to prevent the entrenchment and consolidation of this project. This remains an ongoing effort.

It has taken a number of forms: most importantly, an ongoing air campaign has targeted Iranian infrastructure and convoys in Syria. In 2018 alone, Israel struck more than 200 targets in Syria, according to a statement by former IDF chief of staff Lieutenant-General (Res.) Gadi Eisenkot. On the ground, Israel has struck against Iran-associated targets close to the border, in the process neutralizing a number of prominent pro-Iran operatives and senior officers.

This campaign continues. Israel considers it to have been a partial success – preventing the Iranians until now from developing an effective military infrastructure able to be activated against

Israel, while failing to cause Iran to abandon this attempt, or to entirely uproot its presence from Syria. In many aspects, indeed, the Iranian presence in Syria is not susceptible to destruction by air power alone. Iran, as seen above, has penetrated deep into the Syrian state itself, and has recruited militias from among Syrian citizens. Israel can blunt the Iranian capability, prevent the movement of certain weapons systems, and perhaps stop Iran from reaching the border with Israel and entrenching its military capabilities there. But it is questionable as to whether Jerusalem can cause Iran to entirely quit Syria.

A second aspect which Israel developed during the Syrian civil war to counter the advance of the Iranians was that of close cooperation with certain rebel militias close to the border in Quneitra Province. Groups such as Fursan al-Golan and Ahrar Nawa among others benefitted from Israeli support and assistance. These connections appeared to end with the return of the Assad regime and its allies to the border area in summer, 2018. However, the Quneitra and neighboring Deraa provinces appear far from reconciled to the return of Assad and his allies. A paramilitary group calling itself 'Popular Resistance' has emerged and is engaged in regular attacks on regime and allied forces in this area. Given the strong evidence for Hizballah's presence in the area, it is interesting to speculate regarding the possibility of Israeli connections to the Popular Resistance group, which is thought to consist of former members of rebel militias. Of course, no firm conclusions can be drawn in this regard.

There are clearer indications, however, that in response to Iran's seeking to move elements of its infrastructure from Syria to Iraq, Israel is expanding its operations to take in Iraq as well as Syria. Two air raids have taken place in recent weeks against IRGC and Shia militia targets deep in Iraq. On July 19th, a base maintained by the militias near the town of Amerli in Salah al Din Province, north of Baghdad was targeted. Three days later, aircraft struck Camp Ashraf in Diyala Province. According to Arabic media reports, the second raid was of considerably larger dimensions than its predecessor. Al-Ain, the Emirati news site which first broke the news of the Camp Ashraf action, reported 40 dead, among them both Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) personnel and Iraqi Shia militiamen.

No country or organization has taken responsibility for these actions. A simple process of deduction, however, leaves Israel as the only serious candidate. In private conversations in the preceding months, Israeli security officials in conversation with the author had consistently stressed the importance of the emergent Iranian threat to Israeli security on Iraqi soil. The apparent commencement of Israeli air activity in Iraq, for the first time since the destruction of the Osirak reactor in 1981, represents a predictable extension to Iraq of the existing Israeli strategy pursued in Syria. The recent air raids are unlikely to be the last.

The extension of the Israeli air campaign to Iraq brings Israel's efforts to contain and turn back Iran into direct proximity with the broader western effort. The US has over 5000 troops in Iraq, and it is likely that Iraq in the months ahead will continue to constitute a central 'front' in the broader conflict pitting the west and its regional allies against the Iran-led regional bloc.

Conclusion: the IRGC's Middle East?

The methods and praxis of the IRGC's Qods Force have proven to be of particular use and application in the context of the Middle East over the last two decades, and particularly since 2010. No other regional power possesses a similar force to the IRGC. Iran is not, however, immune to counter-pressure. US sanctions in recent months have revealed the extent to which the regime is vulnerable economically. The more than 200 airstrikes conducted by Israel against Iranian targets in Syria also indicate Iran's radical limitations in the conventional military sphere.

Iran is very good at its own brand of asymmetrical warfare. But it lacks skills in other fronts. Until now, however, it has benefitted from the clarity of its strategic vision, and the patience and application with which it has sought and is seeking to realise it. The missing ingredient has been a similar clarity and unity on the part of its enemies. With Israel extending its campaign against Iranian expansion to Iraq, ongoing western sanctions, and western determination to resist further attempts at maritime piracy in the Gulf, this situation may be in the process of now changing. From Israel's point of view, the IRGC's advance across the region, using the methods of proxy and asymmetrical warfare represents the key challenge facing Jerusalem at the present time.

*Dr. Jonathan Spyer is Director of the Ruben Center (formerly the GLORIA Center), IDC Herzliya, and a fellow at the Middle East Forum. He is the author of *The Transforming Fire: The Rise of the Israel-Islamist Conflict* (Continuum, 2010) and a columnist at the *Jerusalem Post* newspaper. Spyer holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics and a Master's Degree in Middle East Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. His reporting on the war in Syria and Iraq has been published in a number of major news outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Weekly Standard* and many others.*

Join the Initiative

www.friendsofisraelinitiative.org
info@friendsofisraelinitiative.org

On social networks

Facebook: Friends of Israel Initiative
Twitter: @Friendsisrael