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Iran's Foreign Policy in Iraq and Syria after 2011

EZGİ UZUN

Ph.D. in Political Science, Sabancı University

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This paper, entitled *"Iran's Foreign Policy in Iraq and Syria after 2011"* is authored by Dr. Ezgi Uzun as part of the G*RF Young Academics Program Policy Paper Series*.

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GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM

About the Author

Ezgi Uzun, currently an instructor at Sabancı University in Istanbul, studies Iran's foreign policy and security culture. Her wider research interests include the role of religion in international politics, transnational religious networks, sectarianism, religious insurgencies, and popular mobilization forces in the Middle East with a geographical focus on Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Her doctoral dissertation examines Iran's "Axis of Resistance" policy in the Middle East, with a specific focus on the Islamic Republic's religious ideology and ties to transnational Shia networks in Iraq and Syria. Her previous research concentrated on Iran's nuclear program and its ramifications for regional power transitions. She has co-authored two publications on nuclear politics, "Bureaucrats, Ayatollahs, and Persian Politics: Explaining the Shift in Iranian Foreign Policy" and "The Path to an Entrenching Alliance: Utilitarianism and Historical Institutionalism in Committing to NATO's Missile Defense System." She was a visiting scholar at the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University in New York from March 2017 to January 2018, and her research there was funded by the Scientific and Research Council of Turkey (TÜBITAK). She received her master's and Ph.D. degrees in Political Science from Sabancı University in 2011 and 2018 respectively. She holds a bachelor's degree in Translation and Interpreting Studies from Boğaziçi University in Istanbul.

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Abstract

While scholars of Iran's foreign policy interpret the nuclear deal as a move towards pragmatism under the administration of Hassan Rouhani, the strong ideological contours of Iran's simultaneous political and military engagement with Shia political movements in the Middle East is relatively underscored. This study thus seeks to examine the Axis of Resistance – a dense Iran-led alliance network of state and non-state actors covering a wide range of Shia mobilization activities across the Middle East. The study first maps out Iran's foreign policy discourses addressing the political transformations in the Middle East at three critical junctures: the Iraq War of 2003, the Syrian civil war of 2011, and the rise of ISIL in 2014. This is followed by an analysis of how these discourses are translated into policy strategies, with a focus on Iranian support for Shia militias across Iraq and Syria and the development of popular mobilization units like Hashd al-Shaabi. The study shows that the discursive and organizational institutionalization of 'religion' in foreign policy has the capacity to reshape the existing military orders and to challenge power balances across the Middle East. This research is based on two field trips conducted in Tehran in the summers of 2015 and 2016, as well as data retrieved from Persian news sources and Iranian policy elites' official websites.

1. Introduction

Among the titles used for the Islamic Republic's capital city of Tehran, the most descriptive is perhaps "the city of martyrs." An ordinary visitor quickly catches sight of colorful paintings on tall buildings that depict Iranian martyrs killed in the war with Iraq – the "Holy Defense War" in the Islamic Republic's terminology. The big blue street signs standing at each intersection carry the names of key revolutionary personalities who were killed in the *Hafte Tir* bombing during the early years of the revolution.[1] It is also not uncommon to see conference halls, seminar rooms, or faculty buildings at the largest universities in Tehran named after Mostafa Chamran, dubbed "*Shahid* Chamran" (Chamran the Martyr), the famous commander of a group of paramilitary volunteers in the Iran-Iraq War that would later become Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).[2] Revolution, war, and martyrdom are commonplace elements of the city's design, easily capturing any visitor's attention in the public spaces of Tehran.

Nevertheless, the old-fashioned tanks, weaponry, and soldiers' photographs that decorated Tehran's crowded Park Laleh in September 2016 were not so ordinary. The decorations were there for a particular reason: Iranians were preparing for a week-long national event to commemorate the 28th anniversary of the end of the Holy Defense War. Public ceremonies throughout the week were organized by the IRGC where war poems were read, war stories were narrated, and plays were put on extolling the heroism, sacrifice, and victory of Iranian soldiers who volunteered on the frontlines. Following one of those plays on a September night in Park Laleh, a speaker picked up the microphone, commemorated the heroes of the Holy Defense War for their sacrifices during the Islamic Republic's resistance against "imperialistic powers and their Middle Eastern allies," and then started to talk about the heroism of another person who had volunteered to fight on the frontlines for another purpose, at another place, and at another time. He was referring to a volunteer who had set out for Syria in 2016, to defend the sacred Shia shrine of *Sayyeda Zainab* near Damascus against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) attacks on Shia religious sites. The volunteer was critically injured during the conflict, and thus turned back to Iran for treatment. Reportedly, he was ready to travel back to Syria and contribute to the defense of the sacred Shia shrine once fully recovered. The speaker closed the event with a long speech on Shia volunteers from all around the world who were leaving their homes and families to defend the sacred Shia shrines in Iraq and Syria. The audience shared the speaker's sympathy and accompanied him in prayers for the volunteers.[3]

The Iranian volunteer's story is counter-intuitive in many respects. Typically, the deployment of IRGC personnel to the other side of the Iranian border has been

[1] The Hafte Tir bombing refers to the bombing incident of 1981 at the central office of the Islamic Republican Party of Iran, killing more than 70 people including high-level officials of the Islamic Republican Party, members of the parliament, ministers, and other government officials. One of the casualties was Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, the Chief Justice of Iran, who contributed to the Islamic constitution-making process and was the second most influential person after Ayatollah Khomeini in the early days of the Islamic Revolution.

[2] "Shahid" means "martyr" in the Persian language.

[3] This observation is based on the author's field trip to Tehran, Iran, in September 2016.

limited to the Iran-Iraq War and Iran's policy of "exporting the revolution" between 1980 and 1989. Equally surprising is the movement of Iranian volunteer fighters, i.e. the *Basij* force, to Syria and Iraq in the last couple of years. The Basij organization was a popular mobilization unit functioning under the auspices of the IRGC during the war with Iraq. It was later transformed into a domestic security force and community welfare organization for overseeing in the decades to come the daily popular practice of the Islamic Republic's principles. However, the Basij resumed its external operations and emerged as another actor in Syrian territory when the civil war broke out in 2011. Iran's Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs even released information on the official recruitment processes for volunteers to be sent to Iraq and Syria, with the volunteer registration process managed by the Basij. Similarly, the IRGC, which was traditionally extremely reticent about disclosing their activities in the field, in no way shied away from sharing news from Iraq and Syria on their official media channels and social media accounts. IRGC media outlets and social media accounts abounded with news about shrine martyrs while the funerals of IRGC personnel and Basij volunteers were attended by high-level state officials. The head of the Martyrs Foundation, Mohammad Ali Shahidi, even disclosed the number of Iranian casualties in Iraq and Syria, reporting that up to March 2017 around 2,100 IRGC advisors and volunteers had been killed in cross-border operations.[4] What is more, neither the IRGC nor Basij volunteers were necessarily there for defending the Iranian territory against any immediate physical threat. For the Basij, one significant factor driving them to the field was the security of Shia populations and holy sites across borders, i.e., the sacred Shia shrines in Najaf and Karbala in Iraq and Sayyeda Zainab in Syria.[5] Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who receives families of Iran-Iraq War martyrs on a regular basis, also met frequently with the families of those IRGC volunteers who lost their lives in Iraq and Syria, calling them "the defenders of the Ahl al-Bayt shrines."[6]

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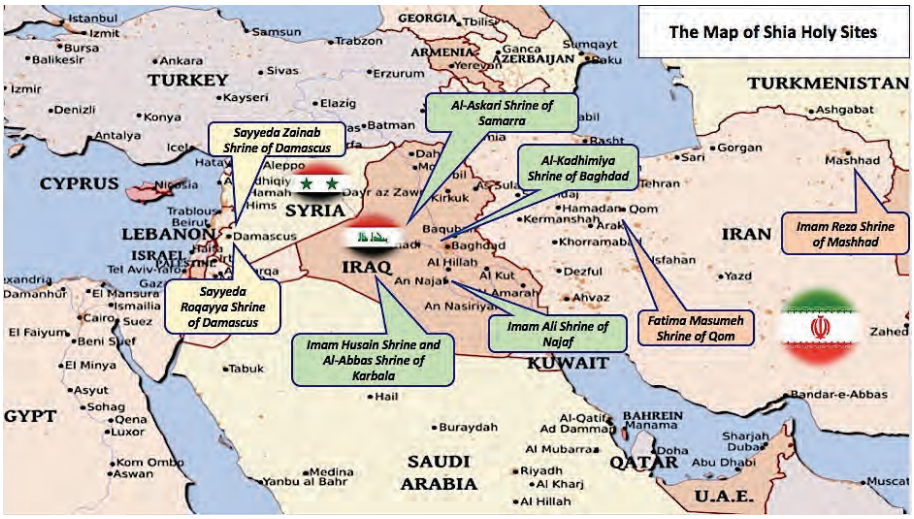
[4] "2100 Iran Volunteers Killed in Iraq, Syria: Official," *Arab News*, March 7, 2017, accessed September 20, 2017, url: http://www.arabnews.com/node/1064501/middle-east.

[5] Author's interview with an Iranian analyst at Middle East Institute, Washington DC, USA, November 20, 2017.

[6] "Ahl al-Bayt" in Arabic refers to the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad, including the Shia Imams. Ali Khamenei, "Whenever We Relied on Revolutionary Spirit We Moved Forward," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, June 25, 2016, accessed June 5, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3965/Ayatollah-Khamenei-Whenever-We-Relied-on-Revolutionary-Spirit.

Map 1: The Map of Shia Holy Sites[7]

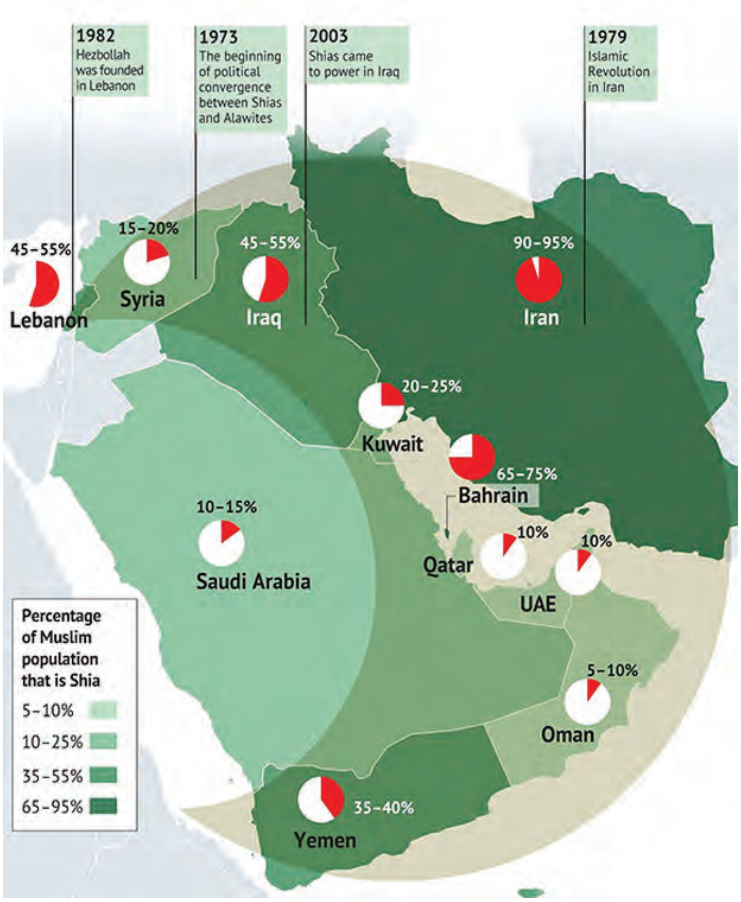


Over the last few years, scholars working on the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic have been preoccupied with debates around Iran's nuclear deal. The Rouhani Administration's diplomatic engagement with the international community over Iran's nuclear program and his agreement to level down nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief in 2015 led many scholars to conclude that the Rouhani Administration is acting pragmatically in foreign policy, bypassing the criticism of more ideologically oriented elements of the regime. However, the historic nuclear negotiations happened in synchrony with an equally important phenomenon: increased Iranian presence in the greater Middle East. During the last couple of years, Iran's relations with the Shia entities in Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain and its unfailing support for the Assad regime alongside Hezbollah have raised Iran into newspaper headlines for a reason besides the nuclear deal. While Western analysts were writing on the Iranian move towards pragmatism under the Rouhani Administration, IRGC circles were talking about an "Islamic resistance movement" in the Middle East in their own news outlets. They were explicitly referring to an "axis" or a "front" spanning from Lebanon in the northwest of the Middle East to the Syrian regime and the Iraqi Shia government in the east and finally down to Bahrain and Yemen on the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. IRGC generals and Basij members call this front the "Axis of Resistance," which in Iranian political discourse refers today to an Iran-led alliance network across the Middle East of state and non-state actors predominantly of Shia faith. The Islamic Republic has used this term for a few decades to refer to the Islamic resistance in Palestine,

[7] Based on the author's own research. It should be noted that there are more Shia holy sites than those shown on the map. The author's selection of the holiest sites is based on their religious significance and political relevance in the post-2003 period. For more information, see "Pilgrimage to Karbala, Who are the Shia?: Shia Holy Sites," PBS, March 26, 2007, accessed September 2, 2019, url: https://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/uncategorized/who-are-the-shia-shia-holy-cities/1735/.

Lebanon, Iran, and also Syria against Israeli and US interests in the region; the axis in its original meaning is an ideological and strategic alliance blending anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and political Islam. However, due to its additional geographical coverage of Shia entities across the region, especially after 2003 in Iraq, the "Axis of Resistance" has come to overlap with a more frequently used concept: the "Shiite Crescent." "Axis of Resistance" policy has appeared increasingly ideological and religious because of its geographical focus over time on Shia-populated areas, the overt cross-border movement of the IRGC and Iranian volunteers, and the discourse of "the defense of Shia shrines." In that sense, the "Axis of Resistance" has increasingly resembled the policy of "exporting the revolution" from the first decade of the Islamic Republic over time.[8]

Map 2: Shia Influence in the Middle East[9]



[8] It should be noted that "Axis of Resistance" is an alliance of several – today predominantly Shia – entities in the region. All actors that are part of this alliance might have somewhat diverging interests, priorities, and preferences concerning this alliance. This paper only focuses on the Iranian position and understanding of the alliance, excluding the rest of the actors due to its central focus on Iranian foreign policy.

[9] "Shia Crescent," *Valdai Discussion Club*, accessed January 9, 2020, url: https://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics/shia-crescent/.

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is quite puzzling for scholars. The Islamic Republic characterizes the Islamic revolutionary movement as a resistance against the political, ideological, and economic tenets of the existing international system. However, the state has continued to function in the very system that it has purported to resist. This dilemma puts Iran's relations with the rest of the world in a problematic position, making the regime's international behavior difficult to understand. Therefore, scholars of Iranian foreign policy have often depicted Iran's international behavior as swinging between ideology and pragmatism.[10] Iran's "Axis of Resistance" policy is another indicator that analyzing the Islamic Republic's foreign policy as falling on one side of a pragmatism-ideology dichotomy might not be a fruitful endeavor. Instead of labeling a foreign policy orientation as pragmatic or ideological, decoding what is realpolitik and what is religious in a given policy might be more feasible. What is more, it might be more illuminating to examine the role of religion in foreign policy, instead of dwelling in widespread discussions of whether religion is truly influential in shaping a state's ideology and identity, or whether it is simply a tool to mask realpolitik-driven aims. The Islamic Republic of Iran should be regarded as an Islamic state-building project spanning the past forty years with extensive challenges and complications at the existential level, i.e., the dilemma of defining its position as a nation-state in an international system it is ideologically opposed to and the ramifications of this situation for the new state's institutional development. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" policy reveals a great deal about the progress of Iran's Islamic state-building project, not only at the foreign policy level, but at the broader existential level, comprising Iran's institutional development, its contradictions, and its complications.

This policy paper is thus an attempt to decode Iran's "Axis of Resistance" policy with a focus on what is religious and realpolitik about this policy. The central argument of this paper is that religion has become increasingly institutionalized over the course of Islamic state-building in Iran, informing Iran's security institutions, indigenous capabilities, and foreign policy strategies. The "Axis of Resistance" policy shows that religion is an institution and a source of power for Iran in the fourth decade of the revolution. With this in mind, the first section will provide an overview of the regional transformations in the Middle East during the last decade with three breaking points: the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring of 2011, and the rise of ISIL in 2014. The second section will discuss the policy discourses the Islamic Republic has developed as a response to regional developments. The third section will discuss how these discourses were translated into actual policies in the countries of the "Axis of Resistance," with a specific focus on the development of Shiite militia and paramilitary forces in Iraq and Syria. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of this policy for the Middle East.

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[10] See Fakhreddin Soltani and Reza Ekhtiari Amiri, "Foreign Policy of Iran After Islamic Revolution," *Journal of Politics and Law* 3, no. 2 (2010): p. 199-206; Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, Ithaca Press: Reading, 2008.

2. Recent Transformations in the Middle East

The first step towards understanding Iranian policy in the Middle East region is to understand the current interaction context within which the state operates. The Middle East region has been undergoing systemic shocks, both internally and externally defined, over the last decade. The first shock was the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which created a regional power vacuum and sparked a new rivalry among Middle Eastern states for regional leadership.[11] This moment was paradoxical for the Iranian regime. On the one hand, the American invasion had eliminated its decades-long rival, the Saddam regime. On the other hand, the near-total destruction of the Iraqi state, the challenges around the reconfiguration of the new political system, and the ensuing ethnic/sectarian conflict meant a prolonged US presence on Iran's western borders. Coupled with Washington's "Axis of Evil" rhetoric, the US military presence in the region fueled the Islamic Republic's fear that it was second on the list for invasion, at a time when bilateral relations were becoming increasingly tense due to the latter's nuclear program.

Second, the Arab Spring of 2011 was a blow to the existing political order within Arab states. Arab streets rang with chanting against economic and political inequality and the ineffectiveness of the existing authoritarian Arab regimes. The most commonly proposed alternative to authoritarianism was democracy, which was manifested in Tunisia and Egypt to a certain extent with overtly Islamist overtones. On the other hand, serious complications surfaced in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, where protests turned into sectarian conflict and civil war.[12] The third systemic shock was the rise of ISIL in late 2014 across the Syrian-Iraqi territory – a fertile spot for the growth of jihadist networks in the face of crumbling state authority in both countries. The collapse of the Baath regime with the invasion created severe political complications over who would rule over a multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic Iraq, and how its new government would be constructed. A similar complication materialized in Syria, where many anti-regime groups emerged with various political and ideological visions over the future of the nation and the Assad regime lost territory to these groups. With such developments in the background, the Syrian-Iraqi territories soon became a battleground for several governmental and non-governmental actors, regional powers, and finally international powers, each of which had a stake in the conflict.

Under these circumstances, the situation in the post-2014 Middle East looked quite complicated. The prolonged civil conflict and ISIL encroachment on territories across Syria and Iraq wore down the Syrian army and brought about

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[11] For an analysis of how international and regional players received the Iraqi invasion, see Rick Fawn and Raymond Hinnebush, eds., *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Press, 2006).

[12] For a more comprehensive discussion on new sectarianism in the Middle East, see Genevive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shia-Sunni Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 7-8.

the rapid decay of state institutions over ISIL-dominated territories. In a similar vein, state bureaucracies and military structures in Iraq eroded with the invasion, followed by a decade-long sectarian conflict. The traditional standing army lost its allure owing to extensive corruption and the rapid sectarianization of the state, and popular mobilization and militiafication became the new name of the game. The nature of war changed and so did the nature of security structures. The decay of state institutions in Iraq and Syria was reciprocated by regional actors' ambitions to extend their own political system and ideology for greater regional influence. The seemingly faith-based conflicts were indeed part of another clash among different political ideologies espoused by regional actors for regional leadership. According to some analysts, roughly four ideological fault lines characterized the Middle East in the post-2011 period: 1) electoral Islamism espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood; 2) the Salafi jihadist ideology exemplified by a jihadist network divided between ISIL, *Al-Qaeda*, and *Al-Nusra*; 3) the predominantly Shiite axis of Iran, Iraq, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Syria; and finally 4) the traditional allies of the US in the region such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and some Gulf countries.[13] In such a transformed Middle East, with decaying state institutions, the rivalry for regional leadership is not fought so much by conventional military forces. Rather, the power distribution is determined by states' abilities to form and sustain alliances with like-minded proxies and domestic groups elsewhere.[14] A state's power in this transformed region is determined by the stability of its alliances with non-state groups, and the stability of an alliance between a state and a non-state actor is determined by the state's commitment to ideological projection and capacity for material support.

While the Islamic Republic of Iran was known for its ambition to export its revolutionary ideology between 1979 and 1989, Lebanese Hezbollah was the only case where this ambition materialized. Nevertheless, the changes in the balance of power following the fall of the Saddam regime and the transformation of the security system especially in Iraq and Syria have led many analysts to deem Iran a more influential actor in the region.[15] A solid indicator of Iranian influence is the so-called "Shia awakening," i.e. the political and military alignment of Shia actors in the region, ranging from Lebanese Hezbollah to Iraqi Shiites and Yemeni Houthis.[16] One should proceed with a note of caution though. The Shia world should not be treated as a monolithic entity sharing univocal ideologies,

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[13] For a detailed discussion of ideological fault lines in the post-2011 Middle East, see Eran Lerman, "The Game of Camps: Ideological Fault Lines in the Wreckage of the Arab State System," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies,* The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, no. 124 (2016); and Mark L. Haas, *The Clash of Ideologies and American Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[14] See Gregory Gause, III, "Ideologies, Alignments and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 50, no. 3 (July 2017): p. 672-675; and Gregory Gause, III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 11 (July 2014), url: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf.

[15] See Gause 2014.

[16] See Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future* (London and New York: W. W. Norton and Company Ltd., 2007).

political aspirations, and ideological commitments. On the contrary, similar political and ideological divisions within the Sunni community are observable among the Shiites as well. There are multiple types of Shia political actors, such as the Shia clerics of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, Shia political parties, Shia militias, and paramilitary organizations. The ideological and political orientations of these groups are quite diverse, shifting between and at times transcending the binaries of religious and secular, state and civil, or national and transnational. Such internal variances complicate the Iranian influence over Shia politics in the region as well.[17] What is noteworthy is the increased Iranian ability to influence Shia politics in the region despite such complexities and diversities since 2003. It is these very complications, emanating from the multivocality of Shia politics in the region, that have led Iranian policy-makers to adopt various political discourses on the country's Middle East policy.

3. The Islamic Republic's Discourses on the Middle East after 2011

The Islamic Republic is quite innovative in devising new political discourses. As a revolutionary Islamic regime, the Islamic Republic has an entrenched intellectual background that discursively accompanies its Islamic state-building process. As such, the increased Iranian involvement in regional transformations during the last decade was synchronized with the generation of various political discourses on the Middle East. Three discourses are central to understanding Iranian policy towards the region: "Islamic Awakening", "popular mobilization," and "resistance."

3.1. Islamic Awakening

A look at key Iranian newspapers reveals that Iranians do not use the commonly employed term "Arab Spring" in referring to the recent transformations in the Middle East. The relevant term for the Arab Spring is "Islamic Awakening" or "Islamic Spring" in the Iranian discourse, as the toppling down of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes by popular demonstrations and the subsequent empowerment of Islamist political parties in both countries signaled for the Islamic Republic the revival of an Islamic Awakening that would sweep the whole region.[18] While the term "Islamic Awakening" is used to refer to the Arab Spring today, it has a long history of usage by the Islamic Republic.

The term originally referred to the rise of a new political ideology and system in the Middle East as an alternative to Western liberalism and Soviet Marxism. This new ideology is a socially and politically activist Islamism, intended to address

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[17] One notable point of divergence is that the Shia political theology of the Najaf school is predominantly politically quietist, whereas the Islamic Republic's Qom school is predominantly activist. In a similar vein, despite a decades-long alliance with Iran, not all Shia political parties in Iraq enjoy the same level of ideological affinity to Iran.

[18] The author's conversation with an Iranian diplomat at the Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Istanbul, June 2015.

the sociopolitical problems experienced in the region. According to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the successive imperial interventions into the political affairs of Middle Eastern nations, the exploitation of natural resources, and the cultural and social problems inflicted on Muslim lands by the globalization of Western liberal and materialist cultural norms and practices are the root causes of sociopolitical problems in the region today.[19] Moreover, the military alliance of authoritarian Arab regimes with Western powers is also believed by the Islamic Republic to create a cycle of dependence, which further consolidates the cycle of exploitation experienced by Middle Eastern peoples. In the Iranian experience, the way to break this cycle was to turn inwards, to harness indigenous forces, and to establish an indigenous system not imported from elsewhere. Islamism was this very indigenous force that freed the Iranian nation from Western colonialism and gave the nation its independence.

Ayatollah Khamenei sees "Islamic Awakening" as a new power in the region introduced by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In a speech, he refers to how the writings of outstanding American political personalities such as Joseph Nye, Henry Kissinger, and Samuel Huntington define the Islamic Revolution of 1979 not only as "a transfer of power and a change of government," but also as "the emergence of a new power" in the region.[20] Ayatollah Khamenei does not see this power on par with the technological scientific advancement of Western powers; rather, he sees it as an opportunity for "political influence in areas surrounding the country."[21] Now, decades after the Revolution, Khamenei argues that "this power has managed to influence regional nations to establish and promote communal Islamic culture and to help regional nations have a sense of identity," which "has not been defeated by different economic, security, political, and psychological pressures."[22] As such, the Islamic Awakening as manifested by the Iranian Revolution occupies a place in the Iranian political mind as a "power" on its own – a power that would mobilize the Muslim peoples all around the region, give them a new sense of identity, and provide tools to fight the influence of Western outreach.

The Iranian leadership perceived the political upheavals of 2011 in Egypt and Tunisia as nothing more than the continuation of the anti-colonialist struggle started by Iran in 1979. Accordingly, the Iranian regime considered the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia a response to the age-old domination of Middle Eastern nations, cultures, and political systems by the forces of Western colonialism as well as by the authoritarian Arab rulers dependent on it. Ayatollah Khamenei

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[19] Ali Khamenei, "Leader's Views on the Islamic Awakening," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, May 19, 2011, accessed June 7, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1458/Leader-s-View-of-Islamic-Awakening#The_wave_of_Islamic_Awakening.

[20] Ali Khamenei, "Leader's Speech in Meeting with Participants of 7th Elite Youth Conference," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, 2013, accessed June 3 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1832/Leader-s-Speech-in-Meeting-with-Participants-of-7th-Elite-Youth.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

states that, like the Iranian Revolution, the main reason for the events of the Arab Spring was "the feeling of humiliation that has been created among the people of Tunisia and Egypt because of the performance of their rulers."[23] While he does not underestimate the importance of economic factors, the root of the problem according to Khamenei is the dependence of the Egyptian president Mubarak on Western powers, "which prevented the economy of Egypt from developing."[24] The solution to the problems driving the Arabs on the street is putting "Islamic Awakening" at the center of new political discussions as a novel and transformative political ideology. Islamic Awakening is not a nebulous concept and it has a certain content and strategy according to Khamenei, which he outlined at the Conference on Islamic Awakening organized by Iran in 2012 and attended by representatives from 80 countries.[25] First, he argued that if the Arab uprisings are a revolutionary moment, the slogans and principles of the revolution should be set in a fixed manner. As Islamism is the pivotal ideology that will steer the course of the Arab revolutions, the slogans and principles must be refined and brought in line with the foundations and undisputed principles of Islam."[26] Second, Islamic Awakening is not an ideological movement without a political end. It is rather a movement aspiring to establish an Islamic political system. While the Islamic Republic of Iran is ruled by *velayat-e faqih*,[27] the Iranian leadership is aware that the specific sociopolitical context in each country might not be suitable for this system. One alternative to Iran's velayat-e faqih system could be any similar system that merges electoral politics and Islamist ideology at a basic level, i.e., a form of "Islamic democracy," as opposed to the Western liberal democracy and authoritarian Arab nationalism.[28] In other words, Islamic Awakening refers to the building of a system based on the principles of political Islam, the details of which would be shaped by the specific contextual variables of each nation. The Islamic Republic sees itself as the leader of this movement since 1979 – a perception that is shared by some of Iran's traditional allies such as Lebanese Hezbollah. According to this discourse, Iran has the potential to inspire other nations in the region to create an independent and self-sustaining Middle East by putting Islam at the center of its ideology and system. With its 40 years of experience in Islamic revolutionary state building, Iran regards

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[23] Ali Khamenei, "Leader Leads Tehran Friday Prayers," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, 2011, accessed May 25, 2017, url:http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1407/Leader-Leads-Tehran-Friday-Prayers.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ali Khamenei, "Leader's Remarks at International Conference on Islamic Awakening + Video and Audio," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, 2011, accessed May 25, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1523/Leader-s-Remarks-at-International-Conference-on-Islamic-Awakening.

[26] Ibid.

[27] "Velayat-e faqih" literally means "the government of the jurist" and is based on the idea that an Islamic state should be governed by a popularly elected Shia cleric of a high theological rank. The system thus requires the pre-existence of a well-established Islamic clerical system which would generate the necessary religious-political bureaucracy to rule the Islamic society.

[28] Ali Khamenei, "We Believe in Democracy and Freedom, but We Do Not Believe in Liberal Democracy," 2010, accessed May 20, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4843/We-believe-in-democracy-and-freedom-but-we-do-not-believe-in.

itself as a model for other states.[29] All in all, the Islamic Awakening refers to an ideological alternative to Western liberalism and Arab nationalism, a power mobilizing the people to change the existing political order, and a governing system based on electoral Islamism.

3.2. Popular Mobilization

If the Islamic Awakening is the aspiration for a new political order in the region, popular mobilization is the basic strategy for accomplishing revolutions in the Arab world. The idea of popular mobilization relies on two premises. First, the concept refers to the revolutionary characteristic of the uprisings, performed by and for the people. Ayatollah Khamenei emphasizes the people element of the Arab uprisings, where "the most important element of the wave of Islamic Awakening is the presence of the people in the arena of action, battle, and jihad."[30] The presence of the masses at the center of these uprisings is what gives them their revolutionary character. According to Khamenei, the existing regime elites and militaries are the "oppressors," whereas "people and the elite that are of people" are "the true owners of these revolutions that should be trusted to protect them and draw the path to the future."[31]

Popular mobilization also has a military connotation, where it refers to the volunteer-based armed mobilization model of the Islamic Republic that was developed during the revolutionary period and the Holy Defense War. As the name suggests, the Holy Defense discourse was overlaid with a heavy Karbala narrative, which implied that people volunteered for the defense of the new Islamic regime in a way similar to how the great Shia martyr Imam Hossein fought in the battle of Karbala against the Umayyad Dynasty in the 7th century (CE).[32] The self-sacrificial act of Imam Hossein during the battle, his resistance to the Umayyad family, and finally his martyrdom became the central discourses to mobilize Iranian volunteer forces during the Iran-Iraq War.[33] The volunteer-based mobilization model, embellished with Shia narratives, was institutionalized with the creation of two security institutions: the IRGC and the Basij forces. Both institutions became the hallmark of a unique Iranian security culture which has been further consolidated to this date. Accordingly, the Iranian regime made up for its weakness in conventional capabilities by elements of unconventional warfare, the culture of the people's war, and

[29] Ali Khamenei, "Leader: Iran's Resistance, Role Model for Awakened Nations," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, 2011, accessed March 20, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1545/Leader-Iran-s-Resistance-Role-Model-for-Awakened-Nations.

[30] Ali Khamenei, "Leader's Remarks at International Conference on Islamic Awakening + Video and Audio," 2011, accessed May 25, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1523/Leader-s-Remarks-at-International-Conference-on-Islamic-Awakening.

[31] Ibid.

[32] See Assaf Moghadam (ed.), *Militancy and Political Violence in Shiism: Trends and Patterns* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

[33] See Saskia Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).

popular mobilization.[34] A commander of the IRGC implied in a 2017 statement that the IRGC has surpassed its existence as a mere military institution and has become a defense school, a defense mentality and a defense brand on its own: "During the sacred defense, the Revolutionary Guards managed to create the Islamic Revolutionary school of defense, a defense school that came from Ashura school, not military strategies taught in military schools of the world. And this school responded to various forms of wars such as irregular wars and urban wars."[35] This unconventional warfare logic did not remain limited to the Iranian experience of war with Iraq, but also resonated with the policy of exporting revolutionary ideology to the Middle East. With this strategy, the IRGC mobilized several ideologically like-minded and predominantly Shia groups across the Middle East.[36]

The discourse of Islamic Awakening has gradually lost its impetus as a political project after 2013. The Egyptian coup d'état, the intensification of the civil wars in Libya and Syria, and the outbreak of Sunni jihadism with heavily anti-Shia motives shifted the Iranian discourse from the political arena to the battlefield. In a similar vein, the discourse of popular mobilization came to be increasingly framed in a military rather than political sense. While Iran had been supporting several Shia political parties in Iraq since 2003 and the Assad regime in Syria since 2012, this support was often kept silent because of the "state sponsor of terrorism" label attached to Iran for its connections with Shia groups in Lebanon and Iraq during the first decade of the revolution. Nevertheless, the Iranian regime became increasingly vocal about the IRGC presence in the region as well as its engagement in proxy mobilization after the ISIL threat emerged in 2013. A new discourse accompanied Iran's increasing military presence in the region: "defense against *takfiris* and terrorists." Traditionally, the Arabic word "takfir" means "pronouncing an action or an individual un-Islamic."[37] According to Islamic jurisprudence, the authority to declare any Muslim or their action as un-Islamic lies with the *ulama*, i.e., the Islamic clerical establishment and Islamic scholars. In the modern era, this word is increasingly adopted by especially Salafist/Wahhabi jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, who declare certain Muslim groups that refuse to pay allegiance to their rule and ideology as apostates.[38] Accordingly, the Shia political leadership, including the

[34] Michael Eisenstadt, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion, Expediency, and Soft Power in an Era of Disruptive Change," *Middle East Studies Monographs*, no 7 (2015): p. 9, 22, 27.

[35] See General Qasem Soleimani's statement, "Sha'an-e Sepah Balatar az Aan Ast ke zir-e Chatr-e Ahzaab-e Siyasi Gharar Girad," *Sepah News*, April 24, 2017, accessed May 28, 2017, url: http://www.sepahnews.com/index.php/ostanha/esfehan/item/3574.

[36] One notable end-product of Qods Force's mobilization efforts in the Middle East was the Lebanese Hezbollah, which emerged as a Lebanese paramilitary group politically committed to bringing Khomeini's velayat-e faqih to Lebanon. Hezbollah has been later transformed into a self-standing military organization fighting in territories outside of Lebanon as well as a Lebanese Shia political party heavily engaged in Lebanese electoral politics.

[37] Hassan Mineimneh, "Takfirism," *Critical Threats*, October 1, 2009, url: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/takfirism.

[38] Noor Zahid and Nafees Takar, "VOA Explainer: Who Are Takfiri Extremists," *VOA News*, June 22, 2016, accessed May 30, 2018, url: https://www.voanews.com/a/explainer-takfirism/3387691.html.

Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian regime, use the term *takfiri* to refer to Sunni jihadists in the region. The main narrative behind this discourse is that Sunni jihadists are dividing the Islamic *Ummah*, i.e., the greater Muslim community in the world, and that Shiites stand against in-fighting.[39] Ayatollah Khamenei has depicted ISIL as a takfiri terrorist group created by the intelligence agencies of the US, UK, and Israel with a goal of dividing the Islamic community along sectarian lines, as well as diverting the "anti-American and anti-tyranny" Islamic Awakening movement from its path.[40] The military connotations of popular mobilization fit perfectly with another grand discourse that plays a central role in Iran's Middle East policy: resistance.

3.3. Resistance

The "resistance" discourse has many associations in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. In its original usage, the concept refers to the Iranian resistance movement against the perceived colonial order in the Middle East as well as Western infiltration in the political, military, economic, and cultural realm. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 is thus depicted as a moment of resistance in the Islamic Republic's self-identification. Internally, the overthrow of the Shah's regime, as well as the adoption of Islamic modernization as the defining element of the new regime – in opposition to the Western liberal-modernist agenda of the former – are the first instances of resistance in the Islamic Republic's collective awareness. Resistance acquired its external character during the Iran-Iraq War, where the Islamic Republic rallied its own indigenous resources in all areas of life, ranging from voluntary mobilization on the battlefield to ordinary people's perseverance at universities, industries, hospitals, and the marketplace against the economic and infrastructural costs induced by the war.[41] The war with Iraq thus contributed to the Islamic Republic's resistance identity, the new regime deliberately constructing the institutions and culture of resistance. Given its experience during both the revolution and the Holy Defense War, Ayatollah Khamenei refers to the Islamic Republic "as a government of resistance" which "has a politics, economy, international action, and an extensive zone of influence inside and outside the country."[42] The movement's scope lends the discourse of Iranian resistance a more comprehensive air, in terms of both military power and political cache.

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[39] Aaron Y. Zelin and Phillip Smyth, "The Vocabulary of Sectarianism," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/29/the-vocabulary-of-sectarianism/.

[40] Ali Khamenei, "Leader's Speech in Meeting with Participants of International Congress on Takfirism," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, November 15, 2014, accessed May 20, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1985/Leader-s-Speech-in-Meeting-with-Participants-of-International.

[41] Gieling 1999, p. 45

[42] Ali Khamenei, "The Enemy Wants to Take Away Iran's Deterrent Power," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, May 10, 2017, accessed June 20, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4807/The-enemy-wants-to-take-away-Iran-s-deterrent-power-Ayatollah.

Second, the discourse data derived from Ayatollah Khamenei's speeches show that Khamenei uses the term predominantly when he addresses the IRGC and Basij. He labels both organizations as resistance forces which continued to pursue their activities as fully established resistance forces of the Islamic Republic after the revolutionary moment was over.[43] Third, "resistance" is widely used to refer to the self-identified Islamic resistance movements in Palestine and the Lebanese Hezbollah, specifically in terms of resistance against Israeli occupation of the relevant territories. As such, the term is used in relation to an "axis" or "front," often referred to as "Axis of Resistance" or "Resistance Front" in Persian sources affiliated with and/or close to the IRGC and Basij.[44] The Islamic Republic is quite vocal in disclosing its political stance on and support for Palestinian and Hezbollahi resistance, as both are considered by Iran to be a part of the same international movement initiated by the Iranian resistance.[45]

However, "Axis of Resistance" has not remained limited to the Iran, Palestine, and Lebanese Hezbollah axis over the years. On the contrary, this international resistance movement has proven to be dynamic rather than static, expanding as political circumstances allow the rise of similar movements elsewhere. Accordingly, IRGC commanders, as well as personalities close to the IRGC, have increasingly included Iraq, Syria, and Yemen in their "Axis of Resistance" discourse during the past few years. The expansion of this concept has been in line with the increased IRGC presence in Syrian and Iraqi territories. However, the target of resistance has also undergone transformation with the inclusion of Iraq and Syria. Now, increased IRGC presence across the Iraqi and Syrian borders was attributed to increasing sectarian conflict and rising Sunni jihadism primarily led by ISIL. As the ISIL threat against Shia populations and Shia shrines in Najaf, Karbala, and Sayyeda Zainab grew, the IRGC legitimated its military presence as defenders of Shia shrines and called those IRGC officers who were killed in battle martyrs.[46]

The IRGC's "Axis of Resistance" discourse is used extensively in *Payam-e Engbelab*, an official IRGC journal reflecting the IRGC's position on political matters. An article written in 2017 depicts the resistance axis as an alliance of resistance elements in Iraq, Syria, and Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah in direct

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[43] Ali Khamenei, "Enemies Trying to Infiltrate Decision Makers," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, November 25, 2015, accessed June 20, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2686/Enemies-Trying-to-Infiltrate-Decision-Makers.

[44] The IRGC does not have an official webpage. However, the institution releases information on their political views and military activities through IRGC-affiliated media outlets such as Mehr News Agency, Fars News Agency, the Sepah News, and Basij News.

[45] Ali Khamenei, "We Are with Every Group that is Steadfast on the Path of Resistance," *The Supreme Leader's Official Website*, February 21, 2017, accessed June 20, 2017, url: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4644/We-are-with-every-group-that-is-steadfast-on-the-path-of-Resistance.

[46] "Bayaniyeye Setad-e Koll-e Niruhaye Mosallah be Monaasebat-e Dovom-e Ordibehesht: Sepah-e Pasdaran Separ-e Defaa-e Iran va Moghaavemat dar baraabar-e Nezam-e Solte va Sehyonism Ast," Sepahnews, April 20, 2017, accessed May 25, 2017, url: http://www.sepahnews.com/index.php/etelaieah/item/3557-لک-دات-س-ی-ن-ای-ب-ت-س-ا-م-س-ی-ن-ژ-ی-د-ص-و-ه-ط-ل-س-م-ا-ظ-ن-ر-ب-ا-ر-ب-ر-ه-ت-م-و-ا-ق-م-و-ن-ا-ر-ی-ا-ی-ع-ا-ف-ه-ر-پ-س-ن-ا-ر-ا-د-س-ا-پ-ه-ا-پ-س-ت-ش-ه-ب-ی-د-ر-ا-م-و-د-ت-ب-س-ا-ن-م-ه-ب-ح-ل-س-م-ی-ا-و-ر-ی-ن.html.

opposition to Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the region, who are claimed to be cooperating with the US and Israel for the manifestation of their interests in the Middle East.[47] In 2017, the IRGC saw this block of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the US as trying to increase their leverage in Syria and Palestine by supporting the Salafist-takfiri ideology and by curbing the Islamic Awakening in the region.[48] This identification of allies and enemies along a Shia versus Sunni axis in *Payam-e Enghelab* brings to mind discussions of a sectarian power game in the region. Nevertheless, neither Ayatollah Khamenei nor the IRGC or its affiliated institutions emphasize Shia identity as the ideological core of this alliance. Instead, they refer to the ideology of resistance, which encompasses a broader range of ideological traditions blending anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism, and recently anti-Salafi jihadism, further accompanied by Shia-informed mobilization strategies, security culture, and institutions.

The Iranian discourses on the Middle East show that Iran's vision of the region has witnessed a shift from the political to the military realm. The Islamic Republic set out with the discourse of Islamic Awakening along with a vision of its political manifestations in the region. However, the transformation of the Arab Spring into large-scale internal conflicts, proxy wars, and radicalization shifted the Iranian discourse to an unconventional form of military mobilization across Syria and Iraq, informed by the Iranian experience of popular mobilization and resistance culture blended with relevant Shia narratives.

4. Popular Mobilization in Iraq and Syria in the Post-Arab Spring Period

How did the Islamic Republic's discourses of Islamic Awakening, popular mobilization, and resistance translate into actual policies towards Iraq and Syria? Iran established strong ties with several Shia groups in Iraq in the 1980s in opposition to the Saddam regime, some of which have survived to the post-Saddam period. Several Shia political parties were formed in the post-Saddam political system in Iraq, with diverse political ideologies and positions on Iranian involvement in Iraq. The Islamic Republic adopted a strategic position and acted as a political power broker among a diversified set of Shia political groups in the early years of the post-Saddam period. However, the intensification of sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria shifted the Islamic Republic's foreign policy strategies over time to more extensive levels of military engagement with the Shiites in the region. The Iranian strategy has two components: 1) the Islamic Republic extends political and military support to Shia-affiliated armed groups; 2) the Islamic Republic supports the institution-building processes, especially in the security sector, where it has an increasing influence over the creation and reconfiguration of paramilitary institutions such as the *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Iraq and the "National Defense Units" in Syria.

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[47] See "Dar Saayeye Eghtedar-e solh," *Payam-e Enghelab (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Monthly Magazine)* 9, no. 99 (June-July 2017), url: http://www.sepahnews.com/images/payam94/payam.pdf.

[48] Ibid., p. 29-30.

4.1. Shia Armed Groups in Iraq and Syria

Figure 1: Country Origins of Shia Armed Groups

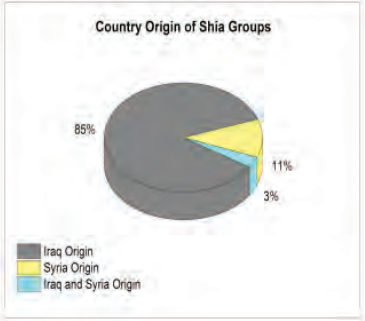
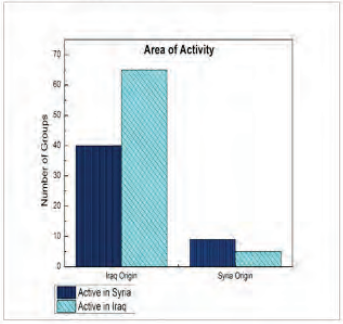


Figure 2: Area of Activity



The data on Shia armed groups provides several insights regarding the nature of Shia mobilization in the Middle East.[49] First, the data shows that Shia groups in Iraq and Syria are ideologically and politically diverse. There are three core ideological blocks within Shia armed mobilization. Some groups in Iraq pay allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran and subscribe to velayat-e faqih as a political ideology. They look to the Islamic Republic as an inspirational example for building a political system which would be ideologically sympathetic to and politically friendly towards the Islamic Republic. Some of these groups are already defined as "Iranian proxies" by analysts in the US and Europe, because they receive military, political, and ideological training as well as technical support from Iran. Proxy groups often cooperate with one another during strategic operations, they help establish front organizations to be sent to Syria, and their manpower is higher than others. A second group pays allegiance to the Iraqi nationalist leader and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.[50] This group of militias is predominantly Iraqi nationalist in outlook and they defend the idea of an independent Iraqi state free of foreign influence, including that of Iran. Yet another group of Shia militias is affiliated

[49] The data on Shia armed groups in Iraq and Syria have been taken from a limited number of, yet highly detailed and ambitious, works and datasets collected by individual area researchers, university research institutes, and think-tanks. Most of the data used in this research is based on the "Jihad Identifiers Database" collected and made accessible online by Jihad Intel Group of the Middle East Forum. Another source of data is a Stanford University research project called "Mapping Militant Organizations." One important note concerning the data on Shia armed groups is that the conflicts both in Iraq and Syria are rather contemporary phenomena with a history of a decade at most. The conflict continued after the collection of the data, which makes it difficult to capture the rapid dissolution of existing groups, the formation of new groups, and the formation and break-up of alliances. Therefore, constantly updated data is necessary. The data used for this paper covers the time period between 2003 and 2017.

[50] Muqtada al-Sadr is the son of Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq Al-Sadr of Iraq and comes from the most famous politically activist family of Shia clerics: the Sadr family. His father was assassinated by the Baath state in 1999. Following the invasion, Muqtada al-Sadr entered a period of rapid Shia mobilization against coalition forces as well as some Sunni factions who cooperated with Al-Qaeda offshoots in Iraq. He was hailed for his strong Iraqi nationalism and armed mobilization capacity against anti-Shiite elements. Al-Sadr initially enjoyed close ideological and operational relations with Iran in the early years of the post-Baath period. He is known to have spent several years in Iran's Qom *hawza* in the mid-2000s. Nevertheless, his relations with Iran have become tense over time, with Al-Sadr emphasizing his ideology of Iraqi nationalism in political affairs.

with Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq, the Shia cleric most revered and most followed for religious guidance among Shia communities across the world. The pro-Sistani groups have mobilized predominantly in response to Ayatollah Sistani's *fatwa* (religious opinion or decree) in 2014 for the defense of Shia populations, as well as Shia shrines and *hawzas* (religious seminaries), against the ISIL threat. These groups are also Iraqi nationalists and oppose increased Iranian influence over Iraq. Sistanist groups plan to dissolve themselves once the ISIL threat is fully eliminated. Unlike pro-Iranian and Sadrist groups who are affiliated with Shia political parties and factions within Iraqi politics, pro-Sistani groups usually do not prefer political engagement. It should be noted that while this classification of Shia groups seems ideologically clear-cut, there are some groups which incorporate elements from different ideological blocks. Moreover, some groups in different blocks tend to engage in short-to-medium-term cooperation with each other for material and operational support, as necessitated by the conflict setting.

The datas show that a total of 125 Shia groups were active across Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017. As Figure 1 shows, 85% of Shia groups originated in Iraq. This shows that most Shia mobilization occurred originally in this country. This is not surprising given the fact that both the demographics and the sectarian political landscape are in favor of the Shiites in Iraq. What is striking though is that around 40% of Shia groups in Iraq did not remain limited to Iraqi territories and passed across the border to fight in Syria. This cross-border mobilization was predominantly a response to the rise of Sunni jihadism and ISIL encroachment on Syrian lands. Predominantly pro-Iranian groups, but also some Sadrist groups, fought alongside the Assad regime against opposition forces and/or ISIL in Syria. As far as the ideological composition of Shia groups is concerned, a striking result is that 61% are pro-Iranian and they pay ideological allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader. This shows that Iranian influence over Shia armed mobilization is stronger than that of Sadrist and Sistanist factions. Of the groups, 11% are coded as both pro-Iran and Sadrist. Some of these are splinter groups that broke away from Muqtada al-Sadr's forces and were later co-opted by Iran. Others are pro-Iranian, but attempt to appeal to Sadrist factions. Yet another group belongs to the LAFA network of Shia militias, i.e., the Iraqi Shia militia network headed by the *Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigades*, who went to Syria for the defense of the Sayyeda Zainab Shrine near Damascus along with Assad's forces. On the Syrian front, Lebanese Hezbollah is an influential ally of Iran whose official involvement in the Syrian conflict since 2013 has augmented Iranian power. As Figure 3 shows, 9% of active groups pay ideological allegiance to Lebanese Hezbollah. It should be noted that promoting oneself as a Hezbollah brand is equivalent to paying allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader. When the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hezbollah-branded Shia groups, and groups appealing to multiple factions are considered, the extent of Iranian influence over armed Shia mobilization far exceeds the actual numbers the figures expose. Compared to Iran's and even Hezbollah's influence in the field, groups associated with Muqtada al-Sadr and Ayatollah Sistani do not enjoy the same level of influence.

Raw statistics leave us with several preliminary conclusions on the nature of Shia mobilization across Iraq and Syria. First, clerical authority does not automatically translate into political and military influence on its own. Without doubt, the fatwa of the traditionally politically quietist Ayatollah Sistani helped bring together Shia groups for military action against ISIL in 2014. However, it was the IRGC's military mobilization strategy – in the form of training, funding, and strategic advice – that made a difference. Second, the results show Iran's capacity to socialize Shia groups in line with its own political orientation, ideological vision, and organizational structure.

4.2. The Creation of Paramilitary Organizations

While support for Shia armed groups is one military strategy in Iraq and Syria, the institutionalization of these forces under paramilitary organizations is another. The Iraqi "Hashd al-Shaabi," a.k.a. "Popular Mobilization Forces" (PMF), and the Syrian "National Defense Forces" (NDF) are two military institutions established to function as paramilitary forces, both of which are claimed by the Iranian leadership to be modeled on Iran's popular mobilization forces.

4.2.1. Hashd al-Shaabi / Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)

When the Islamic State invaded the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014, the Iraqi army, which was institutionally and militarily weakened due to the de-Baathification of Iraq's security services during the political reconfiguration in the post-Saddam period, rapidly deserted the city without any committed confrontation. The city's capture took Iraqis by surprise, and the Shia populations doubly so. ISIL was a direct threat to Shia populations, as the group adopted a strong anti-Shia rhetoric and targeted the Shia-populated areas of Iraqi territories. When the ISIL threat approached Shia shrine areas in the cities of Najaf and Karbala, the Iraqi Shia cleric Ayatollah Sistani issued a fatwa on June 13, 2014, calling all Iraqis to arms, including both Sunnis and Shias.[51] Between 60 and 90 thousand volunteers enlisted immediately, a number far surpassing what was expected.[52] Despite attempts at greater inclusivity, a great majority of these volunteers were Shia men, answering the call of their esteemed Shia cleric as a religious duty.

Ayatollah Sistani's call to arms was not intended to form a new institution separate from the state. He was rather calling all Iraqi men who could take up arms to support Iraq's existing security forces under a lawful and legitimate

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[51] Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa was an extraordinary move for a politically quietist cleric. As the most revered religious authority in Iraq, Sistani refrained from engaging in political discussions wherever possible. He was in favor of the establishment of a constitutional democracy and opposed to the importation of velayat-e faqih to rule the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Iraqi society. See Abdo, *The New Sectarianism*, p. 21.

[52] Ibid.

Iraqi state authority.[53] His fatwa was first answered positively by the Iraqi prime minister of the time, Nouri al-Maliki, who wanted to boost his political power, which was on shaky ground due to his unpopular and unsuccessful sectarian policies. Al-Maliki also wanted to maintain his relevance to the Iranians by bringing the already existing pro-Dawa and pro-Iranian militia under the new institutional formation Ayatollah Sistani was calling for.[54] This was soon followed by the inclusion of Sadrist groups and other Shia nationalists. The new institution thus became an umbrella organization bringing together both already existing and new militias, all affiliated with different power centers within Iraq.

The Hashd[55] composition closely reflects the aforementioned factionalism within Shia politics and armed mobilization: the Sistanists, Sadrists, pro-Iranian Hashds. The first group of Sistanists are made up of volunteers who took up arms as a religious duty in response to Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa. This group is also known as "Hashd Sistani."[56] The motivation for these groups is the defense of the holy sites in Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra. The Sistanist groups' vision of the Hashd involves dissolution after ISIL is defeated, and they are reluctant about future involvement in politics.[57] The second group of militias is the Sadrists, the most prominent of them being *Saraya al-Salam*. The Sadrist Hashd are part of an extensive Sadrist social network structure in Iraq and have considerable fighting expertise.[58] The last group is the pro-Iranian militia, referred to as the "Hashd Soleimani," as they are extensively supported and supervised by the IRGC's Quds Force and Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani.[59] These groups are known as institutionally better established, militarily stronger, and more experienced than Sadrists and Sistanists, thanks to committed Quds Force support in the form of military equipment and training.[60] The pro-Iranian proxies within the

[53] See Ranad Mansour, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," *Carnegie Middle East Center,* April 28, 2017, accessed September 2017, url: http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810.

[54] Skype interview with a journalist at TRT World, conducted by the author on June 13, 2017.

[55] The word "hashd" in "Hashd al-Shaabi" in the Arabic language refers to a group of people who gather together for mobilized action.

[56] Joost Hiltermann, "Iraq: The Clerics and the Militias," *The International Crisis Group*, October 2015, url: https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-clerics-and-militias.

[57] Mansour, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," url: http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810.

[58] Ibid.

[59] The Quds Force is the branch of the IRGC that is responsible for external operations and was originally tasked with the export of the revolution during its first decade. The primary tasks of the Quds Forces today include unconventional warfare, intelligence services, and support for ideologically sympathetic groups in other countries across the Middle East. Qasem Soleimani is an Iran-Iraq War veteran, a Major General of the IRGC, and the well-known commander of the Quds Force. He was popularized both by Western and IRGC media outlets during the height of Quds Force activities in post-Saddam Iraq. Today, he is recognized by the Iranian regime as one of the most central and influential military and political figures in foreign relations with Middle East states. For more information on "Hashd Soleimani," see Hiltermann, "Iraq: The Clerics and the Militias," url: https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-clerics-and-militias.

[60] Mansour, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," url: http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810.

Hashd have an ideological allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader and subscribe to velayat-e faqih. Their transnationalist vision stands in contrast to Sadrist and Sistanist groups, who are Iraqi nationalists. As a result, several of these pro-Iranian proxies fight in Syria to support "Axis of Resistance" or form front groups for this purpose. Moreover, the pro-Iranian Hashd are closely affiliated with pro-Iranian political parties, such as the Badr Brigades in Iraq, and have a considerable influence over Iraqi electoral politics.[61]

As Figure 4 shows, the majority of the Hashd are pro-Iranian, followed by Sistanists and then Sadrists, which indicates strong Iranian influence on the Hashd.[62] The Iranian influence is felt on the operational front as well, especially in budgetary allocations. The funding of Hashd al-Shaabi comes directly from the Iraqi state's budget.[63] However, the funding is not allocated equally to all groups operating under the Hashd and the issue of budgetary allocation is a source of contention among different Hashd factions. When Hashd al-Shaabi was formed, the Shiite Prime Minister of the time, Haider al-Abadi, handed the Hashd funding as a lump sum to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a well-known Shiite Hashd commander in close cooperation with Iran since the Iran-Iraq War.[64] The latter then decided on the distribution of the money amongst the militia groups operating under the Hashd.[65] Al-Muhandis thus controlled the volunteer militia and flow of funds within the diverse Hashd organization, causing pro-Iranian groups to get an upper hand.[66] Therefore, the pro-Iranian Hashd received more volunteers and military equipment, which increased their status as a more powerful fighting force within Hashd al-Shaabi.

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[61] Loveday Morris, "Appointment of Iraq's New Interior Minister Opens Door to Militia and Iranian Influence," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2014, accessed May 27, 2017, url: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/appointment-of-iraqs-new-interior-minister-opens-door-to-militia-and-iranian-influence/2014/10/18/f6f2a347-d38c-4743-902a-254a169ca274_story.html?utm_term=.6a02cae4bc3d

[62] Five of the most powerful Hashd groups are directly trained by Iran: the Badr Brigades, Iran's decades-long Iraqi Shiite ally since the war with Iraq; Kata'ib Hezbollah, established by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an ex-member of the Badr Brigades and a commander of Hashd al-Shaabi; Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, established by dissenters from the Sadrist movement and now enjoying very close relations with Iran and Hezbollah; Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, established by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq as a front organization to send Iraqi fighters to Syria to fight alongside the Assad regime; and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, established by IRGC and Hezbollah first in Syria, from where they moved to Iraq.

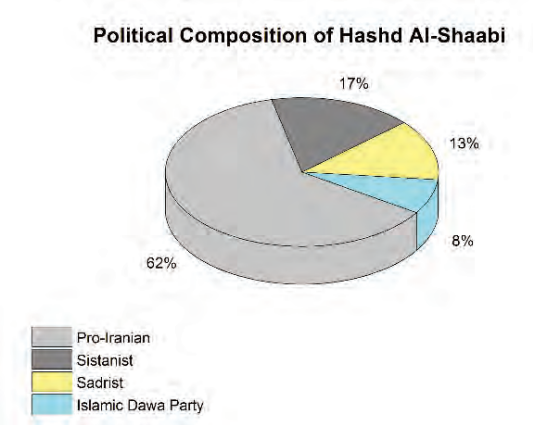
[63] Interview with a journalist from TRT World.

[64] The close connections between Iraqi Shia groups and the Islamic Republic date back to the Iran-Iraq War during the first decade of the revolution. The IRGC-Quds Force supported the mobilization of Shia armed groups with an attempt to internally weaken the Saddam regime during the war. This policy also fit well with Iran's policy of exporting the revolution by building Shia-dominated revolutionary groups in Iraq. One of the groups that flourished with Iranian support and has survived to date is the Badr Organization. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis is an Iraqi Shiite commander who cooperated with the Quds Force for years alongside the Badr Organization. Since 2003, he has been involved in the mobilization and training of many new Shia groups in Iraq, one of the most influential of which is Kataib Hezbollah. He also served as the deputy commander of Hashd al-Shaabi. For al-Muhandis' influential role within the Hashd, see Mansour, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," url: http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

Figure 4: Composition of the Hashd al-Shaabi



Hashd al-Shaabi enjoyed strong support within the Iraqi population during its formation. The formal Iraqi army was generally seen as a corrupt and inefficient institution by the Iraqis, while an army made up directly of Iraqi people was seen as a legitimate supplement when it was established. This was also reflected in the motto of the Hashd: "We are fighting not only against ISIL, but also against corruption."[67] The sectarian nature of the ISIL threat to the Iraqi Shiites and Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa for the defense of the shrines gave a sacred character to Hashd al-Shaabi. Shia leaders emphasized the homogeneity of the Shia population in the fight against ISIL along with the heroism, sacrifice, and martyrdom of the Hashd volunteers, which links them to Shia Karbala narratives.[68]

The strong volunteer-based popular mobilization aspect of the Hashd – as its name, "popular mobilization forces," denotes – as well as the religious Shia narratives employed to enable this mobilization, recalls the formation of the IRGC and Basij. Like Hashd al-Shaabi, both are the institutional extensions of war that shaped the military structure and strategic culture of the Islamic Republic. The strong Iranian influence over the organizational structuring of the Hashd, along with Iranian ideological and operational influence on individual Hashd groups, strengthens the proposition that the Islamic Republic's Quds Force has tried to create an institution like the Iranian Basij. As a matter of fact, Iranian sources close to the IRGC and Basij speak of Hashd al-Shaabi as an institution modeled on the Iranian Basij. In this respect, a news article published by the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency wrote that "Inspired by the Iranian Basij, a similar organization has been established in Iraq, known

[67] Interview with a journalist from TRT World.

[68] Marsin Alshamary, "Tilly Goes to Baghdat: How the War with Daesh Can Create a Shi'a State," in 'Islam in A Changing Middle East: New Analysis for Shia Politics," *POMEPS Studies 28*, December 27, 2017, p. 43-48, url:https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/POMEPS_Studies_28_NewAnalysis_Web.pdf.

as the Popular Mobilization Units or Hashd al-Shaabi."[69] In a similar vein, a news site close to the Iranian Basij quoted a spokesperson for Hashd al-Shaabi saying that the Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi is a continuation of the Iranian Basij, where the Iraqi counterparts relied heavily on the experience of the Iranian Basij.[70] The same news article continued by quoting Nouri al-Maliki saying that the Iraqi government adopted the form and structure of the Iranian Basij while establishing Hashd al-Shaabi.[71]

4.2.2. National Defense Units (NDF)

The formation of a similar paramilitary force has been underway in Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. A popular army was formed predominantly of Alawite volunteers who had initially mobilized themselves to protect their neighborhoods against the anti-regime forces and later started to fight for the Assad regime in coordination with the Syrian Army. Contrary to the attention the Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi attracted from the policy communities, the NDF remains relatively understudied. Such a lack of attention can be attributed to the Syrian Army's relative strength as the central pillar of the Assad Regime's security structure despite its war weariness over the years. Nevertheless, the Syrian security establishment also has relied heavily on the use of pro-regime militia and paramilitary units in fighting off a diverse set of anti-Assad forces.

The popular mobilization forces in Syria have a longer history compared to the Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi. The Assad family's Baath Party formed several paramilitary units after coming to power in the 1960s as a counterforce to domestic opposition.[72] Baath-led militiafication and the formation of paramilitary groups intensified during the 1980s, when the regime provided arms and training to regime supporters throughout the country to counter Muslim Brotherhood uprisings.[73] When the civil conflict erupted in Syria in 2011, the

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[69] "Formation of Islamic World's Basij Feasible: Iran's Top Officer," *Tasnim News Agency*, November 23, 2016, accessed April 2017, url: https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/11/23/1248368/formation-of-islamic-world-s-basij-feasible-iran-s-top-officer.

[70] "Niruhaye Mardomiye Araagh Che Kasaani Hastand va Che Mikhaahand?" *Basij Press*, July 11, 2016, accessed April 2017, url: http://basijpress.ir/fa/news-details/79355/نیروهای-مردمی-عراق-چه-کسانی-هستند-و-چه-می-خواهند؟/.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Kirk Campbell, *Civil-Military Relations and Political Liberalization: A Comparative study of the Military's Corporateness and Political Values in Egypt, Syria, Turkey and Pakistan*, quoted in Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime From Counterinsurgency to Civil War," *Middle East Security Report 8*, 2013, p. 11, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf.

[73] The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which had been active in Syria since the 1940s, entered a phase of radicalization when the Baathists took control of the country with a coup d'état in 1963. The sectarian contours of the Syrian Baath regime, which favored minority Alawites in the state bureaucracy and increased Alawite peasants' economic status through nationalization and land reform projects, led to a resentment among Sunni urban classes. At a time when the Muslim Brotherhood movement shifted towards non-armed political struggle, these factors led to the radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and a series of uprisings followed between 1976 and 1982. For more information on Syrian Muslim Brotherhood uprisings, see Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of A Failed Revolution," *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no 4 (2016): p. 541-559. On the Baath-led militiafication as a response to Muslim Brotherhood uprisings, see Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime From Counterinsurgency to Civil War," *Middle East Security Report* 8, 2013, url: 2013, p. 11, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf.

Assad Regime had already had 30 years of experience in building pro-regime militia forces. These militias were called the "Popular Committees" or "*Jaysh al-Shaabi*," as they were local volunteers who armed themselves in Syrian towns, villages, and districts in defense against anti-regime elements.[74] These popular committees were usually made up of minority communities: Alawites, Druze, and Christians.[75] The concept of popular committees was thus already ingrained in the Syrian security logic under the Assad regime long before the eruption of the civil conflict in 2011. This process was not a consequence of the extreme militiafication of the Syrian war.

In 2013, when the Syrian Army was worn out in the face of a myriad of opposition forces and was expected – by both regional players and the international community – to lose the game soon, Syria's two long-standing allies, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, stepped in to support the Assad regime.[76] Both Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran had been providing training to pro-Assad units and fighting alongside Assad since 2012, yet their military activities increased in 2013. Hezbollah and Iran's decision to press for more military support was rooted in the defense of the "Axis of Resistance" alliance. In his May 2013 speech, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah called Syria "the backbone" of the "Axis of Resistance," which cannot be abandoned to Israel, the West, and more recently, to the takfiri terrorist forces.[77] Both Iranian IRGC-Quds Force units and Lebanese Hezbollah supported the Assad regime by direct involvement in the conflict, funding and training the pro-Assad militia, sending Iraqi Shiite militia to fight in Syria, and creating new militia in Shiite-dominated villages. Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran, Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah, Qasem Soleimani of the Quds Force, and Syrian officers met in Tehran in the spring of 2013 and decided on closer cooperation and coordination.[78] One consequence of this meeting was grouping the pro-Assad militia and paramilitary forces under a more institutionalized mechanism. As a result, several pro-Assad militias and local committees were restructured and merged under a more institutionalized structure called the "National Defense Forces."[79] The NDF was established by a former Iranian Basij deputy commander, Hossein Hamedani.[80] Hezbollah has also provided significant support for the creation and expansion of the NDF,

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[74] Ibid., p. 16.

[75] Ibid., p. 18.

[76] This is not to claim that Iran and Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict saved the Syrian regime in 2013. As a matter of fact, the Syrian regime experienced a similar military deadlock in 2015 against opposition forces, and the involvement of Russia in the conflict assisted greatly in preserving the longevity of the regime. As this is outside of the scope of the paper, no further discussion will be made on this point.

[77] Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," *Middle East Security Report* 19, 2014, url: http://www.understandingwar.org/report/hezbollah-syria.

[78] Ibid., p. 14.

[79] Aron Lund, "Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 2, 2015, url: http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215.

[80] Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," p.14, url: http://www.understandingwar.org/report/hezbollah-syria.

especially via training the NDF constituents in Latakia, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo in urban warfare and guerilla tactics.[81]

Whether the NDF was originally modeled on the Iranian Basij is a matter of discussion. While the idea of popular committees has a long history under the Assad regime, the collaboration between Syrian, Iranian, Hezbollahi, and Iraqi Shia militia forces on the NDF project has had a significant effect on the further evolution of the NDF. The Assad Regime does not share the Islamist political ideology espoused by Hezbollah, Iran, and Iraqi Shia militias. However, all parties are committed to the ideological contours of the "Axis of Resistance" and the operational necessities to keep the alliance intact. As such, the operational experience of latter parties in the popular mobilization model and the "Axis of Resistance" discourse highlight the commonalities between the Iranian Basij, Hashd al-Shaabi, and the NDF as paramilitary institution formations. In this respect, Marisa Sullivan, a researcher specializing in the Syrian Civil War, argues that the NDF was intended to resemble the Iranian Basij as a national paramilitary force.[82] Moreover, the IRGC-Quds Force Office in Damascus remained the coordination office for military planning, strategy, and operations – which brought together all parties of the "Axis of Resistance" throughout the civil war.[83] The Iranian regime's discourse about the NDF forces is in parallel with its narrative for Hashd al-Shaabi. An article published in *Payam-e Enghelab* claimed that the Iranian Quds Force's assistance in Syria and Iraq "has led to the popularity of this school of thought beyond the borders of the region… the dialogue between popular forces such as Jaysh al-Shaabi in Syria and Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, which is based on the modeling of [Iranian] forces and the Iranian army, is an indication of the influence of Iran's authority in neighboring countries."[84]

Iran's focus on Shia militia mobilization and the institutional build-up of paramilitary units leave us with one important conclusion. With the fading of Arab Spring ideals and the transformation of the process into sectarian conflicts, radicalization, and proxy wars, the Iranian regime shifted away from the idea of an Islamic revolution, under the discourse of an Islamic Awakening, and toward the strengthening of the security sector in war-torn countries. Accordingly, the IRGC-Quds Force followed a strategy of forming Shia militia and paramilitary units similar to its own Basij and/or Lebanese Hezbollah in these countries, under the discourses of popular mobilization and the "Axis of Resistance." In that sense, religion did not necessarily play the role of an ideology, as the Islamic Awakening discourse emphasizes, but rather the role of an "institution" and a source of "power." The Islamic Republic's decades-long experience with

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., p. 13.

[84] See "Dar Saayeye Eghtedar-e Solh," *Payam-e Enghelab*, url: http://www.sepahnews.com/images/payam94/payam.pdf.

popular mobilization in the Iran-Iraq War and the export of the revolution, which was embellished with heavy Karbala narratives, was embodied in its ideological security institutions such as the IRGC and Basij. The institutionalization of religion in the security culture and security institutions of the Islamic Republic became over decades a source of military power for Iran, which helped this state to exert influence on conflicts elsewhere especially after 2011.

Despite the decreasing influence of the Islamic Awakening discourse, this military mobilization strategy has had a direct influence on Iran's political influence as well. This was particularly manifested in the internal discussions surrounding the future of Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq after the defeat of ISIL. As a matter of fact, several pro-Iranian militia showed a motivation to engage in Iraqi politics as a political party, which culminated in the political coalition of the most powerful pro-Iranian Hashd groups as a political block in the May 2018 elections. Called the *Fatah* Alliance, this coalition included the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali and was headed by Hadi al-Amiri – the famous pro-Iranian general of Hashd al-Shaabi who is also the leader of the Badr Organization. The Fatah Alliance won 47 seats in the Iraqi parliament, coming only second after Muqtada al-Sadr's *Sairoon* Alliance.[85] The pro-Iranian Hashd's engagement and success in Iraqi elections signaled another developmental path for the Hashd in the future, where Hashd al-Shaabi's double role as a paramilitary security unit and as a political actor might be comparable to the Hezbollah model in Lebanon. In a 2015 interview with the author, an Iranian journalist predicted such a developmental path for Hashd al-Shaabi, arguing that it is another shadow organization of Iran operating in Iraq, resembling Hezbollah.[86] Given the latest anti-Iran protests that started Iraq in 2019, whether Hashd al-Shaabi will be a strong Shia political actor in the Iraqi electoral system and continue its existence as a paramilitary security unit at the same time remains to be seen. Nevertheless, this developmental path leaves us with several conclusions on Iran's "Axis of Resistance" policy in the region.

5. Conclusion

Iran's "Axis of Resistance" policy can teach us a lot about the changing nature of Middle East politics and several conclusions can be derived from this analysis. First, to describe Iran's foreign policy as a pendulum swinging between ideology and pragmatism lies on faulty premises. The Islamic Republic's policy of supporting resistance groups through IRGC involvement does not mean that Iran does not act rationally and/or pragmatically. It only means that the Islamic Republic sees an ideological and institutional mechanism at its disposal as an asset to maximize its power in the region. In this respect, Iran's religious ideology and institutions such as the IRGC and Basij are treated as a source of

[85] "Iraq's Sadr Announces Political Alliance with Pro-Iranian Block," *Al Jazeera*, June 13, 2018, accessed March 3, 2019, url: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/iraq-sadr-announces-political-alliance-pro-iranian-bloc-180613045304818.html

[86] The author's interview with an Iranian journalist at Azad News Agency in Tehran, Iran, Summer 2015.

"power" on their own. Iran's unconventional power challenges our traditional understanding of military power as rooted in states' conventional capabilities. Scholars and policy-makers should thus focus more on unconventional power dynamics to understand the changing security map of the region. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" policy is a valuable test-case for this purpose.

Second, religious identity and ideology are strong mobilizational forces in the Middle East today. However, religious and/or religious-ideological affiliations are not sufficient on their own to mobilize co-religionists living under a myriad of nation-states. Iran's strong mobilizational capacity over the Shiites across the Middle East comes from its decades-long experience in and commitment to its popular mobilization model accompanied by careful framing and branding of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology, Shia Karbala narratives, and resistance discourse.

Third, traditional international relations analyses tend to trace state-to-state alliance patterns and balance of power dynamics to understand power shifts in the Middle East. However, the failure of nation-states, sectarian conflicts, and the intensive militiafication of the region foreground the salience of state-to-non-state alliances for power shifts in the Middle East region today. The "Axis of Resistance" can be described as a non-traditional alliance formation between state and non-state actors in this respect. Sub-national, national, and transnational actors all function in a multilayered and intertwined network structure. State-to-non-state alliance patterns are not specific to regional Shia politics though; similar networks are in place among Sunni jihadists and electoral Islamists. Therefore, analyzing how these network structures function is crucial for our understanding of the Middle East.

Fourth, for the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, the "Axis of Resistance" alliance relies as much on institution-building as it does on militia support in war-struck domestic settings. The Iranian policy of exporting the revolution during the 1980s has long been understood to export Iran's velayat-e faqih-based political ideology to neighboring Muslim countries. It is true that the Islamic Republic sought to export velayat-e faqih to countries with a sizeable Shia population such as Iraq and Lebanon; but it also supported other Islamist political ideologies and movements in Sunni countries which might not necessarily be institutionally and theologically akin to velayat-e faqih. Today, Iran carefully refrains from vocalizing velayat-e faqih and Shia clerical rule as an alternative political order for the Middle Eastern nations on the path to political transformation, although most of the Iran-supported militia pay allegiance to velayat-e faqih in their discourse. Nevertheless, Iran's activities in the "Axis of Resistance" show that the exportation of the Iranian political system seems to have been replaced by another idea in the mid-2010s: the exportation of Iran's military system. The experience with Lebanese Hezbollah showed that a group can operate as a paramilitary organization independent of a state's security system on the one hand, and can be integrated into the electoral political system of the same state on the other, enjoying extensive levels of influence domestically and

transnationally. The creation of paramilitary organizations such as Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq and the NDF in Syria can be considered part of a greater Iranian institution-building scheme in the Middle East. The Iranian officials' emphasis on the "Iranian Basij model" as emulated by these new institutions strengthens the proposition that the Islamic Republic is exporting its military model, if not its political model, to the region through a variety of activities. Still, the conflicts within these countries might have generated such an outcome on their own. The perceived security threats emanating from ISIL and other opposition forces have precipitated military alignment and coordination among "Axis of Resistance" actors, thereby leading to the observed institutional build-up.

Related to the last point, the question remains as to what implications these new institutions will have for the future of the Middle East. Are Hashd al-Shaabi and the NDF transitory institutions created to address the civil conflicts in Iraq and Syria? Should they be expected to dissolve once the conflict is over? Or are they permanent institutions designed to be integral parts of both the Iraqi and Syrian states' military and political systems? The Iranian IRGC has evolved from a volunteer-based mobilization force at the outset of the Iran-Iraq War to a highly-institutionalized army at present. Over the course of decades, the IRGC has further evolved from a mere military to an economic, social, and finally political force inside the regime through its involvement in the post-war reconstruction of the country at all levels. A similar scenario was observed in the case of Lebanese Hezbollah. Now another similar scenario may be possible for Iraqi and Syrian politics as well. In fact, the political engagement of the most powerful Hashd al-Shaabi groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah in the most recent Iraqi elections already signals such a possibility for Iraq. Another related question is whether these institutions will have a national or transnational political orientation. Further transnationalization of such institutions in both an ideological and operational sense can be expected to have ramifications for the future of the "Axis of Resistance" alliance. These issues remain a question mark for now, but one conclusion is certain: the future of power balances and political order in the Middle East will be determined not solely by political dynamics within and between states, but between states and non-state actors as well.

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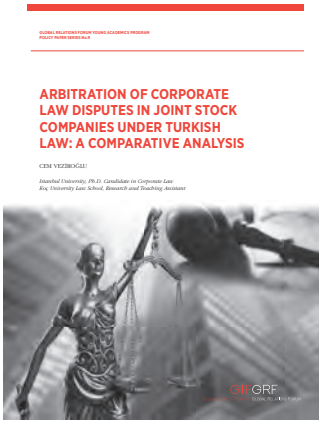

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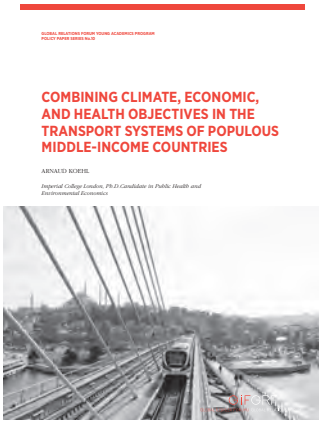

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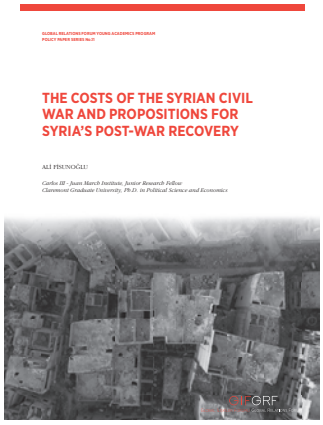

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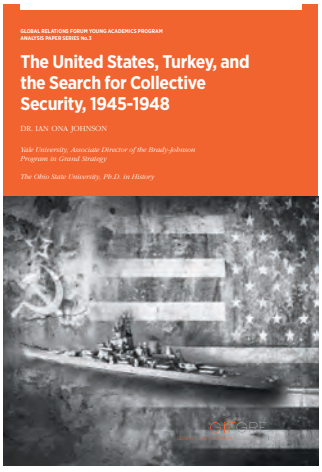

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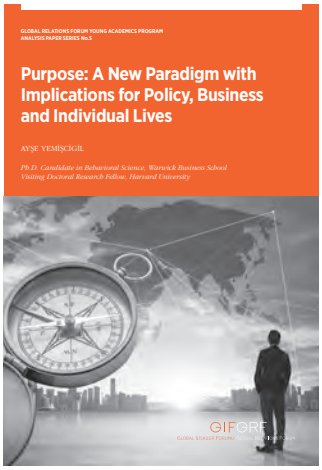

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