IRAN ENTANGLED

IRAN AND HEZBOLLAH'S SUPPORT TO PROXIES OPERATING IN SYRIA

Nakissa Jahanbani and Suzanne Weedon Levy | April 2022

Iran Entangled:
Iran and Hezbollah's Support to Proxies Operating in Syria

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Cover Photo: A Hezbollah supporter uses her mobile phone to takes a picture of photo of slain Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Qassem Soleimani during a ceremony marking the anniversary of the assassination of Hezbollah leaders, Abbas al-Moussawi, Ragheb Harb, and Imad Mughniyeh, and the end of a 40-day Muslim mourning period for Soleimani, in the southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, on February 16, 2020. (Hassan Ammar/AP Photo)

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About the Authors

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

Syria is a cornerstone of Iran's national security doctrine.[1] While Iran's alliance with Syria is long-standing, in the past decade Iran has entangled with Syrian economics, politics, and security through a variety of hard and soft power techniques. To Iran, Syria is also a crucial regional ally. Syria has geopolitical utility for Iran's regional strategy and is an avenue through which Iran can exert considerable influence. The two countries have an alliance dating back to the early 1980s during the regime of Hafez al-Assad. In Syria, Iran can both exert influence in the security sphere through more tactical means while also fan a religious and social support base in Syrian society. Iran achieves these goals through raising and supporting non-state militant groups in Syria.

Throughout the Syrian civil war, Iran has provided tactical support to both Syrian military forces and proxies[2] that serve Iranian interests. To raise proxies, Iran has provided financial incentives to potential recruits and leveraged religious narratives, endeavors that have dovetailed with Iran's broader exportation of the *velayat-e faqih* ideology to Syria.[3] Today, Iran's presence remains entrenched in Syria. The Iraq-Syria border is a stronghold for pro-Iranian forces for the movement of fighters, weapons, and other goods, such as near the Iraqi border town of al-Qaim.[4] In January 2022, Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and other Iranian-backed forces, such as the Fatemiyoun Brigades and Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), were reportedly acquiring real estate—coercively or through financial incentives—around Daraya suburb of Damascus.[5] In the same month, Iranian-backed militias were reported to be smuggling weapons in Deir ez-Zor province.[6] U.S. troops remain in Syria, perhaps in part offering a counterweight to Iranian influence in the country.[7] Iranian and Iranian-backed militias continue to pose a significant threat to the U.S. military and its partners in Syria, as exemplified by the October 2021 drone attacks at al-Tanf garrison.[8]

This report investigates the nature of Iranian and LH support to proxies operating in Syria from 2011 to 2019, using a macroscopic lens to note existing patterns of engagement. By examining trends at this broad level of analysis, it maps an historical view of the conflict. While the nature of Iran's proxy network is dynamic, it is useful to investigate the network at its (arguably) peak years to understand

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1   Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 205; Mahan Abedin, *Iran Resurgent: The Rise and Rise of the Shia State* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2019), p. 130; Ariane Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 255, 277-282.

2   In this report, the term "proxy" refers to a militant group that receives support from the Iranian government, the IRGC or its Quds Force, or LH. "Clients" and "surrogates," which can denote more enmeshed relationships, is interchangeable with "proxies" in this study. For more information, see Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies* 28:1 (2018) and Assaf Moghaddam and Michel Wyss, "The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates," *International Security* 44:4 (2020): pp. 119-157.

3   The *velayat-e faqih*, or "Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist," ideology underpins Iran's system of government, where the clergy are in charge of state institutions and governance. For more information, see "What Is Velayat-e Faqih?" Institute for Global Change, March 20, 2019.

4   "Exploiting Iraqi-Syrian border has served as IRGC focal point for years," Diyaruna, February 28, 2021.

5   Nohad Topalian, "Iran-backed militias, Syrian forces seize private homes in Daraya," Diyaruna, January 10, 2022. In January 2022, Iranian-backed militias attacked U.S. bases in east Syria. See, for example, Michael Knights and Crispin Smith, "Making Sense of Militia Attacks in Iraq and Syria in Early 2022," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 6, 2022; Jeff Seldin, "US-Led Coalition Responds to New Round of Attacks in Syria, Iraq," Voice of America, January 5, 2022; and "Pro-Iran militias keep up attacks on US military targets in Iraq, Syria," *Arab Weekly*, January 6, 2022.

6   "SOHR: In front of the Russians…Iranian militias link the east of the Euphrates to the west of Syria," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 17, 2022. There are also reports of IRGC troops in Deir ez-Zor province in early 2022. See, for example, Omar Abu Layla, "How Iranian Militias Have Swallowed Deir Ezzor," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 16, 2022.

7   Lolita C. Baldor and Robert Burns, "General says US troops to remain in Iraq," *Military Times*, December 9, 2021; Barbara Starr, "US officials say humanitarian effort in Syria is another means to counter ISIS," CNN, December 3, 2021.

8   "Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress - Operation Inherent Resolve: October 1, 2021-December 31, 2021," U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General.

existing and potential future structures and capabilities. This report investigates support from Iranian actors—inclusive of the IRGC and its various components, notably the Quds Force (IRGC-QF), as well as the Iranian government more generally—and LH through the lens of kinetic and non-kinetic assistance. The former refers to joint attacks between the militias and Iranian actors and/or LH, personnel placed with militias, and training and weapons provided to militias. Non-kinetic support entails funding, logistical support, recruitment and social service assistance, and meetings between Iranian actors and/or LH and militias. Looking at these two categories of support provides a more holistic snapshot of Iranian influence and capacity-building with proxies in Syria.

The key questions explored in this report are as follows:
• During the Syrian conflict, what types of support did Iran provide its proxies?
• How did Iran's support to its proxies change over time?
• How do Iranian actors and LH vary in their support to proxies, if at all?

Key Findings
Below are the most notable findings from this study.

Finding 1: Iranian and LH support started with higher volumes of kinetic support, followed by increases in non-kinetic support. This pattern *potentially* indicates a phased rollout of kinetic assistance to be replaced with longer-term societal entrenchment efforts.
• Kinetic support peaked in 2015 to 2017 while non-kinetic peaked in 2017 to 2018.
• Iran and LH began sending fighters to the conflict in 2011 and 2012. The number of personnel increased over time, and both entities faced considerable losses in 2015 and 2016.[9] As the conflict progressed, there was an emphasis toward supplying non-kinetic support, potentially providing the dual benefit of minimizing Iran's losses while ensuring longer-term involvement in the country.

Finding 2: When looking at specific kinetic and non-kinetic support, there seems to be a division of labor between Iranian actors and LH within the kinetic, but not non-kinetic support.
• The IRGC and other Iranian actors sent more weapons and personnel (advisors, soldiers, trainers, etc.) to militias.
• Conversely, LH conducted more joint attacks with militias.
• For non-kinetic support, LH mostly met with militia members, but the IRGC and other Iranian actors dominated in this specific support, as well as other forms, including funding, logistics, recruitment, and social service provisions.

Finding 3: During the Syrian civil war, training, funding, weapons provisions, and joint attacks were among the most common types of support provided by Iranian actors and LH.
• Of all supports, training was the most often provided, followed by joint attacks and funding.
• Iranian actors provided training, funding, and weapons support the most, while LH took the lead in joint attacks.

Finding 4: Among all Iranian actors, the IRGC was the most prolific in providing a range of supports to militias operating in Syria.
• When looking at specific Iranian actors, the IRGC provided the most kinetic support.
• Specifically, the IRGC predominantly focused on providing training and funding support.
• The Quds Force was responsible for 77 out of about 156 cases of IRGC support. The most common

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9   Abedin, p. 138; *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2020, p. 23; Marie Donovan, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan, "Iran's Reserve of Last Resort," American Enterprise Institute, January 1, 2020; Garrett Nada, "Iran's Growing Toll in Syria," United States Institute of Peace, October 26, 2015.

support types provided by the Quds Force were meeting with militia leaders and training.

Given the unique aspects of the Syrian case and the ongoing nature of Iran's involvement in that country, there are a few implications for this study. The conflict has strengthened various Iranian-backed forces, particularly Iranian security forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, and proxy groups, notably Iraq-based groups operating in Syria, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah.[10] This was the first conflict since the Iran-Iraq War where the Iranian army (*Artesh*) and IRGC worked together; and both groups of fighters gained considerable experience.[11] To justify the conflict, Iran was able to cultivate a religious narrative to not only assuage its domestic population but also to bolster proxy fighter recruitment to the conflict.[12] Relatedly, through this conflict, Iran institutionalized the recruitment of foreign fighters, notably the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades from Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively. Future conflicts with Iranian influence may see a similar narrative and fighter mobilization. Additionally, there is some concern that Iran may redeploy these fighters to other settings, such as Afghanistan.[13]

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10   Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 291; Michael Knights, "Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020).

11   Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 280, 291.

12   Abedin, pp. 138, 141, 148-149; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 205; Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 278-279; Ali Ansari and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, "The View From Tehran," in Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci eds., *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, August 2016, p. 3.

13   See, for example, Amir Toumaj, Candace Rondeaux, and Arif Ammar, "Soleimani's Shadow: The Fatemiyoun Division & Iran's Proxy Warfare Propaganda," New America, last updated July 9, 2021, pp. 69-70; Ali M. Latifi, "'Phantom force': Young Afghans fighting in Syria face uncertain future," Middle East Eye, September 26, 2020; Frud Bezhan, "The Return Of Pro-Iranian Militia Fighters To Afghanistan Fuels Fears In Kabul, Washington," RFERL, February 7, 2020; Colin P. Clarke and Ariane Tabatabai, "What Will Iran Do As the US Negotiates a Withdrawal from Afghanistan?" Defense One, April 6, 2020; Ali Alfoneh, "Afghans fear IRGC may deploy Fatemiyoun fighters to Afghanistan," Middle East Institute, March 5, 2018.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Militant agents are a primary component of Iranian grand strategy.[14] The agents (also called proxies) offer Iran several benefits, notably the ability to project power and counter adversaries while maintaining some deniability for Tehran.[15] Working with proxies aligns with Iran's forward defense national security strategy, which, according to Alex Vatanka, holds that "militarily confronting enemies outside of Iran's borders is preferable to having to face them inside of Iran's borders."[16] In part designed by the late IRGC-Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani, forward defense was developed to "overcome Iran's limitations given Tehran's isolation and lack of access to conventional military platforms."[17] Continuing under Soleimani's successor, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, the proxy model has demonstrated its utility, although it "still reflects Iran's military weak points."[18] Working through proxies comes at a lower cost than engagement by other means.[19] For example, in many ways, it was more efficient for Tehran to raise and/or bolster local militias in Syria, which have an intimate understanding of the sociocultural and physical landscape,[20] rather than send Iranian forces. Behnam Ben Taleblu remarks on Iran's proxy strategy throughout the conflict most pointedly: "Iran's support to proxies often takes a needs-based approach, which plays to local training and production capabilities, deniability, risk-tolerance, battle-field impact, and more."[21]

In the Syrian conflict's early years, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) raised and supported several local militias in Syria. Training and recruitment assistance to these militias persisted throughout the conflict. By the same token, Iraq-based proxies—which are more geographically proximate to Syria and were training and sending non-Iranian soldiers on behalf of the IRGC—can deploy at a relatively lower cost than direct engagement by Iranian forces.[22] Toward the former, Iran also directed Iraqi groups to Syria in the early years of the conflict. While there was a major retraction in 2014, when the Islamic State prominently emerged in Iraq, many of the Iraqi proxies maintained a presence in Syria throughout the conflict. Iran also recruited Afghan and Pakistani Shi`a to enlist in the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades, which were deployed in both 2013 and 2014 to Syria.[23]

The Syrian civil war was a boon for Iranian proxies, LH, and various Iranian forces alike, as all benefited from the combat experience.[24] For many Iranian forces, this was their first battle experience since the Iran-Iraq War.[25] Several analysts have remarked that LH grew in strength and capabilities because

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14 Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War."

15 Ibid.

16 Alex Vatanka, "Whither the IRGC of the 2020s?" New America, January 2021, p. 8.

17 Ibid., p. 20.

18 Ibid., p. 20.

19 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 290.

20 Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 30; Navin A. Bapat, "Understanding State Sponsorship of Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science* 42:1 (2012): pp. 1-29.

21 Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

22 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 280.

23 Phillip Smyth, "Iranian Proxies Step Up Their Role in Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 13, 2014; "*Hame anche bayad darbareh doh lashkar fatemiyoun va zeinabiyoun bedaneem* [Everything one needs to know about the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades]," *Defa Press*, July 28, 2020; Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, pp. 23, 103-104; Ahmad Shuja Jamal, "The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society," United States Institute of Peace, March 19, 2019, p. 7. The first Zeinabiyoun fatalities were recorded in July 2014. For more information, see Ali Alfoneh, "Using Syria as a Training Ground: The Case of the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 17, 2018. For a backgrounder on the Fatemiyoun Brigades, see Jamal.

24 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 291.

25 Ibid., p. 291.

of fighting during the civil war.[26] Even so, LH's involvement in the conflict undermined its popularity with the Lebanese public and the broader Arab world, particularly among Gulf states.[27] Notably, the conflict fomented an opportunity for Iran—particularly Soleimani as its major architect—to solidify a proxy network and a parallel logistical route vis-à-vis a land and air bridge extending from Iraq, through Syria and Lebanon to Palestine. It has forced the Iranian state to mature, modernizing its military procedures and thinking, and perfecting its "hybrid warfare capabilities."[28] Like their Iranian counterparts, the conflict in Syria fostered the proxies' operational capabilities.[29] Because of their involvement, the Iraqi-based proxies swelled in ranks and improved their capacity for training and conducting armed conflict.[30]

While the purview of this study ends in 2019, recent developments indicate Iran is continuing to maneuver itself into Syrian security and politics, likely with Assad's blessing.[31] Since 2019, there have been several indications that Iran and LH have not withdrawn from Syria.[32] Recent accounts suggest that Iranian forces are still present and active in Syria.[33] Since 2022, there have been reports of Iranian militias active in Syria, such as attacking U.S. forces in the country and smuggling weapons in Deir ez-Zor, among other activities.[34]

Despite the death of Soleimani, it appears the overall trajectory of his regional proxy network has continued even though his successor, Qaani, spent much of his previous tenure focusing on work in Afghanistan and other regions.[35] However, some have criticized Qaani's effectiveness at the helm of the IRGC proxy network, stating that the Quds Force's influence over its militias has declined in recent years.[36] Additionally, as the conflict in Syria waned, many Iraqi-based proxies returned their gaze inward, while some Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun fighters have relocated to Iran.[37] Iran has indicated that its regional activities—and seemingly, proxy network—are off the table in potential future negotiations with the United States under the Biden administration.[38] Iranian and Iranian-backed forces continue to pose a threat to U.S. coalition forces in Syria, as exemplified in several drone

26   Seth G. Jones, "The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 20, 2018; Jesse Rosenfeld, "How the Syrian Civil War Has Transformed Hezbollah," *Nation*, March 30, 2017; Nicholas Blanford, "Though Strengthened in Syria, Hezbollah Faces Unprecedented Dangers Within," *World Politics Review*, September 17, 2019.

27   See, for example, Samia Nakhoul and Tom Perry, "Lebanon's Hezbollah 'got power but lost the country,'" Reuters, August 19, 2020, and Lizzie Porter, "How the Arab world turned against Hezbollah," *Prospect*, October 5, 2020.

28   Ariane Tabatabai, "Syria Changed the Iranian Way of War," *Foreign Affairs*, August 16, 2019.

29   Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 290-291.

30   Knights, "Back into the Shadows?"

31   Ali Hashem, "IRGC Syrian commander removed 'upon request from Assad,'" Al-Monitor, November 15, 2021.

32   Golnaz Esfandiari, "Analysts See Little Change In Iran's Strategy In Syria, Despite Reports Of Withdrawal," RFERL, May 15, 2020; Nohad Topalian, "Hizbullah digs in near Syria's Sayyida Zainab shrine," Diyaruna, January 17, 2022.

33   Waleed Al-Khair, "Locals report major increase in IRGC militia activity in eastern Syria," Diyaruna, February 11, 2021; Esfandiari, "Analysts See Little Change In Iran's Strategy In Syria, Despite Reports Of Withdrawal;" Jared Szuba, "Can the US force Iran out of Syria? Not likely, former officials say," Al-Monitor, December 22, 2020; "SOHR | 'Reports of reducing Iranian troops in Syria untrue,'" Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 7, 2021; Waleed Abu al-Khair, "'Little Iran': IRGC evicts locals in eastern Syria as militant enclave expands," Diyaruna, March 19, 2021.

34   "SOHR: In front of the Russians…Iranian militias link the east of the Euphrates to the west of Syria;" Knights and Smith.

35   Ali Alfoneh, "Esmail Qaani: the next Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander?" American Enterprise Institute, January 11, 2012; Bezhan.

36   Faris al-Omran, "IRGC's Quds Force stalls under Qaani's lacklustre leadership," Diyaruna, November 11, 2021

37   See, for example, Toumaj, Rondeaux, and Ammar, pp. 69-70; "*Hame anche bayad darbareh doh lashkar fatemiyoun va zeinabiyoun bedaneem* [Everything one needs to know about the two Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun divisions];" and Amir Toumaj, "IRGC-led Afghan group holds first 'international conference' in Iran," FDD's Long War Journal, September 15, 2020.

38   Golnaz Esfandiari, "Analysts See Little Change In Iran's Strategy In Syria, Despite Reports Of Withdrawal," RFERL, May 15, 2020; Szuba.

attacks in 2021 that were linked to Iranian proxies.[39]

This report investigates the nature of Iranian and LH support to proxies operating in Syria from 2011 to 2019, using a macroscopic lens to note existing patterns of engagement. This approach provides an extended snapshot of Iranian support trends during several periods in the Syrian civil war, prior to major events in 2020, such as the U.S. airstrike against Soleimani, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

Specifically, this report asks:
* During the Syrian conflict, what types of support did Iran provide its proxies?
* How did Iran's support to its proxies change over time?
* How do Iranian actors and LH vary in their support to proxies, if at all?

Overview of Report's Approach

This study juxtaposes Iranian support to that of LH. By capturing and investigating the two entities in tandem, it finds nuances in the division of labor that exists between Iran and LH. This report studies Iranian support to 24 militias. While there are many other groups that were found to be linked to Iran,[40] only militias with a publicly demonstrated, substantial relationship with Iran between 2011 and 2019 were included.[41] Then, support patterns between groups and LH are researched using multi-language open sources and social media. Relationships were defined as evidence of existing tangible support. By virtue of this approach, this study does not include groups that only received support from LH, which is evident for some groups known to have links with Iran, such as Harakat Zain al-Abedin, among others. The limitation of this approach is discussed at the end of this chapter.

To best study macroscopic trends about support for Iranian-backed militias, the data in this report captures the presence of a relationship each year. This method is used for a couple of reasons. First, given the discrepancies that exist in open-source research, this approach ensures some standardization in analysis. Second, this macro-level view of Iranian proxy sponsorship provides the ability to study notable areas of overlap in different types of support. As Iranian strategy is opportunistic, multi-pronged, and incorporates elements of both hard and soft power,[42] this report studies a variety of supports ranging from tactical support, such as joint attacks and weapons provisions, to recruitment assistance and logistical support.

Components and Layout

The report's methodology follows this introduction and is laid out in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 provides a brief yet broad foundation of Iranian involvement in Syria, noting Syria's relationship with Iran under the Shah, the Iran-Iraq War, and the eve of the Syrian civil war. Against the background provided, Chapter 4 explores and contextualizes trends in Iranian and LH support to proxies using novel data. It concludes by looking at notable aspects of Iranian and LH support to proxies operating in Syria, such as by religious affiliation and geographic trends. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the results and some implications for future work.

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39 "Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress - Operation Inherent Resolve: October 1, 2021-December 31, 2021;" "U.S.-led coalition shoots down drone in southern Syria," Reuters, December 16, 2021; Eric Schmitt and Ronen Bergman, "Strike on U.S. Base Was Iranian Response to Israeli Attack, Officials Say," *New York Times*, November 18, 2021.

40 See appendix for a list of groups that were found to have links to Iran, but not substantial enough for inclusion in this study.

41 See the appendix for a full list of groups that the report researchers found to have links to Iran.

42 Sanam Vakil, "Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant," *Uluslararası Iliskiler* [International Relations] 15:60 (2018): pp. 105-120.

Chapter 2. Methodology

This section outlines the methodology and data collection process that was used to develop this report. In this, it is salient to discuss how militias were selected into the study, the definitions of the variables collected, and data collection techniques and caveats, including the nature of the sources.

Section 2.1. Selection of Militias for Study

To provide an overview, this study had three criteria for inclusion, listed below and explained in greater detail in the subsequent section:

(1) The militia was operating in Syria between 2011 and 2019;
(2) There is evidence of a demonstrated and tangible relationship between the militia and Iran; *and*
(3) For groups that met the above criteria, several variables could be coded that indicated the existence of a functioning entity.

(**1**) **Militias were included in this study if open-source information indicated they were operating in Syria between 2011 and 2019.** For this, sources' tenses and reporting dates were carefully reviewed to ensure activity was coded for the appropriate years.

(**2**) **For inclusion, it was necessary that groups had a demonstrated relationship with Iran.** Organizations were removed if they were only linked to Iran with non-specific language, such "Iran-backed," "linked to Iran," or "consulted Iran," and no other supporting information or relationships were found. For example, groups such as Mukhtar al-Thiqfi Brigade or Ansar al-Marja'iyah where only one support type was found were not included. To ensure a viable comparison of Iranian and LH support to proxies operating in Syria, this study consisted exclusively of groups linked to Iran or both Iran and LH. Groups found to be linked only to LH and not Iran were not included in the study. This decision was made to better analyze differences in support trends for Iranian actors and LH. Examples of groups reportedly found to be supported by LH but not Iran included the Imam Mahdi Brigade and Harakat al-Imam Zain al-Abidin. Both groups were set up and coordinated by LH but, through evaluation of open-source material, were not found to have definitive ties to Iranian entities.

(**3**) **Finally, the study only includes groups with sufficient data.** Put differently, groups needed to have several codable variables or relationships that indicated the existence of a functioning entity. The authors looked for information on ideological, tactical, and strategic support to be as holistic as possible in their investigation. The authors took care to only include groups about which they could find sufficient, corroborating sources in English, Persian, and Arabic open sources or groups' social media.

Groups Included

There are 24 groups in this study (see Table 2.1 for a list).[43] There are 316 relationships between Iranian entities (including the IRGC, IRGC-QF, and non-specific mentions of Iran, such as the Iranian government) or Lebanese Hezbollah and the groups. Of these, 78 were attributed to LH and 238 to Iranian actors.[44]

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43   A list of some groups found to have Iranian support but not included in this study can be found in the report's appendix.

44   For a related graphic breaking down these numbers, see Figure A6 in the appendix.

Table 2.1: Groups and Main Areas of Operation[45]

Operating in Syria	Operating in Syria and Iraq (Years of Operation in Syria)
Lebanese Resistance Brigades	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq[46] (2011-2018)
Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya	Badr Organization (2013, 2014, 2019)
Liwa al-Quds	Harakat al-Nujaba[47] (2013-2019)
Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA-Umbrella) Liwa Dhualfiqar (LAFA-Constituent)	Jaish al-Muwamal (2016)
Al-Ghaliboun	Khorasan Companies (2014-2016)
Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir	Saraya al-Jihad (2015-2018)
Quwat al-Ridha	Kata'ib Hezbollah[48] (2011-2019)
Fatemiyoun Brigades	Promised Day Brigades (2014, 2015)
Zeinabiyoun Brigades	Kata'ib al-Ansar al-Wilayah (2015-2016)
	Saraya al-Aqidah (2014)
	Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (2017)
	Kata'ib Sayyida al-Shuhada (2013-2014, 2016-2018)
	Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (2014-2018)

Section 2.2. Definitions of Variables Collected

In order to capture the operational aspects of Iran's partnerships with militias, the researchers coded several variables. It should be noted that several supports listed below could be provided together; these instances of overlap were double-coded, but only if provisions for both were clearly stated. For example, if the IRGC provided training to a militia, it implies some level of inherit coordination with the militia; however, coordination support was not coded unless the source(s) explicitly referenced some aspect of planning.

- **Training:** Does the group receive training from an Iranian entity or LH? This was coded in the direction of provision. Search terms included but were not limited to: train*, camp*, and instruct*. For example, when Iran provided training to the Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir militia in 2019, the relationship was coded with Iran as the sending entity and the militia as the receiving entity.[49] This variable also included instances where Iran arranged for the group to be trained elsewhere or by another entity.[50] Also, if Iran sent IRGC forces to the group's base for training, this overlapped with "Personnel Placement" support (below).

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45   Aliases for these groups were also included in search strings. For Iraqi-based groups, if applicable, the brigade number they were in within the Hashd al-Shaabi structure was also included.

46   Brigades, or subgroups that compose the broader group, included are: Liwa Kafil Zaynab, Liwa al-Shaheed al-Qa'id Abu Mousa al-Amiri, and Saba' al-Dujail.

47   Brigades included are: Al-Hamad Brigade, Brigade of Ammar bin Yasir, Golan Liberation Brigade, and Liwa al-Imam al-Hassan al-Mujtaba.

48   Brigades include Saraya al-Difa' al-Sha'abi.

49   "[The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is taking out a batch of leaders training camp east of Homs]," nedaa-sy.com, January 2, 2019.

50   For example, in 2016, Iran arranged for fighters from Jaish al-Muwamal to receive sniper training in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. For more information, see "Iraq: Jaysh al-Muwamal—a new Iranian militia to support Assad," Mulhak, August 22, 2016.

- **Joint Attacks:** Does the group attack with an Iranian entity or LH? This variable was coded in both directions. Search terms included but were not limited to: attack*, target*, bomb*, kill*, fight*, fought*, clash*, and martyr*. This variable captures instances when sources stated Iranian or LH forces attacked with groups; coordination was not assumed if further detail was not provided (i.e., was not explicitly stated in the sources). Specific instances of coordinating attacks were captured under "Coordination" support.
- **Funding:** Did the group receive funding from an Iranian entity or LH? This variable was coded in the direction of provision. (See description of "Training" variable for more information.) Search terms included but were not limited to: fund*, finance*, money, dollar*, and sponsor*.
- **Coordination:** Did the group receive support that could assist operations from an Iranian entity or LH? This can include intelligence sharing, transportation, other planning activities, and non-specific logistic support. Did the group provide such support to an Iranian entity or LH? This variable was coded in the direction of provision. (See description of "Training" variable for more information.) Search terms included but were not limited to: logistic*, transport*, organize*, guide*, and intelligence*. Many sources referred generally to the provision of "logistics" without specifics. Additionally, descriptions of militias "following the instructions of" Iranian actors or their involvement in the group's "planning" as well as militias receiving guidance or military advice from Iranian actors were also included under this type of support. While some of this support may overlap with "Joint Attacks" or "Training" support, the researchers found enough instances that were distinct enough to code "coordination" on its own, and it was coded regardless of whether it took place in the context of another type of support. As mentioned in the "Joint Attacks" description, overlap was not coded unless specified.
- **Weapons:** Did the group receive weapons from an Iranian entity or LH? This variable was coded in the direction of provision. (See description of "Training" variable for more information.) Search terms included but were not limited to guns, weapons systems, and artillery, among others. Descriptions of Iranian actors "equipping" or "providing equipment for" a militia were also coded as weapons support.
- **Meetings:** Did the group meet with an Iranian entity or LH? Like "Joint Attacks," this variable was coded in both directions. Search terms included but were not limited to: meet*, met*, dialogue*, negotiate*, and visit*. Like "Coordination," some of this might overlap with other variables, and like "Training," this variable encompasses any mentions of meetings between Iranian entities or LH and militias, regardless of whether it took place in the context of another type of support.
- **Personnel Placement:** Did Iran or LH send any personnel to this militia? This included advisors, soldiers, or trainers, among others, from the armed forces or Revolutionary Guard. This variable was coded in one direction, from Iran to the group. Search terms included but were not limited to: Iran * OR Tehran OR IRGC OR "Revolutionary Guard" OR "Revolutionary Guards" OR Pasdaran* OR Sepah* OR Soleimani OR Suleimani OR "Quds" OR "Qods" OR Basij. It should be noted that this variable does not focus on the size of the "placement" but rather the presence or absence of Iranian forces personnel that were reported to be embedded with proxy units in specific years.
- **Recruitment Assistance:** Did the group work with an Iranian entity or LH to recruit members? This variable was coded in one direction, from an Iranian entity or LH to the group. Search terms included but were not limited to: recruit*, enlist*, conscript*, advertise*, and pay*. While some elements of recruitment assistance may overlap with social services provision assistance, this support captures instances where sources specifically indicated Iranian or LH support during the recruitment process as they incentivized and sought to enlist potential fighters to their ranks.
- **Social Services Provision Assistance:** Did the group's social services provision have any Iranian or LH involvement? The variable was coded in one direction, from an Iranian entity to the group. Social services are any services a group provides to the community free of charge, including but not limited to reconstruction, humanitarian relief, trash collection, clinics, donation collections, and welfare services. Search terms included but were not limited to: welfare*, educate*, provide*, donate*, neighborhood*, and pilgrim*. As previously mentioned, some elements of this variable

may overlap with recruitment assistance, as social services may be employed to attract members to fight for the groups that provide them. However, this variable only captures instances where Iran or LH assisted the group in providing such social services.

Section 2.3. Notes about Select Groups

A Note about Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas. As captured in Table 2.1, both the umbrella organization for Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) as well as one constituent group, Liwa Dhualfiqar, are included. LAFA is best regarded as a consortium of militias where there is a central LAFA organization and several constituent militias.[51] Only one constituent LAFA group—Liwa Dhualfiqar—was included in this study. Other constituent groups are: Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn, Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib, Rapid Reaction Forces, Khadam al-Sayyida Zaynab, Suquor al-Imam al-Mahdi, and Qaida Quwet Abu Fadl al-Abbas.[52] They were not added because there was not a sufficient number of observations to meet the inclusion criteria (described earlier in this section). The LAFA umbrella organization was included as it had a distinctive leadership structure from its constituents.[53]

A Note about Iraq-Based Groups and the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades. For transparency, it is important to note nuances about the inclusion of the Iraq-based militias and the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades. As indicated by Figure A7 in the Appendix, Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades observations are no more than 16 in a given year, while observations from Iraqi groups can be up to half of all observations in a given year. Iraq-based groups have most observations in 2011, 2012, and 2015, relative to both Syrian-based groups and the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades. This aligns with existing research that indicates Iraq-based groups came in early in the conflict, but some returned to Iraq due to the growing threat of the Islamic State in 2014.[54] Some Iraqi groups were present throughout or later in the time period, as indicated in Table A7 (appendix). Several Iraqi groups are present in the dataset in 2014, many of which returned to Iraq in that year to fight against the Islamic State. However, the dataset in its present form does not capture this nuance, though it is discussed in Chapter 3.

Section 2.4. Data Collection

Data Set Arrangement for Trend Analysis. Relationships were coded between militias and Iranian actors per group per year. Put differently, each observation is the presence of a relationship between a militia and an Iranian actor each year. More specifically, with this approach, even if the IRGC, for example, provided weapons to a militia multiple times in 2011, this was recorded as a single relationship observation in 2011.

This provides a uniform analysis of important trends in the data, which is complicated when mining from open sources. The 'true' number of instances of a relationship each year can be challenging to determine due to reporting effects (e.g., how many are observed by sources consulted). This approach standardizes the provision of different types of support to understand their potential interactions along a uniform scale. Each row represents a single relationship. This means that even if sources discussed relationships in tandem, they were coded separately. This was to protect against potential inference from sources about support provided in tandem. Limitations of this approach are discussed in Section 2.6.

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51   Phillip Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015, "Appendix 3, The LAFA Network of Organizations."

52   Ibid.

53   Ibid., "Appendix 3, The LAFA Network of Organizations."

54   *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 23; Smyth, "Iranian Proxies Step Up Their Role in Iraq."

This approach assists in the identification of critical areas for study, such as years and groups in which Iran provided multiple types of support or persisted in one type of support. The data allows the authors to pinpoint areas for targeted focus to study the conditions under which they existed. Additionally, it could be argued that the initial provision of support from a state is the most significant, as it has the highest sunk costs for the sponsor.[55]

Additionally, the sources utilized in research for this study do not often provide specific dates involving the provision of tactical variables (e.g., logistics and weapons), making it difficult to decrease the unit of analysis to a month or month-day. By creating this dataset at the annual level, the baseline data could be collected efficiently and strategically to inform the best ways on disaggregating the data later, with greater temporal specificity. To reiterate, as with most quantitative analytics, this approach is not without its limitations, which are discussed in more depth at the end of the next section.

Coding Process. The coding process occurred in multiple phases. In Phase 1, researchers conducted an initial search for each group using English- and Arabic-language open sources. Researchers started in either English- or Arabic-language sources. In Phase 2, the sources in other languages were examined, building off of the previously coded information. Concurrently, social media information in Arabic was collected from various social media accounts and Telegram, and later added to the group coding. In Phase 3, the group coding was quality-controlled for rigor of sources and validity of information, among other related considerations explained below.

Types of Sources. The research team used various policy, academic, and news sources. These include but are not limited to think-tank reports (e.g., RAND Corporation and the Washington Institute), datasets (e.g., Janes Terrorism and Insurgency database), and newspaper sources (e.g., *The Guardian*). Sources were collected from Google searches and NexisUni in English, and from the former in Arabic and Persian. Additionally, the research team used the groups' social media on Twitter, Facebook, or Telegram where possible.

The availability of sources is also important. It should be noted that some of the militias are not as well-known, and so the authors were beholden to the open-source information they could access. Source availability also affected how many groups could be included in the dataset.

To ensure some uniformity across data collection using NexisUni, the authors provided the research team with search strings to implement at first, then tasked research assistants to modify those search strings to gather appropriate sources. Sample terms for these search strings with variable definitions are outlined above.

Rigor of Sources. Sources' rigor was also significant in the present study. As this project concerns Iranian-backed militias, the authors also included information from Iranian state news media in English and Persian. Care was taken to corroborate information in these sources with a second non-Iranian state media source. If it could not be corroborated, the relationship was coded as "suspected." Sources were also kept or discarded based on general source validity. Additionally, where appropriate, a note about the suspected nature of the information was made. Suspected relationships (i.e., observations of support between Iranian actors and LH and the militias) are those in which sources could not be corroborated or the source indicated the relationship was alleged. In the initial rounds of coding, there were more suspected relationships. In the final dataset, not all suspected relationships were included. Suspected relationships were removed if that was the only instance wherein the group

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55   Stephen D. Collins, "State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat," *Politics & Policy* 42:1 (2014): pp. 135, 150; Faruk Ekmekci, "Terrorism as War by Other Means: National Security and State Support for Terrorism," *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 54:1 (2011): pp. 125-141; San-Akca, p. 30.

and Iran had an existing relationship (of any type). If there was an additional relationship recorded, before or after the suspected relationship, that suspected relationship was included, and because of the precedent of the connection between the Iranian actor and LH, the nature of the relationship was adjusted to confirmed. If there was a precedent for the relationship between Iran and the militia group, the researchers felt this lent additional credence to the notion that a relationship exists (and therefore is not suspected).

Some considerations were taken for certain variables. Although more than one source was preferred for the data, due to the fine-grained nature of the coding and the groups, oftentimes one source per variable was all that was available. This was especially true for certain variables like meetings, logistics, and trainings. While this is not ideal, in these instances, the sources' strength was also considered when deciding to keep or remove the coded information.

Corroborating sources is less important for some types of sources, such as pictures on social media depicting meetings where participants can be identified. For example, meeting observations were coded from social media posts based on individuals shown in images and mentioned in captions as well as the date of the post. Occasionally, no specific date was included with the relevant image or described in the article itself. In those cases, the information was stored but not coded. For example, a 2013 article by Middle East Online published an image of an LAFA leader with the Iranian president.[56] No information on the timeframe of the captured photo was included, and thus, the meeting was not coded.

Use of Interviews. The inclusion of interviews from subject matter experts in academia and policy bolstered the findings in this report. Interviews were not used for coding any variables in this study; instead, they were conducted after the report's findings were completed as a way of evaluating and adding dimension to those findings. They were used to contextualize trends and the conflict using insights not readily available in existing literature. This report does not rely on fieldwork, which may be useful in contextualizing the macro-level trends found in this study. However, conducting interviews is qualitatively different than engaging in fieldwork. For example, fieldwork may yield insights from individuals in government or from those engaged in ground operations countering Iranian proxies. Although interviewees may have had some operational expertise, the authors relied primarily on those with academic or policy-relevant expertise.

Section 2.5. Defining the Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Support Framework

To understand some of the support patterns, it may be useful to employ a parsimonious organizing framework. For the purposes of this report, kinetic support consists of materiel and activity relevant to, or often used in support of, tactical operations. This includes personnel placement, training, weapons, and joint attacks. Non-kinetic support encompasses longer-term support and can be used to enable not only operations involving the lethal use of force but also soft-power initiatives, in addition to other types of activity. It includes funding, coordination, recruiting, providing social services, and holding meetings between Iranian actors and LH and militia members.

The kinetic and non-kinetic categories can—but do not necessarily—overlap with hard and soft power, respectively. Tehran seemingly conflates hard and soft power into a "smart power" approach through a combination of both types of measures to further its regional influence.[57] However, observing and measuring these concepts using open-source research, particularly soft power, can be challenging. For this reason, the authors opt to focus on kinetic and non-kinetic support as it is easier to observe

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56   "A Prominent Leader Of Liwa Abu Fadl Al-Abbas, Which is Supported by Iran, is Killed in Syria," Middle East Online, July 30, 2017.

57   Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 156.

and measure.

While these are the parameters utilized in this report, it should be noted that they come with their own limitations. First, it is important to note that the authors are aware that without knowing the intended purpose behind some supports, such as personnel placement and training, it may be that these types of support may not necessarily be kinetic activity.[58] For example, Iran could have sent advisors to help proxy groups to enhance their approaches to battlefield or combat trauma. Such support could include the physical placement of trainers from Iranian forces in Syria to enhance partner capability in that area, for example. Second, there may be some overlap in the kinetic and non-kinetic support categories. For example, funding, coordination, and meetings can also affect kinetic objectives. Even so, for the purposes of this study, these are categorized as non-kinetic given they can be applicable in settings outside of the battlefield.

Section 2.6. Limitations of Study

The following section outlines several limitations that may exist in this study.

Use of open sources. This report's reliance on open sources can yield some potential challenges. First, open sources are susceptible to over- and under-reporting. Over-reporting can exist in open sources when individuals, events, and/or groups are deemed newsworthy or politically relevant. As such, they result in more attention from journalists and analysts alike. By the same token, under-reporting can happen when certain entities are not considered as important or journalists do not have access to areas due to conflict or other travel restrictions. Additionally, for various reasons, many organizations do not wish to advertise their existence and thus strive to make their activity covert. In fact, some groups may use aliases to claim attacks or stay covert while achieving their goals.[59] Consequently, even if they boast a robust operational presence in the Syrian theater, it is difficult to document their activities. Shifting allegiances and alliances within and among groups and individuals often make it difficult to untangle an organization's narrative when reviewing primary and secondary open sources.

Using open sources also can be misleading in the intention or target of support. This is perhaps best exemplified with the provision of weapons support. In the dataset, there are several instances of Iran providing weapons or weapons-related materiel to proxies operating in Syria, which includes both Syrian- and Iraqi-based groups. The authors and research team took great care to only include instances where sources explicitly stated specific groups as the recipients of Iranian support. However, the muddiness of Iranian weapons proliferation makes this complicated. When Iran provides weapons to Iraqi-based groups, for instance, it can be unclear if the weapons are for groups' use in Iraq, in Syria, or being transferred to LH in Syria or Lebanon.[60]

The use of open sources also precluded the researchers from accessing material that Iran, Syria, or other state actors have chosen not to publicize. This could necessarily include sensitive material regarding the Iranian proxy network, including support specifics. Expert interviews were conducted to add nuance and detail to the findings in this study, but more in-depth fieldwork, such as interviewing various stakeholders, would have been ideal.

Exclusion of groups that only received support from LH. The inclusion criteria for this study included the existence of a demonstrated relationship with Iran. The criteria also excluded groups that

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58   The authors thank Don Rassler for this point.

59   The authors thank Muhammad al-`Ubaydi for this insight.

60   Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

were only referred to as "Iran-backed" or the like. It also excludes a handful of groups that, according to open sources, were reported to have only received support from LH with virtually no demonstrated relationship with Iran, such as the Imam Mahdi Brigade or Harakat al-Zain al-Abedin. Like most terrorism research, the use of open sources affects this issue. Groups that are *only* described as being backed by LH or as "Iranian-backed" may have a more robust relationship with Iranian entities not captured in open sources, and therefore not included in this study. While groups only backed by LH are an important subset to investigate, the authors were more interested in understanding trends in support for groups with demonstrated Iranian links that were discernable from open sources. Yet, it is possible, and arguably even likely, that the exclusion of this subset of groups could change the character and/or extent of LH's impact in Syria. If LH is to be regarded as Iran's operational partner in Syria (i.e., takes directions from Iran but is not involved in decision-making),[61] the exclusion of these groups in this report can omit an important layer of Iranian proxy support in the country.

Coding one relationship per variable per year. As previously described, relationships between Iran and/or Hezbollah and the Iranian-backed militias are limited to one per variable per year. However, data collection at the event-level could have yielded more fine-grained trends. While this framework flattens relationships between Iran and militias (i.e., collapses "one relationship" per type of support per year) and likely does not reflect the reality of these relationships, the authors found it a sufficient compromise given the trade-offs in time and efficiency. One potential downside is the lack of attention to magnitude (e.g., number of instances) of certain supports. This can reduce visibility on the significance of not only certain support types but also the strength of relationships between certain militias and Iranian actors or LH.[62]

Annual trends overlook finer trends. Aggregating at the group-year or relationship-year level of analysis erases some of the nuance that could be gleaned from weekly, monthly, or even quarterly trends. The decision to keep data at the annual level was based on various issues related to open-source research that have been previously discussed, including the covert nature of Iranian support in open sources.

Not all groups were active for the entire period of study. It is important to note that not all groups were active for the entire period, 2011 to 2019. This could affect data reporting and availability in a couple of ways. First, groups could have been active for longer than researchers found but not reflected as such in the dataset due to under-reporting effects. Similarly, some groups that are more well-known, whether due to capabilities and/or newsworthiness, may be over-reported in available sources.

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61 Hanin Ghaddar, "Hezbollah-Iran Dynamics: A Proxy, Not a Partner," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2019; authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

62 The authors thank Don Rassler for his insight regarding this point.

Chapter 3. Background on Iranian Proxy Involvement in Syria

This next chapter provides a general review of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war, both directly and via their creation and support of proxies. While the central focus of this report is on the relationship between Iran and the militias it supports in Syria, it is important to consider the context of Iran's activities with the Syrian government and other aspects not evaluated in this report. In an effort to assess Iran's support to proxies in Syria, this background chapter provides, in part, a brief historical overview of the Islamic Republic of Iran's involvement in Syria, which dates to the Iran-Iraq War and was further solidified with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.[63] This section considers the extent of Iranian forces' (to include Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi proxies) involvement and supplementary activities in Syria.

Toward that end, it is useful to first review some motivators of Iran's proxy strategy in Syria[64] and how asymmetric forces fit into it. Iran's motivations may be most influenced by: (a) its historical relationship with Syrian leadership, (b) Syria's geopolitical utility for Iranian regional strategy, and (c) Tehran's desire for regional influence. First, Iran has a long-standing relationship with Bashar al-Assad, which was initiated when his father was in power.[65] Second, and related to the first point, Syria bears strategic utility as a crucial link in the land and air bridge connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean.[66] Through Syria, Iran shuttles weapons and other resources to Lebanon and Palestine.[67] Finally, by maintaining a foothold in Syria, Iran seeks to quell external influence, be it Israeli, American, or—at times—Russian.[68]

Working with proxies is a method by which Iran can accomplish its goals in Syria (discussed more in the next subsection). Bolstering proxies in Syria—ranging from raising militias to moving militant groups from nearby Lebanon and Iraq—provides an opportunity for Iran to consolidate or expand its influence into Syria politically, militarily, and culturally.[69] Iran's proxy activities are part and parcel of its broader military and national security strategy.[70] Yet, much of its military activity is appended with cultural and other soft-power initiatives through religious and educational institutions, relief aid, and related activities. While often discussed separately, hard and soft power practices are not easily disentangled as they mutually reinforce one another. Syria is an excellent case in which to study the multidimensional approach Tehran takes to engrain its influence—whether security-related, political, or sociocultural.

Section 3.1. Brief Historical Overview of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah's Involvement in Syria

The Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria have a well-established relationship that dates back to the 1980s, when the two states shared consulates and general political cooperation.[71] During the Iran-

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63   Ali Soufan, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy," *CTC Sentinel* 11:10 (2018).

64   For an overview of Iranian proxy strategy in Syria, see *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* and Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, "Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence," *International Affairs* 95:2 (2019): pp. 341-364.

65   Afshon Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: the Limits of Religion," *International Affairs* 94:6 (2018): p. 1,252.

66   David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, June 18, 2019; Abedin, p. 135.

67   Adesnik and Taleblu.

68   Soufan; Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013). For more on Iran's relationship with Russia, see John W. Parker, "Between Russia and Iran: Room to Pursue American Interests in Syria," Institute for National Strategic Studies, January 2019.

69   Ahmadian and Mohseni.

70   Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients."

71   Kamal Alam, "The View from Damascus," in Tabrizi and Pantucci eds., *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, pp. 12-14.

Iraq War, the two countries had a primarily tactical relationship.[72] According to Ali Soufan, Hafez al-Assad closed a crucial oil pipeline to weaken Iraq during the war.[73] Over time, their partnership became more pronounced for various geopolitical and strategic reasons, including countering Israeli influence, Saddam's Iraq, and the United States' presence in the region after the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[74] In many ways, Syria is central to Iranian national security, particularly as an Arab ally, of which Iran has few.[75] In the decade or so before the Syrian civil war, Iran had a foothold in Syria. The two countries traded, but Iran was not Syria's main importer or exporter of goods.[76] In the aftermath of Saddam's government, Iran and Syria had differing opinions about the best form of government for Baghdad.[77] Even so, both were wary of the United States' growing reach in the region.[78] Syria, as an Arab ally, had and continues to have multifold benefits for Iran vis-à-vis influence in and access to Lebanon[79] and balancing against Israel.[80] Notably, in Syria, Iran found an opportunity to export its religious ideology. While Assad's family and the political elite in Syria are Alawite, an offshoot of the Ja'afari Shi`a of Iran, Iraq, and other countries, the Syrian government was sympathetic to a secular approach.[81] Assad's—and the Alawites community's—rapport with Iran did not extend to other religious and political groups in Syria.[82] Even the Alawite ruling class purposely separates itself from Shi`ism broadly and the Iranian variant specifically.[83] As a Baathist regime, which includes Christians and Marxists in its ranks, the Assad government follows secular Arab nationalism, which puts it at odds with Iran's fundamentalist worldview.[84] However, because of Assad's need for Iranian support in the early days of the civil war, Iran had opportunities to entrench itself religiously and culturally in Syria through religious schools and institutions, among other vehicles.[85] Iran was also able to promote the narrative that culturally significant Shi`a religious institutions, such as the Shrine of Sayyeda Zainab and Shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya in Damascus, were vulnerable to attack. After salafi-jihadi groups moved to attack Shi`a shrines, Iran was able to use the narrative of a sectarian conflict to enlist foreign recruits.[86] The upheaval helped justify Tehran's presence and mobilize fighters.[87] Iran has also

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72   Nakissa Jahanbani, "Beyond Soleimani: Implications for Iran's Proxy Network in Iraq and Syria," Combating Terrorism Center Perspectives, January 10, 2020.

73   Soufan.

74   Daniel Byman, "Syria and Iran: What's Behind the Enduring Alliance," Brookings Institution, July 19, 2006; Abedin, p. 127; Alam, pp. 12-13; Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 277.

75   Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 205; Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 277; Abedin, p. 130.

76   Alam, p. 15.

77   Ibid., p. 13.

78   Jubin Goodarzi, "Iran and Syria," United States Institute of Peace, October 11, 2010; Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 277; Soufan.

79   Abedin, p. 135; Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 277; Adesnik and Taleblu.

80   Nader Uskowi, "The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel," Issue Brief, Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, September 2018, p. 1; Diane Zorri, Houman Sadri, and David Ellis, *Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU Press, 2020), p. 53.

81   The authors thank Muhammad al-`Ubaydi for his insight regarding this point. For more information, see Diana Darke, "Is Bashar Al-Assad Really the Guardian Angel of Syria's Minorities?" Middle East Institute, April 12, 2021; Joumanah El Matrah, Hidayet Ceylan, Asha Bedar, and Sheikh Abraham Isa Ibrahim; "Introduction to Muslim Diversity: Alawite & Alevi Traditions," Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights, 2014.

82   Zorri, Sadri, and Ellis, p. 53.

83   Ibid., p. 57.

84   Ibid., pp. 53-54, 57.

85   The authors thank Muhammad al-`Ubaydi for his insight regarding this point. For more information, see Anchal Vohra, "Iran Is Trying to Convert Syria to Shiism," *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2021; Nakissa Jahanbani, Oula A. Alrifai, and Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Long Game in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 29, 2021.

86   Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, "The View From Tehran: Iran's Militia Doctrine," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, February 2021, p. 42.

87   Authors' interview, Oula Alrifai, May 2021; authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

leveraged its participation in pro-Assad military campaigns to cement access to regime-controlled areas in western Syria to use as coordinating bases for the IRGC and its proxies.[88]

Like Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) has a long-standing relationship with the Syrian government, which was strengthened during Hafez al-Assad's rule.[89] Both father and son worked with the Lebanese organization: LH assisted Syria in realizing its goals in Lebanon, and Damascus helped supply the group militarily.[90] Relatedly, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah "shared almost identical political and military objectives" in Syria, which, in addition to defending the Assad regime, included securing the border with Lebanon, Shi`a communities, and existing logistical and supply routes within the country, as well as developing a network of proxies inside Syria.[91] Despite LH's own motivations for intervening in Syria, there was likely a high level of coordination between Hezbollah's leadership and the government in Iran.[92] In Syria, LH was playing the role of an intermediary between Farsi-speaking elements and Arabic-speaking Syrian forces—including proxies.[93]

Iran had multifold incentives to be involved in Syria. In part, Tehran was potentially excited by the prospects of secular, Western-sympathetic governments collapsing during the Arab Spring.[94] In September 2012, international players were hedging bets on when Assad would fall, and Iran was likely concerned about this development.[95] Assad did not have enough ground troops to launch an offensive and instead concentrated on a defensive strategy to hold strategically important areas such as the coastal and Christian areas.[96] According to Ali Alfoneh, "The perceived threat to survival of the Baath regime in Syria motivated the Islamic Republic's reactivation of dormant proxies and mobilization of new proxy groups."[97] In late 2012, Iran became directly involved on the ground. Iran's presence likely contributed to a shift in Syrian strategy, as Assad had an influx of resources to dedicate to recapturing Homs, which was under siege at the time and necessary to maintaining continuity between the coastal areas and Damascus.[98] Toward this, LH was a decisive factor in taking back Homs.[99] Meanwhile, Iran mobilized other militias to reinforce areas around Damascus, using the religious narrative of protecting Shi`a shrines to do so.[100]

Despite this, Iran did not publicly jump to Assad's aid from the onset of the conflict. In fact, the Iranian government was seemingly surprised by the outbreak of protests in Syria in March 2011 and remained quiet about the unrest at first.[101] There was also some disagreement among Iranian politicians about the necessary extent of Iran's involvement in Syria, given the unpopularity of intervention among the

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88   Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "Political Strategy in Unconventional Warfare: Opportunities Lost in Eastern Syria and Preparing for the Future," Joint Special Operations University, March 2019, p. 64.

89   *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 86.

90   Ibid., p. 86.

91   Ibid., p. 88.

92   Authors' interview, Afshon Ostovar, June 2021.

93   Authors' interview, Fred Kagan, June 2021.

94   Abedin, pp. 135-137. More notably, Iran framed the events of the Arab Spring as an "Islamist awakening" and a "natural extension of the Iranian Islamic Revolution." See Abedin, p. 136.

95   Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

96   Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021; Zorri, Sadri, and Ellis, pp. 54-57.

97   Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021.

98   Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

99   Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

100 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

101 Abedin, pp. 135-137.

Iranian public and the reputational and physical costs of assisting Assad.[102] Some in Rouhani's circle questioned the extent of Iran's intervention in Syria, but this debate was quashed quickly by supporters of the "Axis of Resistance" narrative.[103]

In contrast, LH was operational in Syria in the early days of the civil war.[104] Some sources report LH fatalities in 2011.[105] In the early years of the conflict, LH did not announce its role in Syria, even when Iranian leaders began admitting to their involvement, and the delay in acknowledging LH's involvement was due in part to the domestic political reception in Lebanon.[106] At the onset, LH justified its involvement as ideological—"a necessity to protect Lebanon's borders, Shi`a villages, and Shi`a shrines in Damascus."[107] This notion quickly unraveled with LH's deployment to the Battle of Aleppo in 2015, "a shrine-less non-Shi`a city far from the Lebanese border."[108] With LH, Iran instituted a "train-the-trainer" model, which permitted Iran to remove itself "another degree from the network's activities and thus to lower their costs."[109] LH's prior experience and activities provided groups with more "know how" that, if effective, was able to "produce highly elite, specialized hybrid units capable of fighting both state and non-state actors at a lower cost for Iran."[110] However, as a result of and over the course of the conflict, LH's need to fill its ranks led to less ideological training overall for its fighters, according to Hanin Ghaddar, who outlines that LH fighters in Syria could be categorized into two groups: (1) one of seasoned commanders and fighters, and (2) two new groups of fast recruits and contractors.[111] The former were LH elites who had fought in 2006 or were recruited in the conflict's aftermath as full-time fighters; they had ideological and military training from LH.[112] The latter group of fast recruits received military training but not the same level of ideological indoctrination.[113] Consequently, they were not as well trained as the seasoned fighters and less ideologically oriented; they were mostly deployed as foot soldiers.[114] Finally, contractors signed a contract for one to two years, mainly motivated by salary and not ideology.[115]

Iran—notably the IRGC—advised Assad about suppressing the initial protests and managing warfare propaganda earlier in 2011.[116] LH also assisted the Assad regime in quelling uprisings in the early days

102   Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 278.

103   Authors' interview, Alex Vatanka, June 2021. Here, the "Axis of Resistance" refers to both a narrative and a group of actors. Immediately after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the concept of an "Axis of Resistance" had not yet materialized; rather, it existed as a rhetorical goal for the new Iranian regime through which to exert regional influence and challenge the regional status quo. In recent years, this rhetorical goal has morphed into a tangible collection of state and non-state actors including but not limited to LH, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, the Houthis, and several Palestinian armed groups. In addition to evolving into an actual collection of actors, the "Axis of Resistance" is increasingly benefiting from more overt Iranian involvement in the way of military deployments and joint military campaigns. This type of support marks a shift from Iran's prior, less direct support in the way of "covert collusion" and "rhetorical support." For more information, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution: The Changing Nature of Iran's Axis of Resistance," American Enterprise Institute, March 2020.

104   Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 216-218.

105   *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 87.

106   Ibid., pp. 86-87.

107   Ghaddar, "Hezbollah-Iran Dynamics: A Proxy, Not a Partner."

108   Ibid.

109   Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 291.

110   Ibid., p. 291.

111   Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

112   Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

113   Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

114   Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

115   Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

116   Ali Alfoneh and Michael Eisenstadt, "Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 11, 2016; Abedin, pp. 137-138.

of the Syrian civil war.[117] In the summer of 2011, Iranian leadership determined that the unrest and armed rebellion could possibly topple the Syrian government.[118] At this time, Iran began shifting to a more active role after dedicating substantial resources, including the deployment of the IRGC-QF, even though it was reported that they did not engage in combat until early 2012.[119] While Tehran acknowledged its first fatality in January 2012, as the Syrian civil war progressed, their losses became "undeniable."[120]

117   Claire Parker and Rick Noack, "Iran has invested in allies and proxies across the Middle East. Here's where they stand after Soleimani's death," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2020.

118   Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 277-279; Abedin, p. 137.

119   Abedin, p. 138; Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

120   Alfoneh and Eisenstadt. For additional sources, see *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* and Nada.

March 2011
Unrest in Syria.

2011
LH operational in Syria, assists in suppressing uprising.

Summer 2011
Iran concludes Assad could fall, deployed IRGC-QF.

January 2012
IRGC-QF engages in combat, acknowledges first fatality.

2012
Iran establishes Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades.

Late 2012
Iran sends advisors and militias to reinforce areas around Damascus, using the religious narrative of protecting the Shi'a shrines.

2013
Open-source data shows that Iranian-backed Iraqi proxies were launching attacks in Syria. Salafi-jihadist groups started perpetrating attacks against Shi'a shrines.

2011-2013
Iran sends various forces, including the *Artesh* and the IRGC's Ground Forces, to advise, support, and train Syrian forces.

2014-2015
IRGC-*Basij* forces move into Syria.

2014
Iran forces deploy to assist Iraq in fight against Islamic State. Iran and LH establish the National Defense Forces.

2015
Iran loses several IRGC high-ranking officials. Increases recruitment support to proxies in Syria to bolster ranks.

2015
Iran is concerned about weakening of Assad's regime. Russian intervention in fall. IRGC-Ground Forces and IRGC-QF fighters increase the intensity of operations in and around Aleppo. Overall surge of Iranian forces, with a high causality rate.

2015-2017
Iranian kinetic proxy support peaks.

February 2016
Regular Iranian army fighters in advising roles.

2016
Local Defense Forces launched. In May, large losses for Iranian-backed forces are followed by reduced deployments of IRGC-Ground Forces to Damascus.

2017
Iran announces defeat of Islamic State. US airstrike against Iranian proxies in Homs.

2014-2018
Iranian non-kinetic proxy support peaks.

2018
Iran participates in reconstruction convention in Syria, "Rebuild Syria." Syrian regime naturalizes large number of Iranians and fighters from Iranian proxies.

2019
Reports indicate a little over 1,600 Hezbollah fighters were killed over the course of the Syrian conflict. Iran participates in "Rebuild Syria."

2020
LH and Iranian-backed militias sustain losses into 2020. Iran and Syria agree to share scientific and other academic knowledge. Iran pledges to assist in rebuilding Syrian schools.

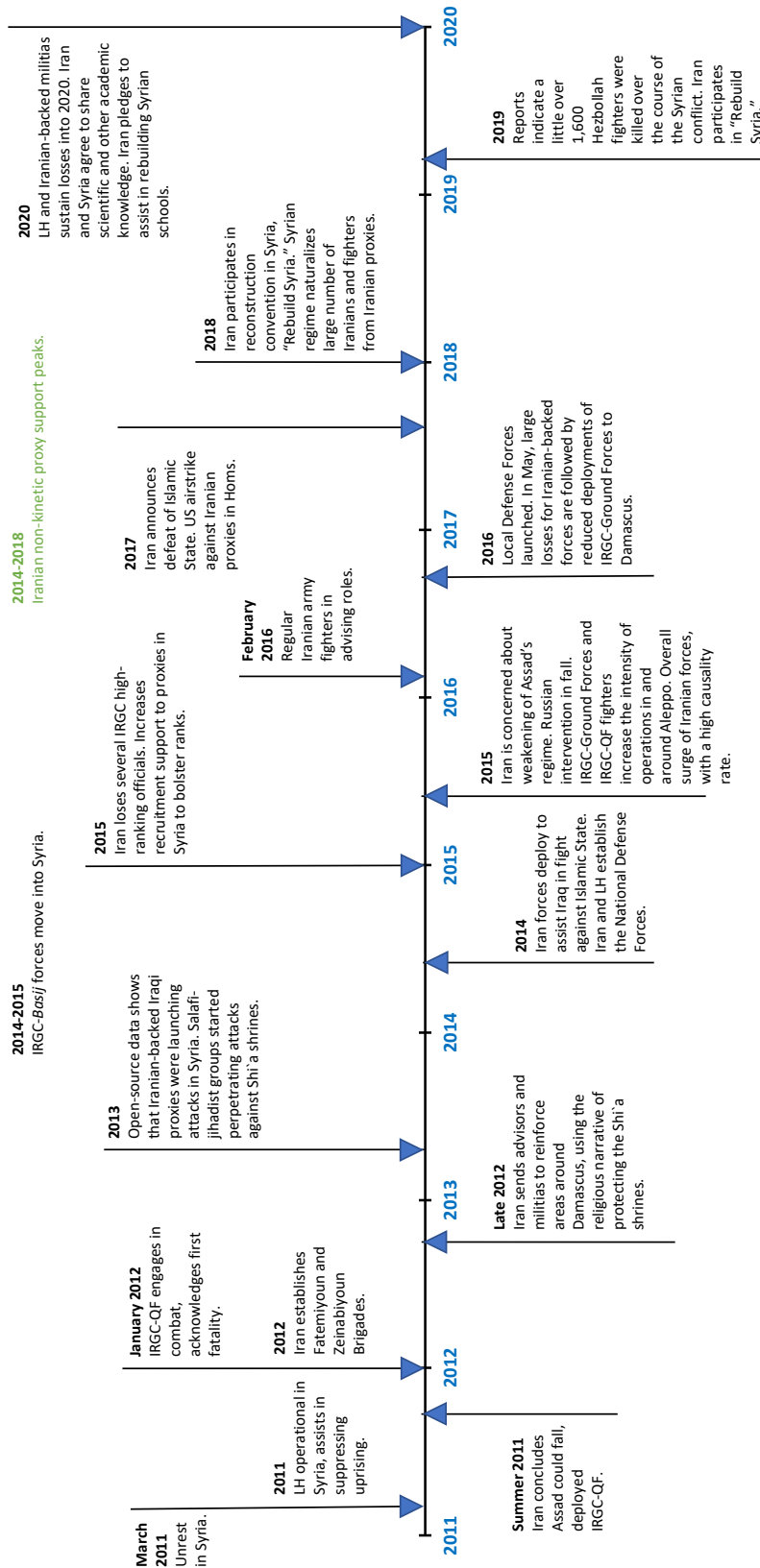2011   2012   2013   2014   2015   2016   2017   2018   2019   2020

Figure 3.1 Timeline of Major Iranian Support-Related Events During the Syrian Civil War, 2011-2020

Between 2011 and the beginning of 2013, as tensions mounted between Assad and anti-Assad factions, Iran also sent various forces, including its military, or *Artesh*, as well as the IRGC's Ground Forces and its Law Enforcement Force to advise the Syrian government and train and support the Syrian army.[121] This was the first time since the Iran-Iraq War that IRGC and *Artesh* soldiers fought side by side; as the conflict progressed, it was evident that the IRGC was the primary force and had some influence over the *Artesh*'s actions.[122] The deployment of the *Artesh* added legitimacy to Iran's intervention in Syria.[123]

Qassem Soleimani, then-commander of the Quds Force and architect of Iran's regional strategy,[124] potentially saw the Syrian civil war as a chance to enhance Iran's position and agenda in the region.[125] Over time, Iran was able to use the growing power of jihadi groups in Syria to cultivate a religious narrative to further justify its intervention to the Iranian public.[126] In the spring of 2013, salafi-jihadi groups started perpetrating attacks against Shi`a shrines. Consequently, Iran was able to frame defending Assad's regime as a quest to protect Shi`a shrines against a sectarian enemy.[127] This narrative was one of the reasons Iran was so successful in recruiting foreign fighters.[128] The Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades were involved in the early years of the conflict, likely motivated by Iranian losses earlier in the conflict.[129] This diversification of forces was a common tactic. Between 2014 and 2015, Iran siphoned forces from the domestic-facing IRGC-Basij into Syria, perhaps to compensate for its continued entrenchment and losses.[130] Specifically, the Basij's Imam Hossein Battalions sustained significant losses in Syria during this time.[131] In 2014, the same year the United States intervened in Syria, Iran was likely feeling the pressures of being spread too thin, as Iranian forces were also deployed to assist Iraqi troops in retaking Tikrit from the Islamic State.[132]

By 2015, Iran had suffered the losses of several senior IRGC commanders, and two generals.[133] Tehran coordinated a substantial recruitment drive in 2015 to bolster its ranks in Syria.[134] By that summer, Iran once again became concerned about a weakening Assad regime and military following a series of battlefield setbacks in northwest Syria.[135] Russia intervened in Syria in the fall of 2015, reportedly with some maneuvering from Soleimani.[136] Concurrently, in late 2015, Iran coordinated a surge of forces

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121   Ansari and Tabrizi p. 4; "Appendix: Timeline of Milestones in Iran's Engagement in the Syrian Civil War," in Tabrizi and Pantucci eds., *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, p. 51; Abedin, pp. 138-139; Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, "Chapter One: Tehran's Strategic Intent;" Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 205-213.

122   Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 280.

123   Ibid., p. 280.

124   Soufan.

125   Abedin, p. 148.

126   Ibid., pp. 141, 138; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, p. 205; Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 278-279.

127   Golkar and Aarabi, p. 42.

128   Abedin, pp. 148-149.

129   Soufan; Ariane M. Tabatabai, "After Soleimani: What's Next for Iran's Quds Force?" *CTC Sentinel* 13:1 (2020); Toumaj, Rondeaux, and Ammar, pp. 34-37.

130   Frederick W. Kagan and Paul Bucala, "Iran's evolving way of war: How the IRGC fights in Syria," American Enterprise Institute, March 2016; Donovan, Carl, and Kagan; Kristin Dailey, "Iran Has More Volunteers for the Syrian War Than It Knows What to Do With," *Foreign Policy*, May 12, 2016; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 210-213.

131   Kagan and Bucala; Donovan, Carl, and Kagan, p. 6.

132   Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Airstrikes by U.S. and Allies Hit ISIS Targets in Syria," *New York Times*, September 22, 2014; Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Deploys Forces to Fight al Qaeda-Inspired Militants in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2014.

133   Nada.

134   Nabih Bulos, "Why Iraqis are fighting in Syria; Shiite militiamen see the civil war next door as another front in their own battle with Islamic State," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 2016.

135   *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 92; Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

136   Alfoneh and Eisenstadt; Soufan.

to Syria,[137] but was able to retract them several months later, due to Russia's intervention.[138] During this time, "160 Iranians were reportedly killed and 300 wounded during this brief deployment–a remarkably high casualty rate of roughly 5 percent per month."[139] With Russia providing air support, pro-Assad forces—including Iran and related proxies—worked to consolidate control over crucial highways between Aleppo and Damascus, an endeavor that constituted most of the 2015-2017 strategy for the pro-Assad camp.[140] In late 2015, IRGC-Ground and Quds Force fighters increased the intensity of operations in and around Aleppo, which may have contributed to higher casualty rates for their fighters.[141] Iran diversified forces after additional losses in 2015, announcing the deployment of regular Iranian army fighters in advising roles to Syria in February 2016.[142]

The year 2016 also marked the first time Ankara put troops on the ground in Syria, given the increased threat on Turkey's eastern and southern borders.[143] As a direct competitor to its interests in the country, Iran likely took Turkey's intervention seriously.[144] Devastating losses for Iranian-backed forces in May 2016 were followed by reduced deployments of the IRGC Ground Forces to Damascus.[145] In December 2016, Assad, backed by Russian airstrikes and Iranian-backed militias, took back Aleppo.[146] In the weeks before the Astana talks started in Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkey brokered a ceasefire between rebels and Assad's government on December 30.[147]

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137 According to Alfoneh and Eisenstadt, at this time, Iran had allegedly sent some 700 fighters from the IRGC-Quds Force and Ground Forces as well as 4,000-5,000 LH fighters. Iran deployed a "surge" of up to 2,500 IRGC troops to Syria in September 2015.

138 Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

139 Ibid.

140 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

141 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, "Chapter One: Tehran's Strategic Intent;" Nicholas Hargreaves-Heald, "Proving Ground: Iran's Operational Strategy in Syria," Small Wars Journal, May 27, 2018.

142 Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

143 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021; Francesco Siccardi, "How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 14, 2021.

144 Authors' interview, Colin Clarke, June 2021.

145 Donovan, Carl, and Kagan, p. 4.

146 "Syria profile – Timeline," BBC, January 14, 2019; Amir Toumaj, "Array of pro-Syrian government forces advances in Aleppo," FDD's Long War Journal, December 9, 2016; "Syria's government recaptures all of Aleppo city," Al Jazeera, December 22, 2016.

147 Mona Yacoubian, "Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad," United States Institute of Peace, January 1, 2021; Shaun Walker and Kareem Shaheen, "Syria ceasefire appears to hold after rivals sign Russia-backed deal," *Guardian*, December 30, 2016.

Image 1: This image, picturing late IRGC-Quds Force commander Major General Qassem Soleimani was shared on the Al-Nujaba Satellite Channel's Telegram account on September 6, 2016, under its "Military Media" segment.[148]

On the heels of the ceasefire, Russia, Iran, and Turkey initiated the Astana peace talks[149] in January 2017.[150] In May, the United States struck Iranian proxies that were encroaching on a de-confliction zone near al-Tanf garrison in Homs province.[151] Specifically, reports indicated the pro-Iranian forces were there to solidify a link in supply routes between Iraq and Syria, a claim that was further bolstered when multiple Iranian-made drones were shot down around al-Tanf in June 2017.[152] Pro-Assad forces, including Iranian and Iranian-backed ones, had some successful campaigns in 2017, including recapturing Palmyra in March and the November capture of Al Bukamal from the Islamic State, the latter of which was widely publicized on Axis of Resistance-affiliated media.[153] In November, Rouhani announced the defeat of the Islamic State.[154]

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148 Translation of caption in graphic: "The Commander Qassem Suleimani inspects different groups of the Islamic Resistance Harakat al-Nujaba / Southern Aleppo Suburbs."

149 The Astana talks, sponsored by Iran, Russia, and Turkey, ran parallel to the U.S.-sponsored Geneva talks and were intended to complement those in Switzerland. The Geneva talks started in 2012 while the Astana process started in 2017 and continue into 2021. For a useful overview of both talks until 2017, see "Syria diplomatic talks: A timeline," Al Jazeera, September 15, 2017. For information about Astana talks in 2021, see Josephine Joly, "Astana Peace process: 17th round of talks on Syria begin in Kazakhstan," Euro News, December 12, 2021.

150 "Syria profile – Timeline;" Yacoubian; "Syria: the Astana peace process," France 24, May 9, 2018.

151 Martin Chulov, "US jets attack Iran-backed militiamen in south-eastern Syria," *Guardian*, May 19, 2017.

152 Julian Borger, "US shoots down second Iran-made armed drone over Syria in 12 days," *Guardian*, June 20, 2017; Ahmad Majidyar, "Iranian-Backed Forces Advancing to Southeast Syria despite U.S. Warning," Middle East Institute, May 24, 2017; "Al-Tanf, Syria," International Crisis Group, February 3, 2022.

153 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 101; Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Iranian-backed militias routed in last Syrian militant stronghold," Reuters, November 12, 2017.

154 Jamal, p. 6; Sam Meredith, "Iran President Rouhani declares end of Islamic State," CNBC, November 21, 2017.

Despite announcing victory against the Islamic State, Iran continued to be present in Syria in 2018 and 2019. Throughout 2018, Iran and Israel exchanged attacks on each other's military targets.[155] Iran, Russia, and Turkey met on several occasions in 2018 and 2019 to discuss the final front in Idlib province.[156] Iran's oil sales to Syria were also spotlighted and sanctioned in 2018 and 2019.[157] Concurrently, Iran also continued its involvement in various non-military initiatives. In both 2018 and 2019, Tehran participated in a Syrian reconstruction convention, and in 2018, Iran promised to build houses near Damascus.[158]

Section 3.2. Utility of Working with Proxy Militias in Syria

Although Iran had deployed a substantial number of its own forces, including the *Artesh* and IRGC, it also backed dozens of proxies in Syria. For Iran, working with militant non-state actors has several advantages and is a mainstay of its grand strategy. According to Afshon Ostovar, militant clients offer Iran five benefits: (1) maintaining independence from foreign powers, (2) exporting its worldview to Shi`a kin outside Iran, (3) extending military reach and countering adversaries while maintaining some deniability, (4) reducing audience costs of foreign intervention, and (5) partially resolving Iran's need for allies.[159] To these, Ariane Tabatabai has added: lowering the material and reputational costs of defeat.[160] In the context of Syria in particular, proxies offered a more cost-efficient means for Iran to achieve its goals in Syria. Yet, Iran "did not have a sufficient population to form domestic agents; it had to manufacture them."[161] Outsourcing fighters through proxies insulates Iran from the toll of losing people.[162] Had Tehran sent in comparable numbers of Iranian forces, the operational, human, and reputational cost would have likely been too high.[163] In comparison to sending only Iranian forces, it was more efficient for Tehran to raise and/or bolster local militias or train and send non-Iranian soldiers.[164]

While little is known about proxies' cost to Tehran, sources indicate between $5 to over $15 billion to support Assad's government annually, some of which covers support to proxies.[165] While illicit fundraising—such as through oil and narcotics sales, among others—is a backbone of the IRGC's economic activities, it is unclear to what extent these avenues fund militias.[166] Iran also likely funds groups through oil sales. In November 2018, the U.S. Department of Treasury sanctioned several individuals and entities for providing Iranian oil to the Syrian government, seemingly via Russian

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155 Yacoubian.

156 "The Latest: Iran, Russia, Turkey presidents meet in summit," Associated Press, September 7, 2018; Vladimir Soldatkin, Tuvan Gumrukcu, and Ece Toksabay, "Turkey, Russia, Iran agree steps to ease tensions in Syria's Idlib despite lingering differences," Reuters, September 16, 2019.

157 For example, see "U.S. Sanctions Network Supporting Assad, Hezbollah and Hamas," The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, November 27, 2018; "Disputed Iranian tanker Adrian Darya I photographed in Syrian port," *Telegraph*, September 7, 2019.

158 Oula A. Alrifai, "The 'Rebuild Syria' Exhibition: Iranian Influence and U.S. Sanctions," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 17, 2019; Oula Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 14, 2021.

159 Ostovar, "Grand Strategy of Militant Clients."

160 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 290.

161 Zorri, Sadri, and Ellis, pp. 53-54.

162 Authors' interview, Afshon Ostovar, June 2021.

163 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 277-281, 290.

164 Ibid., p. 280.

165 Abedin, p. 151; David Adesnik, "Iran Spends $16 Billion Annually to Support Terrorists and Rogue Regimes," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 10, 2018; Seth J. Frantzman, "Could Syria become Iran's 'Vietnam'?" *Jerusalem Post*, December 15, 2019; Yaghoub Fazeli, "Iran has spent $30 billion in Syria: Prominent MP," Al Arabiya, May 20, 2020.

166 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 269-270.

government subsidiaries that went on to fund proxies' activities in the region.[167]Another source indicates that Iran also fundraises for proxies through donations from IRGC offices in Iran.[168] While costs are important, these estimates may be offset by "potential financial gains, as Iran is now in a strong position to demand economic and commercial concessions from the Syrian government."[169]

In addition to the financial cost of proxies, Iran's involvement in Syria has also had a domestic cost. At various points in the civil war, Iranian politicians and the domestic public voiced concerns about Tehran in Syria and its backing of militias specifically. For example, in 2013, after Rouhani's presidential victory, government officials indicated concern about involvement in Syria, which "could prove deleterious to Iran's financial and ideological capital."[170] Their stance, however, was not favored by the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, who worked to quiet this camp while cultivating and spreading a national narrative about religious resistance.[171] Later in the conflict, in 2018 and 2019, protests erupted in Iranian cities over Tehran's involvement, calling for Iran's withdrawal from not only Syria but Lebanon and Palestinian territories as well.[172]

Like Iran, Hezbollah's activities in the Syrian civil war have also come at a cost. Some analysts attest that Hezbollah's losses have been considerable but were concealed in large part to quell domestic backlash.[173] Tracking LH losses throughout the conflict is difficult, as the group has incentives to downplay the numbers.[174] Seth Jones stated in June 2018 that, "estimates range from several hundred to several thousand Hezbollah fighters killed, with the most likely estimates between 1,000 and 2,000 dead."[175] Other accounts of LH fatalities are consistent with these numbers.[176] In 2019, it was reported a little over 1,600 Hezbollah fighters were killed in Syria.[177] Throughout the conflict, LH's losses in Syria affected Hezbollah's popularity in Lebanon as well as among Shi`a communities in Syria.[178] More recently, losses have fomented episodes of unrest among the LH's support base.[179] Both LH and Iranian-backed militias sustained losses into 2020.[180]

Directing Iraq-Based Militias to Syria. Iran also directed some Iraqi militias to Syria as well,

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167 The funds from this specific instance also reportedly funded Hamas' activities. For more information, see "U.S. Sanctions Network Supporting Assad, Hezbollah and Hamas."

168 Adnan Ali, "Syria: the new 'Fatemiyoun Brigade' for the battle of the south [*Sooriyeh: 'Liwa al-Fatemiyon' jadid mahrkt al-jonoob*]," Al-Araby, February 14, 2015.

169 Abedin, p. 151.

170 Ansari and Tabrizi, p. 3.

171 Ibid., p. 3; Abedin, pp. 148-149.

172 Adesnik; Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Iranians respond to the regime: 'Leave Syria alone!'" Al Jazeera, May 2, 2018; Faris al-Omran and Waleed Abu al-Khair, "Protests rage against Iran's influence in Syria," Diyaruna, December 19, 2019.

173 Nohad Topalian, "Hizbullah's human losses in Syria anger base," Al-Mashareq, February 14, 2020; Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah's Balancing Act Between Syria and Lebanon," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2017.

174 Ali Alfoneh, "Hezbollah Fatalities in the Syrian War," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 22, 2016.

175 Jones, "The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria;" Colin P. Clarke, "A Glass Half Empty? Taking Stock of Hezbollah's Losses in Syria," *Jerusalem Post*, October 15, 2017.

176 Alfoneh, "Hezbollah's Balancing Act Between Syria and Lebanon;" Jeffrey White, "Hizb Allah at War in Syria: Forces, Operations, Effects and Implications," *CTC Sentinel* 7:1 (2014); Clarke, "A Glass Half Empty?"

177 "Exclusive: Hezbollah's Gains from Syria War Equal Its Losses," Asharq al-Awsat, January 12, 2019.

178 Ibid.

179 Topalian, "Hizbullah's human losses in Syria anger base."

180 Joe Truzman, "Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias suffer heavy losses fighting in Syria," FDD's Long War Journal, February 5, 2020.

including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba, among others.[181] Available open-source data shows that Iranian-backed Iraqi proxies were launching attacks in Syria as early as 2013, but their involvement dated to the previous year.[182] In 2012 and 2013, various Iranian-backed Iraqi groups moved forces into Syria,[183] initially referred to as the Haydari Force or the Haydariyoun.[184] The moniker collectively described the fighters from Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS).[185]

*Image 2: This image was sent on the Kata'ib Sayed al-Shuhada (KSS)
Telegram channel on December 11, 2017, featuring Qassem Soleimani
(middle) and KSS Secretary General Abu Alaa al-Wala'i (right).*

Iranian-backed Iraqi militias were a critical part of Tehran's strategy in Syria. Iraqi groups' involvement in the Syrian conflict—and against the Islamic State in Iraq—considerably bolstered their capabilities and clout.[186] Michael Knights remarked that the Iraqi Special Groups transformed militarily—both in

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181   Nakissa Jahanbani, "Reviewing Iran's Proxies by Region: A Look Toward the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13:5 (2020); Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019). For an example of reference to the Haydariyoun in Iranian media, see "*Ravayat-e aghab randan takfiri-ha az 500 metri haram hazrat-e zeinab (s) + film* [The Story of Pushing Back Takfiris 500 Meters from the Shrine of Hazrat Zainab (with Film)]," *Defa Press*, November 2, 2020.

182   Jahanbani, "Reviewing Iran's Proxies by Region."

183   Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 216-218; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Return of Iraqi Shi'i Militias to Syria," Middle East Institute, March 16, 2015.

184   Knights, "Back into the Shadows?;" Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Life of Karar Abd al-Amir al-Shahmani: An Early Iraqi 'Martyr' in Syria," aymennjawad.org, April 17, 2019. For an example of the Heydariyoun's discussion in Iranian media, see "*Hadaf-e doshman tabdil-e mosul va halab be mahal-e hamleh be marzehaye iran bud* [The Enemy's Goal was to Use Mosul and Aleppo in to Get Closer to Iranian Borders]," *Defa Press*, January 13, 2016.

185   Knights, "Back into the Shadows?"; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Haydari Force in Syria: A Story from 2013," aymennjawad.org, April 23, 2019.

186   Knights, "Back into the Shadows?"

number and in size—because of the Syrian war and the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq.[187] For example, Kata'ib Hezbollah's size increased fivefold between 2011 and 2013, partially due to a need for a larger Iranian-backed combat force in Syria.[188] Much of these forces were recruited from Syrian Shi`a as well.[189]

Interesting among these are the Sadrist elements called on to supply fighters.[190] For example, Liwa Dhualfiqar received support from Iran but was also aligned closely and received tactical assistance from Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud, or the Promised Day Brigades.[191] Despite Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's opposition to the intervention in Syria, many of the organizations in the theater claim loyalty to him.[192] In some cases, despite touting their affiliation with al-Sadr, it is unclear if militias share a real connection with the Iraqi leader.[193] Using his name and image allows Iran and its proxies to counter al-Sadr's objection to intervention in Syria.[194] Despite being designated by Iran as a "Sadrist" faction and using his image in promotional material, many of these organizations also publicly follow *velayat-e faqih*.[195] Phillip Smyth indicates that Sadrist groups had a hand in establishing numerous Iranian-backed groups operating in Syria and Iraq, including AAH, LAFA, Liwa Dhualfiqar, and potentially the Rapid Reaction Forces.[196] These organizations illustrate Iran's ability to support, cooperate, and direct militias that follow a different religious leader than Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.[197]

National Defense Forces and Local Defense Forces. By 2014, in an effort to organize their loyal local proxies in Syria, Iran, with the assistance of LH, established an umbrella organization: the National Defense Forces (NDF).[198] The NDF had previously existed in the Syrian security structure but had not been activated or mobilized.[199] Before the NDF's reinstallation, the Assad regime had complemented its military security with that of the Shabiha, an Alawite organized crime group that was consolidated as a quasi-security service, which was active from the beginning of the conflict.[200] The creation of an NDF network was a stated objective for Tehran in Syria, per IRGC Brigadier-General Hossein Hamadani.[201] The NDF was a locally oriented entity composed of civilian volunteers; it was not a formal part of the Syrian security infrastructure but a supplementary entity meant to aid the Syrian army.[202] The NDF initiative did not gain traction in the early years of the conflict, despite the personnel, equipment, and funding Iran provided.[203]

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187 Ibid.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

190 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," pp. 24, 28, 39.

191 "Iranian militias officials announce their participation in the battles of Daraa on the side of the Syrian regime," nedaa-sy.com, June 27, 2018; Ahed Fadel, "Al-Hadath Channel Angers Iranian Militia in Syria [*Ghanaat 'al-Hadath' taghzib milishia eeraneeya fi sooriya*]," Al-Araby, May 20, 2020 (updated); Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," p. 39.

192 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," p. 17.

193 Ibid., pp. 17, 18.

194 Ibid., pp. 18, 19.

195 Ibid., pp. 18, 19.

196 Ibid., p. 39.

197 Phillip Smyth, "Beware of Muqtada al-Sadr," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 19, 2016.

198 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 88.

199 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

200 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021; O'Leary and Heras, pp. 4-5; "Syria unrest: Who are the shabiha?" BBC, May 29, 2012.

201 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 89.

202 Ibid., pp. 88-89; Goodarzi.

203 Goodarzi.

In 2016, Iran pivoted to a new approach: the Local Defense Forces (LDF). These were similar to the NDF but focused their area of operation in and around Aleppo.[204] They were part of the Syrian government and not composed of civilian volunteers.[205] While the LDF was a joint project between the IRGC and the Syrian armed forces, not all of its units worked with the Iranians.[206] Through this endeavor, Iran was able to embed within the Syrian security structure.[207] The financial burden of the LDF groups was shouldered by Syria's foreign allies, such as Iran.[208] Iran was also responsible for providing provisions and benefits for the injured and killed.[209]

The LDF incorporated several groups originally named as part of Syrian Hezbollah, or the Islamic Resistance in Syria, including Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya and Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir, among others.[210] Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir is the most prominent element of the LDF.[211] The earliest mentions of this group are in 2012, but it is thought to have been formally founded in 2014.[212] It was created with assistance from the IRGC with the goal of supporting Syria's military operations in the Badiya region.[213] This group offers a representative case of the LDF: it "pledges loyalty to Assad and religious/ideological affinity with Iran" without contradiction.[214]

Bolstering and Recruiting Fighters to Militias in Syrian Theater. From the onset of the Syrian civil war, the IRGC has been involved in training and equipping Assad's forces and that of local militias. This included raising some in addition to recruiting and equipping those that already existed. Additionally, the IRGC focused on recruiting non-Iranian soldiers to fight on its behalf in Syria. The Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades were set up in the early years of the conflict, both of which were vital to Iranian success in the region, such as in the recapture of Qusayr in 2013 from Syrian rebel forces.[215]

Iran engaged in more direct proxy recruitment in Syria. In addition to the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades, Soleimani and the Quds Force established the Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas[216] and, along with Hezbollah, assisted in the formation of Liwa Dhualfiqar.[217] Iran actively sought an audience with Liwa Dhualfiqar, arranging a visit for its founder in 2013.[218] This initial support often resulted in an ongoing tactical relationship. In the case of the Fatemiyoun Brigades, Iran also provided funding,[219] training,[220] and the use of their own commanders on the Syrian battlefield.[221] LH also assisted Iranian forces in

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204 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Local Defense Forces: Regime Auxiliary Forces in Aleppo," aymennjawad.org, May 23, 2016.

205 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 93.

206 Ibid., pp. 93-96.

207 Ibid., pp. 93-95.

208 Ibid., pp. 94-95.

209 Ibid., p. 94.

210 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Think Tanks Bark and the IRGC Moves On," aymennjawad.org, July 13, 2018.

211 Al-Tamimi, "The Local Defense Forces."

212 Ibid.

213 Waleed Abu al-Khair, "Former regime defector joins forces with IRGC in Syria desert," Diyaruna, July 31, 2017.

214 Al-Tamimi, "The Think Tanks Bark and the IRGC Moves On."

215 Soufan; Tabatabai, "After Soleimani."

216 Ahed Fadel, "WATCH: Iranian militia leader appears in video in Daraa," Al Arabiya, July 28, 2018; Hadi Al-Abdullah, "With Russian orders, the commander of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigades was arrested in Damascus," hadiabdullah.net, January 28, 2019.

217 Phillip Smyth, "Israel Is the New Front in the Syrian War," *Foreign Policy*, January 28, 2015; Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2018.

218 Smyth, "Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias."

219 Frantzman.

220 Ahmad Majidyar, "Iran Recruits and Trains Large Numbers of Afghan and Pakistani Shiites," Middle East Institute, January 18, 2017.

221 Ariel Ben Solomon, "Iranian commanders refuse orders to fight in Syria, report says," *Jerusalem Post*, November 4, 2015.

establishing and training militias, such as Quwat al-Ridha, Harakat al-Nujaba (HN), and Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya.[222] LH was active in raising both Shi`a and non-Shi`a militias. LH-directed groups were predominantly composed of Shi`a and Alawite Syrians, but the group also facilitated the creation of Christian militias.[223] LH has also directly recruited fighters to bolster its own Syrian forces, mainly recruiting Syrian residents near Lebanon or among areas that have ties to its Shi`a community.[224] After the village of Zita, across from Lebanon, was retaken from rebel forces, the rebels were eventually absorbed in Hezbollah.[225] Despite the trend of pulling from the Shi`a population, there is evidence that LH has worked with other minorities. Notably, in 2014, Hezbollah encouraged Christians to "form popular committees in Syria and Lebanon based on the 'Islamic resistance' model."[226] Furthermore, there seemed to be considerable coordination between these committees and Hezbollah.[227]

Iran used multiple methods of recruitment for its various proxies. This included salary incentives for various groups, including the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades.[228] Benefits were also offered to martyrs' families. A recruitment ad on Facebook posted by the Zeinabiyoun Brigades in 2015 stated that "if the recruit is killed in action, his children's education will be paid for and the family will be given pilgrimage trips to Iran, Iraq and Syria every year."[229] Coercive measures were also employed, with fighters presented with the choice of becoming a militia member or facing arrest or deportation from Iran. The authors found this tactic most used for recruitment to the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades.[230] In the Fatemiyoun Brigades, individuals were threatened with imprisonment or deportation by authorities and offered recruitment into the group as a potential alternative.[231] For the Zeinabiyoun, some sources attest the IRGC focuses on recruiting Pakistani Shi`a migrants and pilgrims, seemingly concentrating on those in lower socioeconomic strata.[232] A Pakistani official claimed undercover IRGC agents promised employment to Pakistanis who recently arrived in Iran.[233] Some are trafficked into Iran and placed in special detention facilities by the IRGC.[234] The IRGC allegedly threatens prisoners with capital punishment, with the potential to avoid it by enlisting in

222 Phillip Smyth, "How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 8, 2016; "Harakat al-Nujaba… an Iraqi version of Hezbollah," Al Jazeera, September 13, 2016; "Iranian Military Bases in Syria," Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, March 29, 2018; Shashank Joshi, "The Views of Non-State Actors," in Tabrizi and Pantucci, *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, pp. 25-31.

223 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," p. 27.

224 Phillip Smyth, "Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 26, 2018.

225 Ibid.

226 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," p. 47.

227 Ibid., p. 47.

228 Toumaj, Rondeaux, and Ammar; "Iran's broken promises shatter thousands of lives in Afghanistan, Pakistan," *Salaam Times*, October 23, 2020; Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, p. 104; Jamal, pp. 7-9; Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 22, 2016; "*Khanevadeh shohada-ye lashkar fatemiyoun saheb-e zamin maskooni mishavand* [Families of Fatemiyoun Brigades Martyrs To Become Residential Land Owners]," *Defa Press*, October 13, 2020.

229 Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for combat in Syria," Reuters, December 10, 2015.

230 "Treasury Designates Iran's Foreign Fighter Militias in Syria along with a Civilian Airline Ferrying Weapons to Syria," U.S. Department of Treasury, January 24, 2019.

231 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 104. For more examples of coercive recruitment strategies, see Rami Ali, "Beyond the Dichotomies of a Coercion and Voluntary Recruitment: Afghan Unaccompanied Minors Unveil their Recruitment Process in Iran," Stockholm University – Master's Thesis (2018); Daniel Howden and Metin Kodalak, "The Vulnerability Contest," NewsDeeply, October 18, 2018; Jamal, pp. 8-9.

232 Abdul Ghani Kakar, "Iran's Zainabiyoun Brigade steps up recruiting in Pakistan," Pakistan Forward, October 5, 2018; Abdul Ghani Kakar, "Iran's Zainabiyoun Brigade sets sights on Pakistani migrants, pilgrims," Pakistan Forward, June 20, 2019; "Lashkar-e-Zainab: Pakistani Shiite fighters trained in Iran," Manoto, December 20, 2017.

233 Kakar, "Iran's Zainabiyoun Brigade sets sights on Pakistani migrants, pilgrims."

234 Kakar, "Iran's Zainabiyoun Brigade steps up recruiting in Pakistan."

the Zeinabiyoun.[235] The lack of evidence does not necessarily preclude other groups from coercive recruitment tactics. The global focus on IRGC-affiliated groups like the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun could result in over-reporting. Additionally, due to the often-obscure nature of these tactics, they might not be readily apparent for both fighters and investigators. For example, an anonymous source stated that although there were acceptable reasons to reject serving with proxies like Liwa al-Quds, many joined to avoid being subjected to harsh treatment under pro-Assad forces controlling various areas.[236]

While many started out predominantly Shi`a, the fighter bases of many Iranian-backed militias are ethnically and religiously diverse. This was a familiar strategy for Iran and their proxies, who have engaged with Sunni groups in Syria, Palestine, and elsewhere in the past.[237] For instance, the Lebanese Resistance Brigades recruited from Druze and Sunni populations, and Liwa al-Quds from Palestinian fighters—most of which were Sunni—from refugee camps in Aleppo and Homs provinces in 2016 and 2017.[238] Some groups, such as Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir, are strategic partners for Iran, helping them recruit from existing tribes in the region.[239]

One of Iran's most notable forays into proxy recruitment is the founding of the Liwa Abu Fadl Al-Abbas (LAFA), a consortium of several militias. One of the first foreign fighter networks to be established in Syria, LAFA is mainly populated by Iraqi fighters.[240] According to an Iraqi border guard, Iraqi recruits were brought to Iran, under the pretenses of religious tourism, to receive training, a financial stipend, and air transport before going to Syria.[241] LAFA has long been affiliated with the Syrian Republican Guard, a Syrian army unit, possibly dating back to 2013.[242]

Section 3.3. Iran's Soft Power Activities in Syria

Against the more military-focused intervention previously described, Iran simultaneously took steps to make non-militant incursions into Syria, to solidify its long-term influence. According to Amin Saikal, Iran's bilateral approach to influence was outlined in its 2005 Twenty-Year Vision Document.[243] The Islamic Republic outlined a "smart power" approach through a combination of hard and soft-power measures to further its regional influence.[244] Iran's soft power strategies include: (a) propagating its revolutionary ideology to appeal to a wide range of audiences, from religious to secular non-state actors; (b) promulgating anti-hegemonic rhetoric (i.e., as a third way against the dual U.S. and Russian superpowers); (c) spreading the *velayat-e faqih* model of Islamic governance; and (d) strengthening historical and cultural ties with neighboring countries.[245]

Iran enacted "smart power" initiatives through strategic alignments with Shi`a minorities and

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235 Ibid.

236 "Syria: Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, April 2018," FAKTA Project, December 14, 2018.

237 Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East."

238 "'The Godfather' of Liwa al-Quds Militia Killed in Aleppo," eldorar.com, November 28, 2016; "The Troubling Triumvirate Ruling Over Aleppo," Syria Deeply, November 24, 2017; "Liwa al Quds militia Recruits Palestinian refugees of Homs," nedaa-sy.com, June 30, 2017; "Palestinian Militia Assisting Assad in Destruction of Aleppo," Tower, September 28, 2016. There are also accounts of the group recruiting from Lebanon as well. For more information, see Yossef Bodansky, "The Evolution of Russian, Syrian, and Iranian Actions Against DI'ISH and Jihadist Movements, and Turkish-US Responses," *Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy* 394 (2016).

239 Jennifer Cafarella and Matti Suomenaro with Catherine Harris, "Russia and Iran Prepare Offensive Targeting U.S. and Partner Forces in Eastern Syria," Institute for the Study of War, June 25, 2018.

240 Phillip Smyth, "Iraqi Shiite Foreign Fighters on the Rise Again in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 29, 2015.

241 "Iran 'directly involved' in recruiting Iraqis to fight in Syria: officials," Al-Shorfa, April 26, 2013.

242 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and the Republican Guard," ayennjawad.org, March 29, 2018.

243 Saikal, p. 156.

244 Ibid., p. 156.

245 Ibid., pp. 156-159.

amenable religious and political groups in the regions where it sought influence, including the Middle East and Central Asia.[246] This has taken many forms. In the 1980s, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei established his own seminary in the Sayyeda Zainab shrine. Several hospitals were eventually built nearby, and Iran sponsored a radio station to attract pilgrims.[247] In 2020, Iran and Syria's education departments agreed to share scientific and other academic knowledge, with Iran also pledging assistance to rebuild Syrian schools.[248]

Toward this, leading up to and during the civil war, Iran maintained important business, political, and cultural relationships with institutions in Syria. For example, Jamiyat al-Bustan,[249] currently headed by Asma al-Assad, is a charity organization that provides welfare services to Alawites. Financed in part by Iran, it has allegedly "recruited more than twenty-five thousand fighters and shabiha (militiamen)" to fight for Assad, providing them with $150 average monthly wage.[250] The IRGC also reportedly used one of its charitable affiliates in Deir ez-Zor to open a scout center to recruit and train child soldiers.[251] In the same province, it combined several different groups under the banner of Jaish al-Qura.[252] Recruitment efforts were aimed at both rural tribesmen and fighters from cities.[253]

In 2019, Iran sent some of the most prolific exhibitors to a reconstruction convention in Syria, "Rebuild Syria," which it participated in the previous year as well.[254] Oula Alrifai remarked that Iran's participation in these events is an effort to retain justification of its involvement in Syria, as Tehran is concerned about losing a "strategic gateway" to Lebanon and Israel, in addition to the use of Syria as an arena for relief against U.S. sanctions.[255]

Iranian proxies were also involved in soft-power initiatives. Specifically, proxies have invested in reconstruction efforts in key towns along the Iraq-Syria border and Euphrates River to drum up local support.[256] In 2019, there were reports of some Hashd al-Shaabi militias acting as financial middlemen on behalf of Iran in Syria.[257] For instance, these militias would either provide credit cards or funds through PMF-affiliated banks.[258] With the help of Shi`a militias, the IRGC was able to retake territory near the al-Nuqtah shrine from anti-Assad fighters. As a result, the IRGC had control of the shrine's operations since 2017, including religious ceremonies.[259] To justify its expenditures to the Iranian public, Tehran has argued that they will benefit significantly from involvement in Syria's reconstruction. Many companies working on rebuilding Syria's infrastructure are owned or directly associated with the IRGC.[260] In 2018, Iran agreed to build 200,000 houses near the capital. Recently, with the help of local Shi`a businesspeople, Iran was able to construct hotels near the Sayyeda Zainab

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246 Ibid., p. 156.

247 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

248 Ibid.

249 The foundation's name was changed to al-Areen Humanitarian Foundation at the request of Asma al-Assad in summer 2020. For more information on the foundation, see Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

250 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," p. 25.

251 Waleed Abu al-Khair, "IRGC continues to recruit children in Deir Ezzor," Diyaruna, November 14, 2019.

252 Waleed Abu al-Khair, "IRGC in recruitment drive for Deir Ezzor militia," Diyaruna, October 15, 2019.

253 Ibid.

254 Alrifai, "The 'Rebuild Syria' Exhibition."

255 Ibid.

256 Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, p. 101.

257 Oula Alrifai, "What Is Iran Up to in Deir ez-Zour?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 10, 2019.

258 Ibid.

259 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

260 Karam Shaar and Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Iran's credit line to Syria: A well that never runs dry," Atlantic Council, February 10, 2020.

shrine for visitors traveling from Iran.[261] It is unclear if the profit from large-scale projects such as these, many of which never materialized, will be enough to recoup Iran's expenditures.[262]

Some Iranian activities seem to indicate an overall strategy of changing the demography of parts of Syria, a notion that is supported by some anecdotal evidence and expert analysis. The Syrian government has enacted demographic change policies since the time of Hafez al-Assad.[263] This has only continued since the beginning of the conflict. These efforts have persisted through Shi`a gentrification projects and have focused on areas around Damascus to protect it against potential rebel insurrection.[264] Demographic shifts have been orchestrated through Russian- and Iranian-negotiated settlements, or reconciliation agreements, and have also included both relocation efforts and more coercive efforts, including burning homes and fields.[265] More recently, Assad has enacted legislation to legalize his control of land across the state, potentially institutionalizing a means by which to justify its demographic shifts.[266] A Syrian writer in 2015 noted that the Assad government bulldozed some Sunni-majority neighborhoods with promises to rebuild them.[267] In 2018, the Syrian regime "naturalized thousands or even tens of thousands of Iranians, including members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Iran-backed militias like Hezbollah that are deployed in southern Syria along the border with Israel."[268] This tactic is not a new one, as "Syrians who fled Damascus and other areas during the seven years of civil war have long complained of demographic changes and their areas being taken over, either by the government or by outsiders."[269] One motivation for Iran's demographic change efforts is to uphold its "Useful Syria" strategy, "which entails wresting control over a corridor linking Syria's coastal region with Hezbollah's strongholds in Lebanon."[270] More broadly, it also involves Iran's desire to ensure influence should Assad be overthrown and maintain sympathetic populations between Damascus and the Lebanese border.[271] Reports also indicate LH engaged in ethnic cleansing in areas along the border, such as al-Qusayr and Qalamoun, in 2013.[272]

Additionally, Iran has engaged in missionary work to promote conversions, including financial incentives and academic scholarships, among others.[273] At least as of early 2021, unspecified Iranian forces have offered money to Syrian Sunnis to encourage their conversion to Shi`ism.[274] Iran has also supported Assad's demographic shift strategy through the occupation and purchasing of land and properties near Shi`a shrines in Aleppo, Damascus, and Deir ez-Zor through Iranian firms, such as Jihad al-Binaa.[275] LH has reportedly also been involved in land purchases and infrastructure projects

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261 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

262 Shaar and Fathollah-Nejad.

263 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," p. 29; Hanin Ghaddar, "Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 8, 2016.

264 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," p. 21; Ghaddar, "Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete."

265 Hasan Arfeh, "The institutionalization of demographic change in Syria," Atlantic Council, April 4, 2019; Martin Chulov, "Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control," *Guardian*, January 13, 2017.

266 Arfeh, "The institutionalization of demographic change in Syria."

267 Seth J. Frantzman and Juliane Helmhold, "Report: Syrian regime grants citizenship to Iranians, Hezbollah fighters," *Jerusalem Post*, November 25, 2018.

268 Ibid.

269 Ibid.

270 Ghaddar, "Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete."

271 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," p. 21; Chulov, "Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control."

272 Ghaddar, "Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete."

273 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," p. 31.

274 "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," U.S. Department of Defense, March 31, 2021, p. 70.

275 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," p. 23.

aimed at assisting in demographic relocation.[276] As early as 2012, the Free Syrian Army reported that foreign militia fighters from various countries, including Iran, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, settled their families in the vicinity of the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in Syria at the IRGC's instruction, displacing the Sunnis that lived there.[277] Some of the fighters from Iranian-affiliated groups, such as the Fatemiyoun Brigades, settled in and around Damascus after serving.[278] These resettlements and the resulting reconstruction could help shape Iran's entrenchment as the conflict ebbs in the post-conflict era.[279] In places like Daraya and Damascus, Shi`a foreign fighters from Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon and their families were relocated to areas from which Sunni families were forcibly removed.[280] Harakat al-Nujaba "has reportedly overseen the resettlement of 300 such families, who were granted homes and $2,000 each."[281]

Summary of Background

As outlined in the previous section, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah had varying degrees of involvement with the Assad government before the civil war, and both traversed the Syrian battlefield at the onset and during the conflict. Iran's involvement came in the form of the IRGC's Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and army forces. Although it initially sent its personnel in an advisory capacity, Iran forces eventually entered combat directly. Iran supplemented this effort by raising and supporting militias in Syria while directing others from Iraq. Notable among these efforts is the development of the Local Defense Forces, embedded into the Syrian security structure but funded and commanded by Iran. Iran combined hard-power intervention with several sociocultural initiatives, including reconstruction efforts and implementing demographic shifts. Against this broad background, this report next endeavors to look closer at trends in Iranian and LH support to various militias along specific types of assistance, including but not limited to providing weapons and training.

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276 Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021; Mazen Ezzi, "Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria," European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, March 13, 2020, pp. 14, 18.

277 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

278 Frantzman and Helmhold.

279 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

280 Ibid., p. 7; Chulov, "Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control;" Ghaddar, "Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete."

281 Ghaddar, "Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete."

Chapter 4. Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah's Support to Proxies Operating in Syria

As the United States and other countries continue to encounter Iran in Syria, it is pertinent to study previous trends to understand behavior during specific time periods and conditions.

The following chapter explores Iranian and LH support for proxies active in Syria from 2011 to 2019. The discussion begins generally, looking at Iranian versus LH support. It proceeds to discuss Iranian, IRGC, and LH support over time before exploring trends along the framework of kinetic and non-kinetic support. It concludes by analyzing trends in all types of support over time and discussing support along the lines of different religious affiliations.

Moreover, this section endeavors to view Iran's support in Syria through the framework of kinetic and non-kinetic support—and their overlap—before drilling down to understanding trends of more specificity. While the tactical aspects of kinetic support are important for obvious reasons, juxtaposing trends with less military-orientated forms of involvement, such as sharing logistical information or recruitment efforts, is indicative of a multifaceted strategy. Additionally, non-kinetic support may have longer-term effects that bear exploring. Relatedly, considering soft-power activities of not only Iran but the militias it backs, may be particularly significant as analysts and policymakers alike consider Iran's long-term goals in Syria and its propensity to play the "long game."[282] Further, Iran's diversity of support provides a window into how Iran is working to enhance its influence in Syria and its access to resources there through varied means.[283]

As a reminder, the term "Iranian actors" indicates any Iranian group (e.g., IRGC, IRGC-Quds Force, or the Iranian government); Lebanese Hezbollah is discussed separately. Specific sub-groups, such as the IRGC-QF, are mentioned explicitly. Finally, while the researchers took care to cull observations from open sources in multiple languages, actors may be incentivized to hide their provision or receipt of support.[284] For militias, it may be delegitimizing to receive support from an external actor.[285] Relatedly, it may be strategically beneficial for Iran to downplay providing support to hide the full scope of its reach in Syria.

Section 4.1. Investigating Iranian and LH Support for Proxies Active in Syria from 2011 to 2019

Before delving into specific support trends, it is first important to gain broad contours about the entities that support militias. Table 4.1.1 shows the primary backers of groups,[286] meaning those actors (e.g., Iranian actors or LH) that provide the majority of support to different groups in this study. "Primarily Iran-Supported" indicates those groups that received more than half of their support relationships from Iranian actors (e.g., Iran non-specific, IRGC, etc.). Similarly, "Primarily LH-Supported" are groups that received more than half of their support from Hezbollah. "Balanced Support" means that groups receive an equal amount support from both Iranian actors and LH. Finally, "No LH Support" indicates groups that do not receive any support from Hezbollah. While accounting for potential reporting effects due to the use of open sources,[287] overall, this table displays that most groups receive

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282   Frantzman.

283   The authors thanks Don Rassler for this point.

284   See the methodology chapter for more information about potential under- and over-reporting effects in open-source research.

285   Niklas Karlén, "Turning off the Taps: The Termination of State Sponsorship," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31:4 (2019): p. 736.

286   As described in the Methodology section, all groups in this study must have a demonstrated relationship with an Iranian actor at some point from 2011 to 2019. For a description of what constitutes a "demonstrated relationship," see the appendix.

287   See Chapter 2 for more about potential reporting effects with the use of open sources.

backing from both Iranian actors and Lebanese Hezbollah while only a small selection of groups receive support primarily from Iran or LH.

Table 4.1.1 Primary Backers Iranian-Backed Proxies Active in Syria

Primarily Iran-Supported	Balanced Support
Saraya al-Jihad	Fatemiyoun Brigades (IRGC Affiliate)
Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq	Harakat al-Nujaba
Khorasan Companies	Kata'ib Hezbollah
Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir	Khorasan Companies
	Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas
Primarily LH-Supported	Liwa al-Quds
Lebanese Resistance Brigades	Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya
Quwat al-Ridha	Liwa Dhualfiqar (LAFA)
	Saraya al Aqidah
No LH Support	Zeinabiyoun Brigades (IRGC Affiliate)
Al-Ghaliboun	
Badr Brigades	
Ansar Allah al-Awfiya	
Jaish al-Muwamal	
Kata'ib Sayyida al-Shuhada	
Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir	
Promised Day Brigades	

Table 4.1.2 provides a first look at support trends for Iranian actors and LH. It shows a yearly count of the number of proxy groups active in Syria that received support. While LH provides support to fewer groups than Iran, the overall trends are mostly parallel. Figure 4.1.A takes this a step further by separating Iranian actors into the IRGC (here, inclusive of the Quds Force) and non-specific Iranian actors. The latter category captures references to the Iranian government more generally, or sources referenced Iranian support without specifying whether the entity providing said support was the IRGC, its Quds Force, or another Iranian military or paramilitary entity.

Table 4.1.2. Number of Support Observations for Proxy Groups Active in Syria that Received Iranian or LH Support by Year

Year	Iranian Actors	Hezbollah	Grand Total
2011	3	2	5
2012	12	2	14
2013	18	7	25
2014	27	8	35
2015	40	14	54
2016	36	16	52
2017	41	13	54
2018	38	8	46
2019	23	8	31
Grand Total	**238**	**78**	**316**

Like Table 4.1.2, Figure 4.1.A indicates that Iran (non-specific), the IRGC, and LH seem to follow a similar trajectory but provide different volumes of support. According to the dataset, for most of the years between 2011 and 2019, the IRGC was the primary Iranian entity providing support to proxies active in Syria. Open-source reporting suggests that LH and the IRGC provided similar levels of support early in the conflict, from 2011 to 2014. In 2015, IRGC support started outpacing that of LH until 2019, when it evened out. Unsurprisingly, Iranian support increased over time as the conflict intensified. It increased from 2015 to 2017 and peaked in 2018. These trends align with the conflict's major developments, including the Battle of Aleppo, which lasted from 2012 to 2016, as well as Russian intervention in late 2015.[288] Additionally, many Iranian-backed Iraqi militias returned to Iraq in 2014 to fight the Islamic State.[289] This loss of forces, along with the introduction of Afghan and Pakistani recruits, could help explain the 2015 increase. In mid-2017, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani declared victory against the Islamic State,[290] yet Tehran had comparable levels of involvement in Syria the following year (2018). Iranian support declined somewhat in 2019, which could, on one hand, be attributed to regional and domestic pressures and/or a decline in media coverage and reporting focused on the conflict. Toward the former, by that time, the security situation for the Assad government had also arguably stabilized, as the Islamic State and other jihadi groups—while still a threat—were no longer an existential threat.[291] With Russia and Turkey's push for patrol of a demilitarized zone in Idlib in late 2018,[292] Iran may have sought to focus on maintaining proxy forces in Syria that were already seemingly overextended.[293] Additionally, increased sanctions targeting the

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288   *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, pp. 92-93; Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: the Limits of Religion," p. 1,252.

289   Smyth, "Iranian Proxies Step Up Their Role in Iraq."

290   Jamal, p. 6.

291   The authors thank Don Rassler for his insight on this point. See "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," Wilson Center, October 28, 2019.

292   Andrew Higgins and Rick Gladstone, "Russia and Turkey Announce Demilitarized Zone in Last Rebel-Held Part of Syria," *New York Times*, September 17, 2018; "Explainer: Why the war in Syria's Idlib escalated again," Reuters, May 9, 2019.

293   It should be noted that data compiled by Michael Knights demonstrates that the strength of Iranian proxies in Iraq increased dramatically over the 2019 period. For more information, see Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq" and Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" The authors thank Don Rassler for his insight on this point.

Iranian government that year may have also affected Iran's decision-making.[294] Domestic pressures in Iran and in Syria, reflected in increased protests, may have also informed its calculus.[295] While outside of the scope of this study, recent accounts of Iranian proxy activity in Syria in 2020 bolster the view that while the nature of support may be changing, Tehran is still present.[296]

These numbers and figures provide some insight into the potential division of labor and/or coordination between Iran and LH. According to Afshon Ostovar, there is definitive coordination between LH and Iran, as much of Iran's activities are deployed and/or delegated through LH.[297] Analysts often study the relationship of LH and Iran with the principal-agent framework. One notable issue for Iran is that agents (here, LH and other proxies) can develop agency slack over time, where they act more autonomously and diverge from the direction and preferences of the principal (here, Iran).[298] Even so, of all proxies, LH consistently has the least amount of slack.[299] Cooperation between Iran and LH is publicly reported and acknowledged by Iranian officials, including IRGC officers.[300] There are reports of detailed coordination between late Major General Hossein Hamadani, field commander of the IRGC-QF in Syria, and Hassan Nasrallah, in mid-January 2012.[301] Additionally, Alfoneh's research about Iranian and allied combat fatalities in Syria indicates high levels of coordination between the IRGC and LH.[302]

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294 Alex Vatanka, "Iran 2019: Economic woes and a harsh security crackdown," Middle East Institute, December 16, 2019.

295 Ibid.; al-Omran and al-Khair.

296 Esfandiari, "Analysts See Little Change in Iran's Strategy In Syria."

297 Authors' interview, Afshon Ostovar, June 2021.

298 Authors' interview, Diane Zorri, May 2021; Zorri, Sadri, and Ellis, pp. 4-5.

299 Authors' interview, Diane Zorri, May 2021.

300 Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021.

301 Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021; Gol-Ali Babaei, *Peigham-e Mahi-Ha* [The Message of the Fish] (Tehran: Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2015), p. 445.

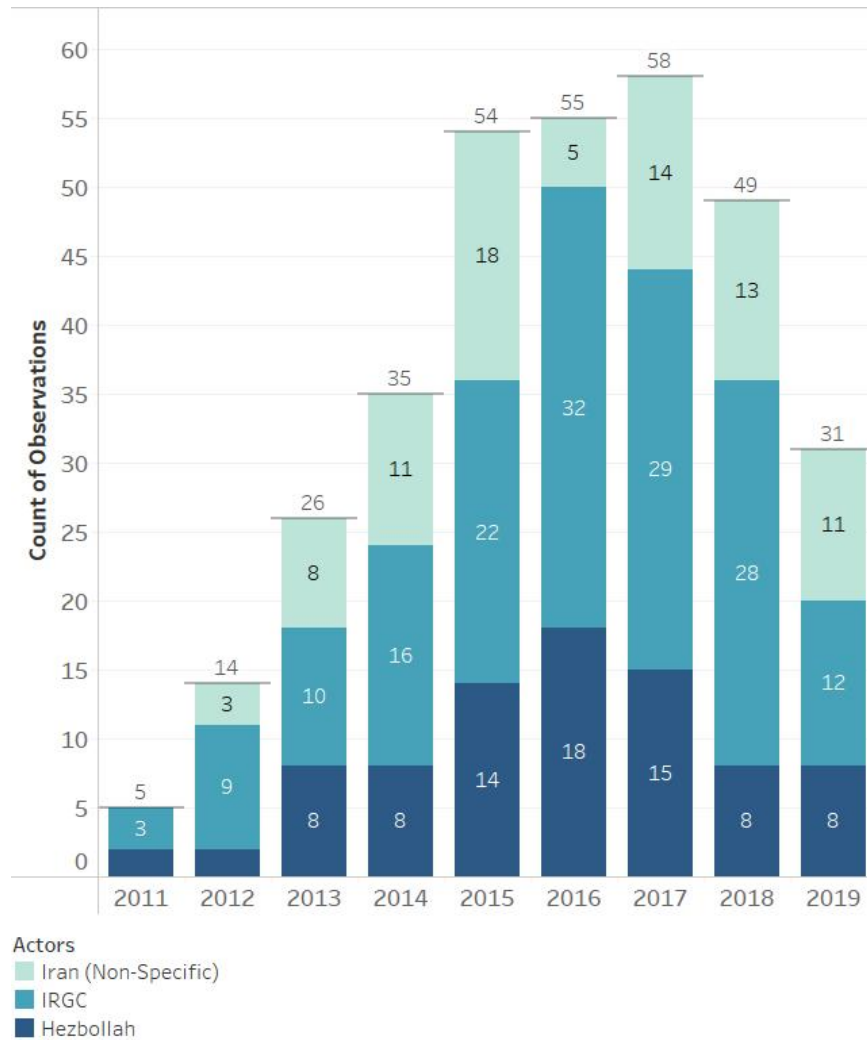302 Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021; Alfoneh, "Hezbollah Fatalities in the Syrian War."

Figure 4.1.A. Iranian and LH Support to Militias Active in Syria, 2011-2019

Section 4.2. Iranian Involvement in Syria Through the Framework of Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Support

In the following section, Iranian support is studied in the context of kinetic and non-kinetic support to provide a more parsimonious organizing framework before delving into specifics. See the methodology chapter for definitions of this framework.

Figure 4.2.A depicts Iranian support from 2011 to 2019, differentiating between LH, IRGC, and non-specific Iranian actors by kinetic and non-kinetic support.

Broadly put, both kinetic and non-kinetic support increased steadily until 2015; in fact, both nearly doubled between 2013 and 2015. At that point, kinetic support remained around the same level for the next two years while non-kinetic modestly increased. This pattern could indicate that Iran focused on kinetic support as it was ramping up non-kinetic support during the conflict. Alternatively, Iran could have taken the time to develop the operational capabilities of its various proxies.[303] Non-kinetic

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303 The authors thank Don Rassler for his insight on this point.

support increased for most years in the study, with the exception of 2017 and 2019. In 2015, Russia became more active in the conflict, providing much-needed air support for al-Assad and Iranian forces. It could be that as the pressure came off kinetic supports, Iran focused more on non-kinetic support, some of which could be useful for cultivating a long-term presence in Syria. The trends adjust from 2015 onward, as an inverse relationship between kinetic and non-kinetic support is evident: As kinetic support diminished, non-kinetic increased incrementally until dipping in 2019.

Specific Iranian actors seem to be more involved in providing certain types of support. Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC seemed to provide comparable amounts of kinetic support over time. Conversely, the IRGC disproportionately provided more non-kinetic support, in comparison to LH.

To better understand kinetic and non-kinetic patterns in Iranian support, it is beneficial to break down trends by type and over time, as shown in Figures 4.2.B and 4.2.C.
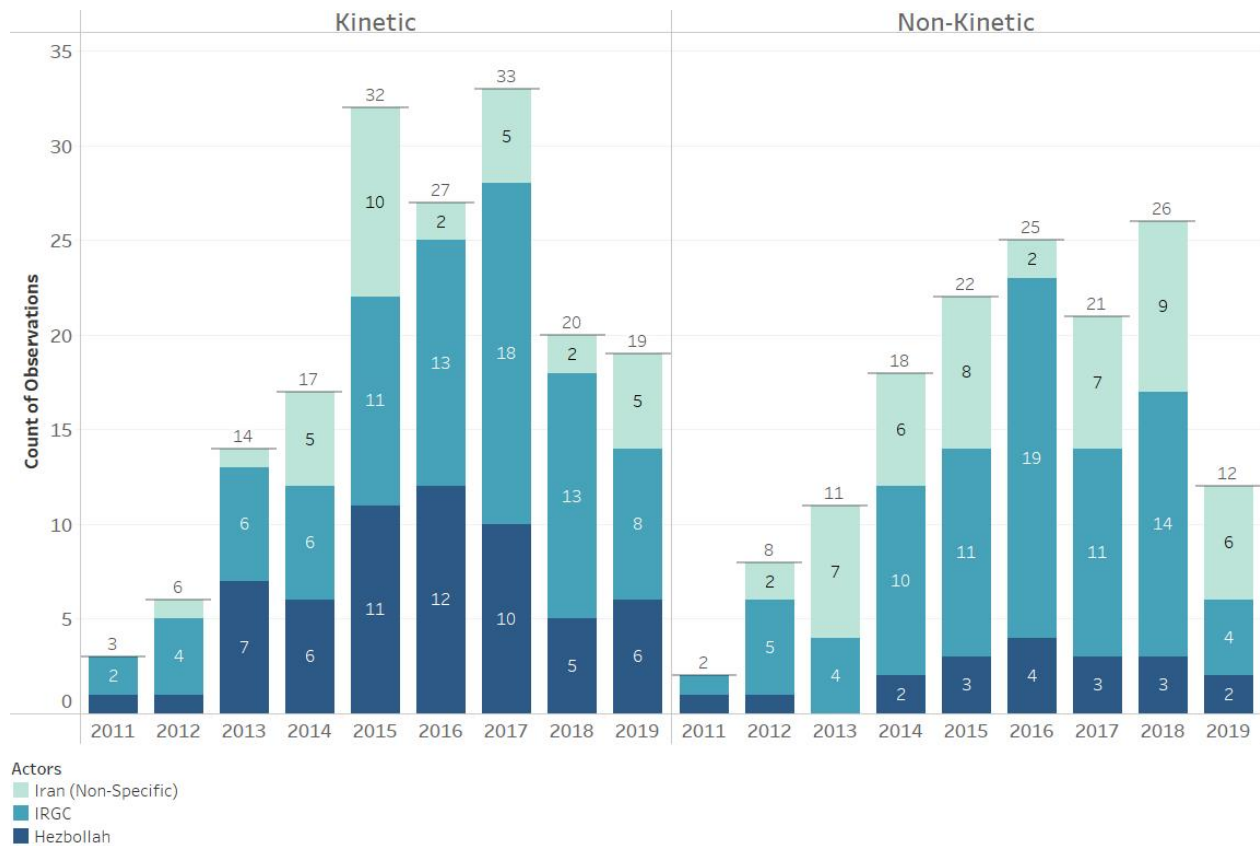

Figure 4.2.A. Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Support for Proxies Active in Syria, 2011-2019

Section 4.2.1. A Breakdown of Kinetic Support Provided to Proxies

Figure 4.2.B shows the number of proxies active in Syria per year that received Iranian kinetic support—joint attacks, personnel placement, training, and weapons—from Iran from 2011-2019. The figure differentiates between support provided by LH, IRGC (inclusive of the Quds Force), or other Iranian actors. There are two ways to analyze the following trends: over time or by actor. This section first discusses support by year before describing specific types. Then, specific providers are investigated.
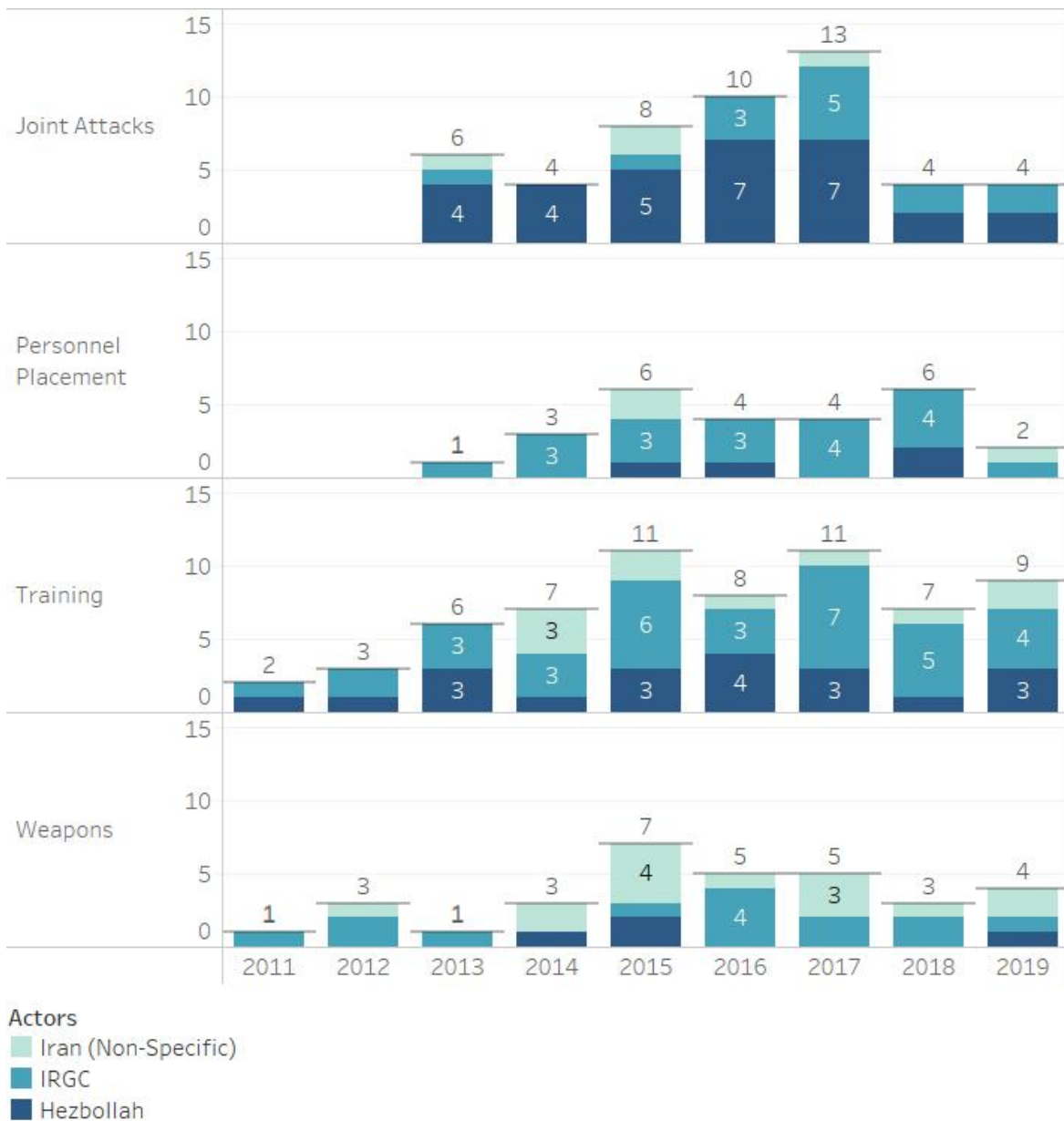
Figure 4.2.B. Number of Iranian Proxies Active in Syria that Receive Kinetic Support by Type, 2011-2019

Turning first to an annual evaluation of Figure 4.2.B, a couple of trends are evident. In the early years (2011 and 2012), open-source reporting indicated that Iran bolstered its militias with training and weapons, most of which was provided by the IRGC, a trend that is consistent with existing research.[304] It should be noted that numbers for 2011 and 2012 are low; any underrepresentation could easily have been a function of reporting on the issue. As the fight against Syrian rebels and the Islamic State intensified in 2013 to 2015, additional supports and the number of groups that Iran reportedly provided kinetic support to grew. From 2013 to 2014, training, joint attacks, and personnel placement increased, consistent with what would be expected of a growing battlefield presence.

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304 Abedin, p. 138; Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

In 2015, there was an uptick across all types of Iranian kinetic supports. This corresponded with a recruitment drive and fighter surge from the IRGC-QF, IRGC-Ground Forces, and LH.[305] Notably, both the number of groups that received training and had Iranian and/or LH personnel placed with them increased. In particular, the IRGC doubled the number of militias it was training from the previous year, from three to six. In the same year, Iran implemented a major recruitment drive and movement of Iranian forces into Syria.[306] Iran increased forces to Syria, bringing in fighters from the IRGC-Basij as well as from the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades.[307] The peak of training and personnel placement in 2015 was followed by the height of joint attacks in 2016 and 2017.

The height of support was from 2015 to 2017. Even though Iranian President Rouhani announced the "defeat" of the Islamic State in December 2017,[308] Iran continued the provision of kinetic supports in the coming years. In 2018, open-source reporting indicated that Iranian and LH forces conducted fewer joint attacks but still maintained a similar level of personnel, training, and weapons provision. Furthermore, Iran may have been replenishing or protecting it stores: On several occasions through the summer of 2018, Israeli airstrikes targeted Iran and its proxies in Syria.[309] In 2019, weapons provision increased slightly while training increased. The emphasis on training could be indicative of Iran's desire to focus on maintenance of forces as the conflict in Syria waned in 2019.

In addition to considering annual trends, there also seems to be a division of labor between Iranian actors. Per Figure 4.2.B, LH seemed to be a primarily tactical operator, as it seemed to be more involved in joint attacks—and involved to a lesser extent in training. Meanwhile, the IRGC seems to primarily play an advise-and-assist, special operations role.[310] The IRGC and LH reportedly provided training, and to a lesser extent co-attacks, in comparable amounts over time. There are several years in which the IRGC and LH trained and launched joint attacks with the same group each year.[311] Broadly speaking, per the dataset, this seems to be most common for Iraqi-based groups operating in Syria as well as a handful of others, including LAFA and Liwa Dhualfiqar.

In the rest of this section, potential explanations of trends over time and by actor are investigated further for each specific type of support.

Joint Attacks. According to public reporting, the IRGC started launching attacks with militias in Syria in 2013 and then again in 2015.[312] Iran attested IRGC forces were in Syria since the beginning of the conflict in an advisory capacity,[313] which aligns with their earliest joint attack in this study's dataset. The IRGC shifted to a more direct operational role in Syria in early 2013.[314] In 2017, it conducted joint attacks with five groups, a number that dropped in subsequent years.

In comparison to the IRGC and non-specific Iranian actors, LH disproportionately conducted more

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305   In 2015, Iran had allegedly sent some 700 fighters from the IRGC-Quds Force and Ground Forces as well as 4,000-5,000 LH fighters. Iran deployed a "surge" of up to 2,500 IRGC troops to Syria in September 2015. For more information, see Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

306   Bulos.

307   Kagan and Bucala; Donovan, Carl, and Kagan; Dailey; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 210-213.

308   Meredith.

309   Ben Hubbard and David M. Halbfinger, "Iran-Israel Conflict Escalates in Shadow of Syrian Civil War," *New York Times*, April 9, 2018.

310   The authors thank Don Rassler for his insight about these two sentences.

311   For a related visual, see Figure A4 in the appendix.

312   As a reminder, the term "joint attack" is employed as a neutral descriptor for Iranian and/or LH and proxy co-launching of attacks. While it is conceivably likely that Iranian actors and LH commanded attacks, this term does not necessarily capture Iranian or LH command or coordination of the proxies, which is captured in the "Coordination" variable in the following subsection on non-kinetic support to militias.

313   Abedin; Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

314   Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 220-229.

joint attacks with militias from 2011 to 2019. Existing research indicates that LH was launching attacks in Syria prior to the IRGC.[315] Toward this, combat participation was one of LH's main goals in Syria,[316] and it did so by launching attacks on its own[317] and with other militias. The data indicates that LH attacked alongside two to seven groups per year during this period. LH and the IRGC seemed to engage in more joint attacks with the same militias in later years, a trend that picked up in 2016, peaked in 2017, and then petered out in 2018 and 2019.[318] Even so, LH still had nearly twice the number of joint attacks in 2013 to 2017 compared to other Iranian actors.[319] In looking at this trend more broadly, the findings support the notion that there is coordination between LH and Iran, and potentially delegation through LH.[320]

Joint attacks declined substantially in 2018 and 2019. In those years, both the IRGC and LH are reported to have only coordinated attacks with the Fatemiyoun Brigades, Harakat al-Nujaba, and Liwa Abu Fadl Al-Abbas; additionally, these three groups have intermittently worked with the IRGC since 2013).[321] Continued joint attacks with these specific groups is not surprising, particularly considering the Fatemiyoun's intertwined nature with the IRGC as well as LAFA and Harakat al-Nujaba's (HN) close relationships with Iran.[322] However, given HN's small fighter corps, relative to many other Iraqi proxies,[323] it bears further discussion as to why Iran may have chosen this group with which to levy attacks.

There are a couple of explanations for Iran and LH's reliance on HN. First, the group was founded in the early years of the civil war with the purpose of supporting IRGC operations in Syria.[324] While originally founded as an AAH contingent, its leader Akram Kaabi splintered HN into its own outfit in 2013.[325] Kaabi's long-standing loyalty to Iran is also a major catalyst for its resource-rich partnership with Tehran.[326] Second, and perhaps most notably, the group has gone on to became one of the most consequential Iraqi-Iranian proxies operating in Syria, which has seemingly persisted even after Soleimani's death.[327] As one indicator of its breadth of deployments, between 2012 to 2018, the

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315 Jahanbani, "Reviewing Iran's Proxies by Region."

316 Joshi, p. 27.

317 Jahanbani, "Reviewing Iran's Proxies by Region."

318 For a related visual, see Figure A4 in the appendix.

319 It is important to note that when operationalized as LH and proxy combat fatalities, this finding is different. Ali Alfoneh's excellent and extensive dataset of Iranian and allied combat fatalities in Syria (e.g., IRGC, LH, and proxies) since 2012 indicated that "peaks in Hezbollah combat fatalities do not always coincide with peaks in combat fatalities among other allied proxies. There is, however, a relatively clear correlation between IRGC and allied proxy combat fatalities. In other words, . . . Iranian proxies died fighting alongside or under IRGC command." Taken together, the two operationalizations indicate an interesting trend. While LH may launch more joint attacks with proxies, it seems more proxy forces suffer combat fatalities with IRGC forces than Hezbollah ones. This potentially indicates a difference in operational capacity for proxies when fighting alongside each actor.

320 Authors' interview, Afshon Ostovar, June 2021; authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021.

321 For a related visual, see Figure A4 in the appendix.

322 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, pp. 103-106; Smyth, "Iraqi Shiite Foreign Fighters on the Rise Again in Syria;" "Iran 'directly involved' in recruiting Iraqis to fight in Syria: officials;" authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021; Michael Knights, "Profile: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 21, 2021.

323 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq." For example, in comparison, LAFA was said to have anywhere between 4,500 to 5,000 members in 2018 and 2019. Hatem Al-Falahi, "Iraqi Militias in Syria: Their Role and the Future," Al Jazeera (Studies), April 1, 2019; "Iranian forces and Shia militias in Syria," Britain Israel Communications and Research Center, March 2018. Collectively, Iraqi proxies operating in Syria are referred to in Arabic as *al-Quwwa al-Haydariya*, in Persian as the *Haydaryiyoun*, or in English as the Haydari Force. For more on these groups, see Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" and Al-Tamimi, "The Haydari Force in Syria."

324 Knights, "Profile: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba."

325 Ibid.

326 Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021; authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

327 Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021; authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021. For additional background on HN and its significance to Iran, see Knights, "Profile: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba" and Knights, "Back into the Shadows?"

group is estimated to have suffered some of the highest fatalities of any Iranian proxy in Iraq and Syria.[328] Additionally, the group maintains a strong working relationship with LH, in part indicated by HN commander Kaabi's personal relationship with LH leader Hassan Nasrallah.[329] In sum, the combination of the group's strategic utility to Iran and its demonstrated fighting record may have contributed to the IRGC and LH's decision to leverage HN more often in joint attacks. On the other hand, however, Iran and LH's preference for leveraging joint attacks with HN (and similar groups) could be due to political reasons rather than military ones.[330]

Training. LH and the IRGC seemed to provide training to comparable numbers of militias over time. Interestingly, both LH and the IRGC trained the same groups in a year on multiple occasions from 2011 to 2019.[331] While existing research attests LH moved fighters into Syria in 2012,[332] the authors' data indicates LH was present on the ground in the previous year training militias.[333] Of note, Iran's multinational proxy deployment was due in part to LH's high level of combat fatalities in the early years of the conflict, 2012 to 2014, as well as the IRGC's wish to provide combat training to proxies.[334]

Several studies delve deeper into Iranian training practices and locations.[335] Iranian actors' training practices vary. There are accounts of weapons training for rocket launchers, sniper rifles, RPGs, or Kalashnikovs, "escape and capture training," as well as physical endurance and parachuting.[336] Iran and LH trained militias in various camps in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.[337] Training was one of the LH's main goals in Syria, particularly early in the conflict.[338] The IRGC also trained some groups in Iran, such as Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir.[339] Others, like Harakat al-Nujaba, receive training at the Iran-Iraq border at an IRGC camp in Bal Nu.[340] Relatedly, Michael Knights stated in 2013 that Iraq-based Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah sent fighters to Iran and Lebanon to be retrained and sent to Syria.[341]

In comparing the training that LH and the IRGC reportedly provided, some militias were only trained by the IRGC, such as AAH, Saraya al-Khorasan, and Liwa Dhualfiqar. There were no groups in the data that received training from only LH. The Quds Force also trained some fighters in Iran, such as in the Imam Ali Facility outside eastern Iran, in Khorasan province, as well as facilities in Syria

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328 Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's Support of Iraqi Shia Militias Ensures Dependency and Loyalty," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, September 12, 2018.

329 Knights, "Profile: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba."

330 Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021. For more information, see Alfoneh, "Iran's Support of Iraqi Shia Militias Ensures Dependency and Loyalty."

331 For a related visual, see Figure A4 in the appendix.

332 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 216-218; Joshi, p. 27.

333 "Shia militias, the Syrian state, and the battle for Aleppo," Janes Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor, November 24, 2016.

334 Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021.

335 See, for example, Seth Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 11, 2019.

336 "Al-Sadr fled to Iran due to assassination fears," Asharq Alawsat (English), January 26, 2011; Lara Jakes and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Shiite militias step up Iraq attacks on US troops," Associated Press, June 30, 2011; Abigail Hauslohner and Erin Cunningham, "As battle lines shift in Iraq, Sunnis who welcomed the Islamic State fear retribution," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2014; "Tunnel Commando: Get to know Hezbollah's elite unit," Mako, March 1, 2019.

337 "Iranian Military Bases in Syria."

338 Joshi, p. 27.

339 "Tunnel Commando: Get to know Hezbollah's elite unit;" "Iran-backed fighters prepare fresh assault against ISIS in Eastern Syria," Al-Masdar News, April 4, 2013; Mona Alami, "Iran's forces inch deeper into south-western Syria," Al-Arab, July 15, 2018.

340 Saleh Hamid, "A report reveals new information about Iranian militias in Syria," Al Arabiya, October 11, 2017.

341 Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2013.

and LH's training facilities in Lebanon.[342] Evidence also suggests that the IRGC-Basij conducted training. Specifically, a commander of the IRGC-Basij's Fatehin unit that operated in Tehran and Syria mentioned in 2016 that the IRGC "has set up 'special courses' for 'resistance forces,' which include Iranian as well as proxies, for combat in Iraq and Syria."[343]

Personnel Placement. The IRGC and other Iranian actors seemed to provide more personnel placement in Syria over time in comparison to LH. As a reminder, this variable does not focus on the size of the "placement" but rather the presence or absence of Iranian forces personnel reported to be embedded with proxy units in specific years. Nor does it distinguish between the number of personnel placed; for example, whether two or 20 IRGC personnel were training a specific militia in 2012, it would still appear as a single relationship in that year for that militia.

The authors' research only found three occasions wherein Iranian actors and LH had overlaps in personnel placement with militias.[344] This finding is interesting as the IRGC sent personnel to train Syrian state forces in the early years of the civil war,[345] yet these graphics do not indicate a pattern of concurrent placement of personnel—whether IRGC or LH—with proxies. It may be due to reporting effects, as analysts and journalists may not have known the extent of Iranian personnel involvement in 2012 and, once uncovered, reported more fully in that year or the next.[346] One source indicates that, "until April 2016, the total number of IRGC and Iranian paramilitary personnel operating in Syria was estimated to be between 6,500 and 9,200."[347] Iran may have sought to downplay its presence at the beginning of the conflict and only with subsequent years has the extent of their early involvement been revealed.[348]

Weapons Provisions. The IRGC provided weapons support early on and seemingly placed more personnel with militias than LH. Dating back to the 1980s, Iran has long-provided weapons and other tactical materiel to LH.[349] Open-source research has found that since 2012, Iran has continued to provide both LH and asymmetric forces in Syria with weapons via the "land and air bridge" from Tehran to Damascus and Lebanon, a logistical route that is vital to Iran's regional influence.[350] For the groups based in Syria, LH provided weapons to the Lebanese Resistance Brigades, LAFA, and Quwat al-Ridha. Much like personnel placement, LH and IRGC were reported to have provided weapons to different groups over time with only one instance of overlap, according to the data.[351] Of the approximately 30 weapons relationships, only eight could be decidedly attributed to the Quds Force, which provided weapons to Khorasan Companies, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Fatemiyoun Brigades.

Taking a closer look at the 11 militias that received weapons support, six were Iraqi-based groups operating in Syria, specifically Jaish al-Muwamal, Saraya al-Jihad, Khorasan Companies, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Harakat al-Nujaba. Generally, analysts have concluded that Iran has

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342 Jones, "War by Proxy."

343 Amir Toumaj, "IRGC to expand Basij special forces," FDD's Long War Journal, October 24, 2016.

344 For a related visual, see Figure A4 in the appendix.

345 Ansari and Tabrizi, p. 4; Abedin, pp. 138-139; *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 87; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, pp. 205-213.

346 See the methodology chapter for more discussion about the potential of reporting effects in this data.

347 Ansari and Tabrizi, p. 5.

348 Abedin, pp. 135-137; Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 278.

349 "What Is Hezbollah?" Council on Foreign Relations, accessed July 13, 2021; Ansari and Tabrizi, pp. 5-6.

350 Adesnik and Taleblu, "Burning Bridge," pp. 7, 9, 10.

351 For a related visual, see Figure A4 in the appendix.

provided light and heavy weapon to Syrian forces and militias, including rockets, rifles, and antitank missiles, among others.[352] Iran also provided weapons to Syrian-based Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir in 2018, which included armored vehicles.[353] Additionally, Iran provided a variety of weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades and sniper rifles, to Saraya al-Khorasan from 2015 to 2018.[354]

Regarding weapons provisions, it is important to note the difficulty in assessing weapons provisions to Syrian groups given the nature of Iranian weapons trafficking throughout the region. For instance, some weapons or weapons parts, such as those needed to make LH's rockets into precision-guided munitions, are trafficked through Syria to Lebanon.[355] By the same token, some weapons may be trafficked to Syrian groups through Iraqi ones.[356] This is all to say that it is difficult to demonstrate the nature of Iranian weapons support to proxies "given the nature of Iranian weapons proliferation and material support to proxies and partners in Iraq and Yemen since at least 2015."[357]

Section 4.2.2. A Breakdown of Non-Kinetic Support Provided to Proxies

The next section details Iranian non-kinetic support to its proxies over time. Figure 4.2.C depicts Iranian non-kinetic support—funding, coordination, recruitment, meetings, and social services provisions—from 2011 to 2019.

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352   Jones, "War by Proxy;" Ansari and Tabrizi, pp. 5-6.

353   "Iran-backed fighters prepare fresh assault against ISIS in Eastern Syria."

354   "Angry Protestors Storm into Baghdad's Green Zone Again," States News Service, May 20, 2016; "Saraya al-Khorasani: The new influence in Iraq," Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, May 8, 2016; Abbas Qaidaari, "Iran's new group in Iraq: Saraya al-Khorasani," Al-Monitor, January 11, 2015.

355   Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

356   Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

357   Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

Figure 4.2.C. Number of Iranian Proxies Active in Syria who Received Non-Kinetic Support by Type, 2011-2019

Before beginning a discussion of the results, it is important to note that compared to kinetic support, the number of observations is relatively low, potentially due to an under-reporting in open sources. The insights shared in this section should be viewed with this caveat in mind. A couple of trends are notable. Over time, funding support increased. Meetings between Iranian actors and militias peaked in 2016, declining in subsequent years. The years 2015 to 2017 still included the most meetings observations in the dataset. Changes in the conflict theater over those years—such as Russia's intervention in 2015 or the December 2016 ceasefire[358]—may have necessitated frequent meetings with proxies. Conversely, recruitment and coordination support remained somewhat steady over time, except for a peak in the

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358 "Syria diplomatic talks: A timeline."

latter in 2015. As with kinetic support trends, overall, it seems different actors engaged in support to varying extents. For instance, the IRGC seems most active in multiple non-kinetic supports, including funding, recruitment, and meetings while LH seemed the most involved in meetings and recruitment and occasional involvement in funding and coordination. Non-specific Iranian actors were predominantly involved in social service provision, funding, and logistics.

Funding. The provision of funding is especially interesting. The IRGC and other Iranian actors were reported as mostly involved in funding; LH only provided funding to a handful of groups.[359] Comparatively, LH only provided funds to Syrian-based groups, such as Lebanese Resistance Brigades.[360] Of the 24 instances of IRGC funding, the Quds Force was reported to be involved in nine. There was little overlap in the groups that received support from Iranian actors and LH, save for AAH in 2012. Overall, the number of groups providing funding support per year gradually increased, with the highest levels from 2016 to 2018.

Estimates of the overall dollar amount Iran has spent in Syria and provided to its proxies vary widely. In 2018, the U.S. State Department reported that since 2012, Iran had provided $16 billion for the Assad regime and "partners and proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen."[361] A member of Iran's parliament reported in 2020 that since 2011, the country had provided between $20-30 billion to Syria.[362] According to a 2020 Atlantic Council report, estimates of "military and economic spending in Syria range from $30 billion to $105 billion in the first seven years" of the war alone.[363] Although it is difficult to find estimates about funding to proxies specifically, as mentioned previously, various reports indicate Tehran has spent between $5 and $15 billion on its projects in Syria each year, including proxies.[364] It could also include the physical and human costs of sending IRGC and *Artesh* troops. Regardless of the specific dollar amount, it is clear that since the start of the Syrian civil war, Iran has spent billions of dollars propping up the Syrian regime.[365] Funding is one of the most vital forms of assistance a state can provide a group.[366] It is easily transferrable, in comparison to more involved forms (e.g., training) and flexible in its use, such as for purchasing other materials (e.g., weapons), recruitment, or salaries, among others.[367] With a steady source of funding from a state, groups can dedicate more attention to operations.[368] In addition, for many militia members a salary or stipend is a requirement for joining, and thus, it becomes an indispensable recruitment tool.[369] The low logistical and operational cost involved in providing funding could explain the steady increase in observations of funding support over time, regardless of fluctuations in troop presence or other material support. This allows Iran to have considerable influence on proxies and their operations, while also furthering its own operational goals.

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359 These groups were Lebanese Resistance Brigades, Quwat Radwan, and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq.

360 For a related visual, see Figure A5 in the appendix.

361 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Revolutionary Guards Commander Gives Rare Estimate Of Money Iran Spent On Proxies, Military Aid In Region," RFERL, September 30, 2020.

362 Fazeli.

363 Waleed Abu al-Khair, "Impoverished Iranians bristle at $100 billion price tag for Syria 'investments,'" Diyaruna, April 19, 2021. For the Atlantic Council report, see Shaar and Fathollah-Nejad.

364 Abedin, p. 151; Adesnik; Frantzman; Fazeli. Iran has allegedly spent $1 billion per year on Iraq's security forces—likely to include support Iranian-backed militias in the Hashd al-Shaabi—since 2014.

365 Abedin, p. 151; Fazeli; Adesnik.

366 Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 60.

367 Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), p. xvii; Byman, *Deadly Connections*, p. 60.

368 Byman, *Deadly Connections*, p. 61.

369 Authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

There are instances of Iran making large payments to groups, such as paying approximately $20 million to establish Jaish al-Muwamal.[370] Other instances include paying salaries directly. Al-Ghaliboun reportedly offered members $100 a month in cash, distributed via the Iranian embassy in Syria.[371] While fighters from Iraqi militias in Syria were paid by the Hashd al-Shaabi, those from some Syrian-based groups received payments directly from the IRGC.[372] Oula Alrifai indicated local anti-Assad individuals attested that the Revolutionary Guards' payments were seemingly orderly and reliable, compared to Assad's "'chaotic and bankrupt' security structure."[373] Alrifai further writes that the amounts differed based on fighters' duties: "those who serve in their hometowns receive $100 per month, while those who travel to the frontlines receive $150 along with military vehicles, fuel vouchers, and miscellaneous spending money."[374] It may be that distributing the money directly to its clients, as opposed to delegating the task to LH, also allows Tehran to further secure control over the proxies.[375]

Coordination. Coordination, which concerned support operations such as intelligence sharing, transportation, other planning activities, and non-specific logistic support, rose sharply from 2012 to 2014, peaking in 2015 and overall decreasing in the years thereafter. Like funding, most of this support was provided by Iranian actors, specifically the IRGC. LH was only involved in providing support to Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH).[376]

The IRGC-QF began engaging in combat early in 2012,[377] coinciding with the rise in coordination. Being directly engaged in the conflict increases the likelihood of information and intelligence sharing and direct coordination with proxies, such as Liwa al-Imam al Baqir and other Iranian proxies, that were said to receive instruction from IRGC's operation center in the Syrian desert.[378] In 2015, there was both an influx of Iranian forces[379] and an increase in IRGC operations in Aleppo,[380] tracking with the peak of coordination support. Of the 19 observations that included coordination support, there were the most in 2015 and 2016. Additionally, there were six observations of Iran providing transportation between 2013 and 2017. Harakat al-Nujaba recruits reportedly flew out of an Iranian airport to Iranian-founded bootcamps south of the Syrian capital.[381] Fatemiyoun Brigade members also allegedly used Iran Air to enter Syria.[382]

It is important to note that this variable might be especially subject to under-reporting issues for several reasons. The intelligence component is by necessity cloaked, and it may be that Iran chose to share intelligence with a select few groups with the understanding they would pass it along to their allies. Also, this support is often integrated with many—if not all—other types of tactical and kinetic operations. Some active operational coordination may be implied but is not necessarily reported in open sources. Much of this type of support is not visible, and thus, information gathering is more

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370   "Iraq: Jaysh al-Muwamal—a new Iranian militia to support Assad."

371   Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Al-Ghalibun: Inside Story of a Syrian Hezbollah Group," aymennjawad.org, April 16, 2017.

372   Alrifai, "What Is Iran Up to in Deir ez-Zour?"

373   Ibid.

374   Ibid.

375   Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021.

376   For a related visual, see Figure A5 in the appendix.

377   Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

378   Al-Khair, "Former regime defector joins forces with IRGC in Syria desert."

379   Alfoneh and Eisenstadt.

380   *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 23; Hargreaves-Heald.

381   "Iraqi Militant Dragged into Iranian Proxy War in Syria Claims being Deceived," Asharq Alawsat (English), August 11, 2017.

382   "Rep. Roskam Urges Treasury Dept. to Investigate Iran Air Transport of Militants to Syria On Commercial Aircraft," Targeted News Service, August 23, 2017.

challenging.

Recruitment Assistance. Compared to other types of support, mentions of recruitment in open sources were scarce. Open-source records indicate that the number of observations of recruitment support between Iranian entities and proxies remained at similar levels from 2011 and 2019, with a small peak in 2018. Unlike funding and logistical support, LH was reported to be less active in recruitment assistance, with half (six) as many instances as the IRGC (12). Of the 12 IRGC instances, the Quds Force was reported to be in seven. Overall, there was little overlap in the groups that received support from Iranian actors and LH, save for Liwa al-Sayyida al-Ruqayya that received support from both the IRGC and LH in 2018.[383] For Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya, "IRGC and Hezbollah organized recruits in a model similar to that of the Iranian Basij."[384] Iran was known to be involved with LAFA's recruitment, which is well-documented in Phillip Smyth's "Shiite Jihad in Syria" report.[385] In the dataset, there were 23 total instances of recruitment support, and Iranian actors provided support in a variety of ways. Iran was involved with Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir's recruitment, persuading recruits to convert to Shi`ism.[386] Anecdotally, it seems that recruitment is better documented in instances wherein an organization is more fully controlled by Iranian actors, rather than an independent entity, such as the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades.[387]

A similar trend holds true for the Lebanese Resistance Brigades (LRB), which is treated, in many ways, as an LH affiliate. It was founded by LH in 1997 to recruit non-Shi`a fighters to resist the Israeli occupation.[388] It has since evolved as a "forward combat force" to support the Syrian regime.[389] In the dataset, beginning in 2011, LH was documented as supporting the group's recruitment efforts for five years (2011, 2014-2016, and 2019). It is likely that LH supported LRB consistently throughout the entire time period, although this was not visible in open sources, as the data shows a conservative estimate. Sources point to LRB's emphasis on targeting specific Lebanese minorities, such as Christians, Sunnis, and Druze.[390] LH's lack of recruitment support to additional proxies other than the LRB is notable, given the multitude of actors they supported throughout the conflict.

As mentioned above, recruitment practices for the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades are well documented, relative to other militias operating in Syria. The IRGC uses several different tactics when recruiting fighters for its Fatemiyoun Brigades, including the promise of money and residency, in addition to emphasizing the need for men to defend Shi`a shrines in Syria.[391] Many of the same motivators are used for Pakistanis recruited into the Zeinabiyoun Brigades, with Pakistani officials accusing the IRGC of using coercive techniques to recruit impoverished Pakistani Shi`a.[392]

It seems likely that recruitment support is provided simultaneously with monetary support and training, or when Iranian actors are directly involved in the creation of a group. For example, Harakat

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383 For a related visual, see Figure A5 in the appendix.

384 "Iranian Military Bases in Syria;" "Get to know the militia 'Ja'afari Force,' which Iran mobilized in Deraa (videos + pictures)," Orient News, June 22, 2018.

385 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects."

386 Richard Spencer, "Turkey clashes with Assad regime in Syria for first time," *Times*, February 21, 2018.

387 Soufan; "US sanctions on Fatemiyoun, Zainabiyoun militias target Iran's export of unrest," *Salaam Times*, January 29, 2019.

388 Amal Khalil, "Lebanese Resistance Leader: The Saraya Is Here to Stay," Al-Akhbar English via Wayback Machine, October 19, 2013.

389 Zambelis, "Hizb Allah's Lebanese Resistance Brigades."

390 White; Tony Badran, "Hezbollah's Sunni Support Network," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, April 7, 2016.

391 Sune Engel Rasmussen and Zahra Nader, "Iran covertly recruits Afghan Shias to fight in Syria; Shia men from Afghanistan are coaxed into war to support Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Guardian investigation reveals," *Guardian*, June 30, 2016.

392 Kakar, "Iran's Zainabiyoun Brigade steps up recruiting in Pakistan."

al-Nujaba (HN) was founded with support from Iran to mobilize Iraqi fighters for participation in the Syrian conflict.[393] There is a high probability Iran had some influence over the group's recruitment practices, even if it did not participate directly. A former HN fighter recalled finding an enlistment flyer in his neighborhood.[394] Enticed by the salary, he traveled to headquarters in Baghdad and then to Iran itself after which he made his way to an Iranian-founded training camp in the Syrian capital and was given light-weapons training by Iranian instructors.[395] Although the source does not mention direct Iranian involvement in recruitment, their assistance at almost every juncture, from transportation to training, strongly suggests at least some peripheral participation. More generally, Iran-backed recruitment centers in Syria are reported to offer a competitive stipend, compared to the country's security forces.[396]

Meetings. Iranian actors met with the largest number of militias operating in Syria per year between 2015 and 2018, and in most years, most meetings were conducted by the IRGC. Of the 23 instances of IRGC meetings with militias, the Quds Force was involved in 18. One-on-one meetings with proxies were a common strategy used by Soleimani to maintain morale and relationships with groups.[397] In fact, between 2015 and 2016, Soleimani launched an aggressive public relations campaign, independent of the proxies, to "burnish his brand" in light of potential criticism following the Islamic State's expulsion from Iraq.[398] This trend is potentially reflected in the numbers of IRGC meetings in those years in Figure 4.2.C.

In contrast to all other non-kinetic supports, there was some overlap in the groups that met with both Iranian actors and LH, including HN (2015 to 2018), Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir (2017), and Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya (2018).[399] LH was active in conducting meetings with militias in eight instances from 2015 to 2018. The data indicates LH more often met with Syrian-based groups, including Lebanese Resistance Brigades and Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir, among others. However, from 2015 to 2018, LH met with HN each year.

Overall, the patterns depicted in Figure 4.2.C fit within the larger context of Iran's involvement in the conflict. The 2015-2018 period included several major events in the Syrian civil war, such as the Russian intervention, the December 2016 ceasefire, and the beginning of the Astana talks.[400] The constantly changing environment may have necessitated frequent meetings between Iranian actors and proxies. Additionally, after Assad's forces suffered several significant losses, Iran increased its ground presence significantly in late 2015, likely affording more opportunities for meetings with its proxies as the IRGC re-strategized to ensure the regime did not collapse.[401] Russia's intervention in 2015 may have also necessitated a level of coordination between Iranian actors and the proxies for the subsequent military operations with Russian air support.[402]

Additionally, then-IRGC Quds Force commander Soleimani was well known for traveling to meet with groups, many of which would publicize the event by publishing images via social and other media

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393 "Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (The Movement of the Noble of Hezbollah)," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies.

394 "Iraqi Militant Dragged into Iranian Proxy War in Syria Claims being Deceived."

395 Ibid.

396 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

397 Authors' interview, Afshon Ostovar, June 2021.

398 Authors' interview, Afshon Ostovar, June 2021.

399 For a related visual, see Figure A5 in the appendix.

400 "Syria diplomatic talks: A timeline."

401 Authors' interview, Oula Alrifai, May 2021; *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, pp. 23-24.

402 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, pp. 24, 92-93; Hargreaves-Heald.

outlets.[403] Meetings in and of themselves signify some interesting aspects. On one hand, they may indicate some exchange of knowledge or coordination. Indeed, sources frequently include information about high-level cooperation at meetings. For example, a 2018 discussion between Harakat al-Nujaba and LH included dialogue about broader security and political topics.[404] Conversely, they can also be opportunities for propaganda and morale boosters for the group members, with no military cooperation involved. For example, in 2017 Soleimani spent a weekend in Deir ez-Zor, where he was photographed with fighters of Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir.[405] This meeting was an indication of their embedded relationship, as the Quds Force armed and trained the Syrian militia.[406] However, it appears this visit was largely intended as opportunity to showcase Iran's cooperation with the Syrian regime after the fall of Al Bukamal and alleged defeat of the Islamic State, as evidenced by the Assad loyalist outfits that publicized the visit.[407] The decrease in reported meetings after 2019 could be partially the result of a shift in Iran's strategy, wherein the focus is more on involvement in reconstruction efforts and providing soft power support to the Syrian state itself.

Social Services Assistance. Like recruitment, there is relatively little evidence of Iranian-backed social service provision in Syria, with only six observations in the dataset. Interestingly, LH was not among the actors that provided these services. Despite the lack of support implementing social services, there is evidence that proxies are receiving this type of aid from Iran. Operated by LH and the IRGC, Jihad al-Binaa is a "key economic and philanthropic" organization in Syria.[408] In addition to a multitude of other services, Jihad al-Binaa has provided families of the Fatemiyoun Brigades and Harakat al-Nujaba with housing.[409] The data that does exist indicates that much of the support came in the form of death benefits for fighters and their families. Iran, via AAH, allegedly provided financial support for families in addition to burial costs.[410] For both the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades, Iran also provided education for the children of martyrs.[411] Additionally, Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir members were sent to Iran to study at Islamic Sharia College at Tehran University.[412] The specifics of these benefits are useful to incentivize populations to join the fight in Syria, if only to help their families.

The lack of social services in the data could be explained by Iranian actors preferring to work directly with state institutions to help local populations, to further solidify their role in and control over Syria's future. This is evident in their push to be heavily involved in reconstruction efforts, including via IRGC-backed businesses.[413] Furthermore, Iran has a network of schools in Syria, at least 40 of which existed prior to the start of the conflict in 2011, although many were not recognized by Assad's government.[414] In 2011, the Assad regime allowed Iran to erect Shi`a Islamist schools throughout the country, and

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403   For example, Soleimani was photographed meeting with Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir members during a visit to Deir ez-Zor in November 2017. For more information, see "Spotlight on Global Jihad (2-8 November 2017)," Meir Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center.

404   This information is based on an article on HN's website, which is no longer readily accessible online. For screenshot and translation of this article, see the appendix.

405   "Spotlight on Global Jihad (2-8 November 2017)."

406   For example, see "Al-Baqir Brigade a local Shiite militia affiliated with Assad's forces in Aleppo," Enab Baladi, October 31, 2016; "Iran-backed fighters prepare fresh assault against ISIS in Eastern Syria."

407   "Spotlight on Global Jihad (2-8 November 2017)."

408   Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," pp. 23-24.

409   Ibid.

410   Martin Chulov, "Controlled by Iran, the deadly militia recruiting Iraq's men to die in Syria," *Guardian*, March 12, 2014.

411   "Pakistani Shias being trained by Iran for a regional fighting force," Asian News International (ANI), December 20, 2017.

412   Amir Toumaj and Romany Shaker, "IRGC-controlled Syrian militia declares jihad against US forces in Syria," FDD's Long War Journal, April 13, 2018.

413   Shaar and Fathollah-Nejad.

414   Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology," p. 11.

Tehran has worked to repair schools damaged in the war.[415]

Section 4.3. Notable Aspects of Iranian and LH Support to Proxies Operating in Syria

Section 4.3.1. Trends in Iranian and LH Support Along Different Religious Affiliations

Some analysts indicate that Iranian-backed militias—particularly Iraq-based ones—are loyal to three major figures: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Muqtada al-Sadr, and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.[416] For analysis, this report investigates proxies' loyalty to Khamenei (also referred to as Khomeinist groups in this study), Muqtada al-Sadr, or other camps, the last of which includes Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani followers and groups belonging to other or no religious affiliations. Exporting the Iranian revolution is seemingly part of the strategic mentality of all actors coming out of Iran, and it has been deployed in a variety of manners, ranging from establishing religious schools to implementing Shi`ism conversion campaigns and working with like-minded partners on the ground.[417] Iran works with groups from various religious traditions and affiliations for strategic reasons. Through entrenchment with different groups, Iran takes measures to maintain influence in Syria. Put differently, shared religious affiliation does not seem to be as strategically significant as does the opportunity to maintain a partnership.

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415   Ibid., p. 11.

416   Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq' Future," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2017; Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018.

417   Authors' interview, Diane Zorri, May 2021.

Image 3: This image, featuring Abu Alaa al-Wala'I and Muqtada al-Sadr, with a picture of Muqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad-Sadiq al-Sadr in the background, was sent on the Kata'ib Sayed al-Shuhada Telegram channel on April 27, 2019.[418]

A similar logic (i.e., to maintain influence) may exist for conversion programs. As mentioned in the background chapter, Iran has engaged in efforts to convert Syrian citizens to Shi`ism, offering incentives ranging from free trips to healthcare.[419] This strategy, aimed at increasing the number of Shiites in Syria, could allow Iran to eventually work as their advocate, ensuring its influence regardless of who is in power.[420] Additionally, this would provide Iran with a potentially tolerant population that can provide operational freedom of action to its proxy forces and the Quds Force.[421] It is thus interesting to see if this soft-power entrenchment also extends to Iran's proxy forces, with efforts to buy loyalty from proxies faithful to figures other than Khamenei.

Militias were coded as part of each camp based on their own statements or from secondary sources.

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418 Translation of the caption in graphic: "His Eminence our brother the mujahid Sayid Muqtada al-Sadr is a moon that lights up the country's sky and a distinct feature in the history of the Resistance. We will not allow, under any circumstances, for him to be insulted by the Gulf tyrants and the enslaved people, whose sincere words shook their thrones that are built on the skulls of the weak. Hajj Abu Alaa al-Wala'I, Secretary General of Kata'ib Sayed al-Shuhada in Iraq."

419 Vohra; authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

420 Vohra.

421 Authors' interview, Jennifer Cafarella, June 2021.

(See Table 5.1 for the categorizations of each group.) For example, sources state that Kata'ib Hezbollah explicitly proclaims allegiance to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei,[422] indicating KH as a Khomeinist group. During a 2019 interview, Liwa Dhualfiqar's spokesman directly confirmed the religious authority for the majority of its Iraqi members is al-Sadr.[423] If sources indicated a proxy was loyal to more than one figure, the affiliation was coded based on what the majority of sources recorded. It should be noted that it is often difficult to definitively assign a proxy to a specific camp, and these classifications should not be considered absolute. For example, although Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya has declared its support for Khamenei, it also used Sadrist images in its propaganda.[424]

Table 4.3.1. Groups by Religious Affiliation

Affiliation	Khomeinism	Sadrism	Other Affiliations
Group Names	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Badr Organization Fatemiyoun Brigades Harakat al-Nujaba Kata'ib al-Ansar al-Wilayah Kata'ib al-Imam Ali Kata'ib Hezbollah Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada Khorasan Companies Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya Quwat al-Ridha Saraya al-Aqidah Zeinabiyoun Brigades	Ansar Allah al-Awfiya Jaish al-Muwamal Liwa Dhualfiqar Promised Day Brigades	Al-Ghaliboun Lebanese Resistance Brigades Liwa al-Quds Saraya al-Jihad

Turning to Figure 4.3.A, overwhelmingly, Iran provided support to groups loyal to Khamenei—a not altogether surprising finding. More interesting, however, Iran appears to have phased its support to militias loyal to al-Sadr and groups with other religious affiliations active in Syria. Specifically, in 2011, Iran provided support to groups loyal to Khamenei and those with other affiliations. There seemed to be an overall preference for these two categories (i.e., Khomeinist and other affiliations) for the first two years of the conflict. Between 2014 and 2015, support to other groups rose and gradually tapered off in 2016 to 2019. In 2016, Iran provided about the same support to both al-Sadr loyalist groups and those with other affiliations who were active in Syria. Most support was provided to al-Sadr loyalists between 2014 and 2018, peaking in 2016. Support to Sadrist groups decreased starting in 2017. Additionally, Iran provided overall support to Sadrist groups to a lesser extent than it did to groups with other, non-Khomeinist affiliations.

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422 Rafid Fadhil Ali, "Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah Seek Greater Popularity through Threats to Kuwaiti Port Development," Jamestown Foundation, August 19, 2011; Mansour and Jabar.

423 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar: Interview," aymennjawad.org, April 12, 2019.

424 Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Ansar Allah al-Awfiyya: One of Many New Khomeinist Militias in Iraq," Jihadology, September 16, 2014.
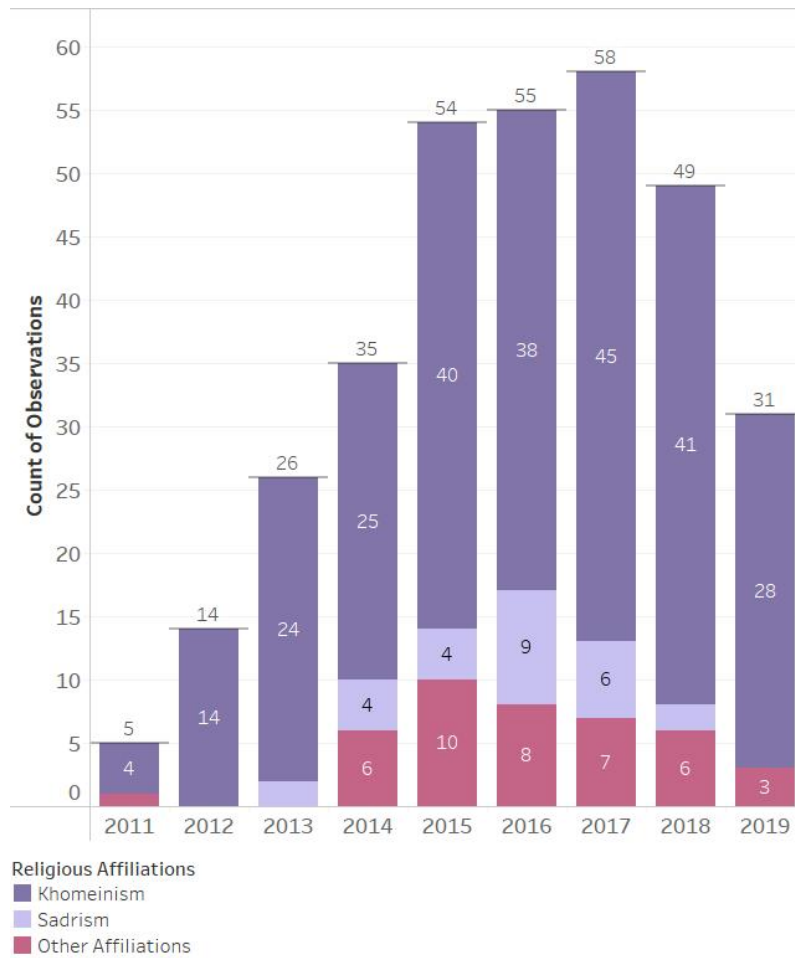
Figure 4.3.A. Overall Iranian Support by Religious Affiliation

In looking closer at annual trends in provisions for each religious affiliation, a few findings about groups with Sadrist and other loyalties bear mentioning. First, aside from groups loyal to Khamenei, the evidence indicated an overall preference for providing kinetic and non-kinetic support to groups with other affiliations. There was a slight emphasis toward groups loyal to al-Sadr during the peak of the conflict (2015-2017). Even so, support to groups with other affiliations was comparable, peaking from 2015 to 2017. Similar trends were apparent for non-kinetic support, to a lesser extent.

When examining religious affiliation by support type (see Figure 4.3.B), there were few indications of potential preference, save for a couple of exceptions.[425] First, only Khamenei loyalists received social services support from Iran. Separately, groups loyal to al-Sadr did not receive recruitment assistance; only Khamenei loyalists and groups with other religious affiliations did.

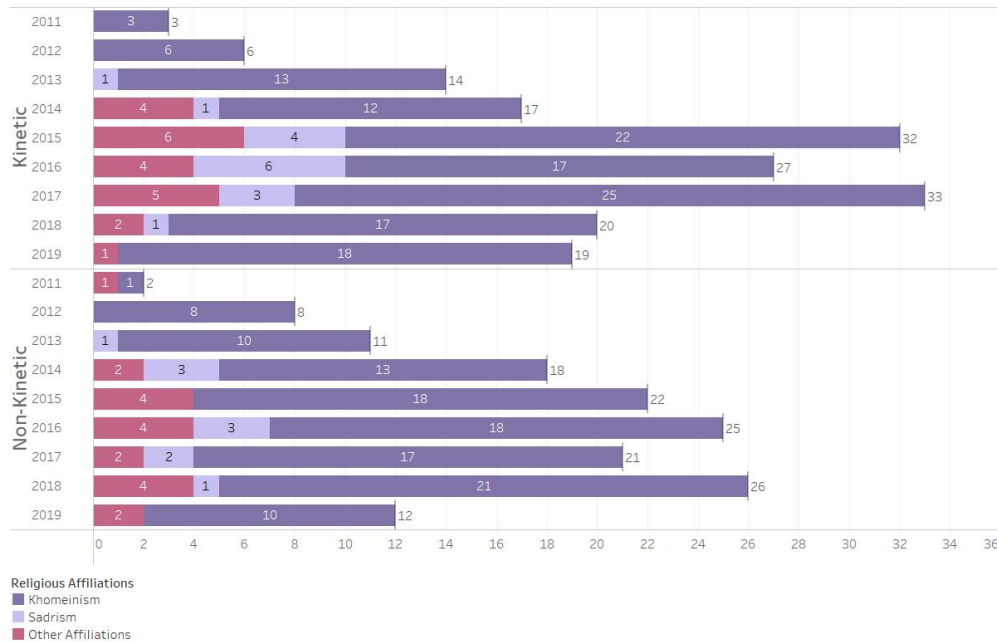425 For related visuals, see Figures A8 and A9 in the appendix.

Figure 4.3.B. Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Support by Year and Religious Affiliation

Iran's willingness to support and work with proxies that do not exclusively subscribe to Khomeinism—and therefore *velayat-e faqih*[426]—could be a necessary compromise, given Syria's demographics. In neighboring Iraq, Iran has attempted to create a proxy network among Iraqi-Shi`a groups expressing a range of Iranian loyalty.[427] There, Tehran allegedly works with Sunni groups, such as the Salah al-Din Brigades.[428] As Iran approaches the use of proxies as a strategic endeavor, it would follow that Tehran would not limit itself to partnering only with groups aligned with its *velayat-e faqih* ideology. Syria is not religiously homogeneous, and supporting only those proxies willing to ascribe to *velayat-e faqih* would limit Iran's potential recruits.

Iran seemingly does not give preference to groups that follow al-Sadr compared to other affiliations and non-Khomeinist groups active in Syria. This seems consistent as Muqtada al-Sadr may be best characterized as Iran's fair-weather friend: Meaning, Iran and al-Sadr have worked together for decades, at least since the 2003 invasion of Iraq,[429] yet the relationship between Iran and al-Sadr and Sadrist groups has had periods of tension. By way of an anecdotal illustration, in 2016, al-Sadr supporters in Iraq participated in anti-Iran chants while destroying the offices of Iranian Shi`a groups.[430] Al-Sadr apologized, and Iran did not pull its support for his Iraq-based militia groups.[431] Notably, al-Sadr's preference for non-involvement in the Syrian conflict, which he claims is an "internal issue," could also be exacerbating tensions between Iran and Sadrist groups.[432] Conversely, al-Sadr was also one of the first Iraqi Shi`a leaders to call for Assad's resignation.[433] Despite this, "Sadrist" groups

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426 As a reminder, the *velayat-e faqih*, or "Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist," is the ideology underpinning Iran's system of government, where the clergy are in charge of state institutions and governance.

427 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, "Chapter Four: Iraq."

428 Ibid., "Chapter Four: Iraq;" Nour Samaha, "Iraq's 'Good Sunni,'" *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2016.

429 *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, "Chapter Four: Iraq."

430 Smyth, "Beware of Muqtada al-Sadr."

431 Ibid.

432 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," p. 17.

433 "Sadr becomes first Iraqi Shi'ite leader to urge Assad to step down," Reuters, April 9, 2017.

were some of the first in Syria, boasting their connection to al-Sadr via posters and imagery.[434] In a 2019 interview, the spokesman for Liwa Dhualfiqar stated the religious authority for the majority of its Iraqi members is al-Sadr, and the Promised Day Brigades were created by al-Sadr himself to fight the occupation forces in Iraq.[435] Phillip Smyth suggests Iran's support of groups such as this is at least in part an effort to counter any opposition to al-Sadr, as many of the groups that claim affiliation to al-Sadr also indicate they are loyal to Iran.[436]

Section 4.3.2. Geographic Trends in Iranian and LH Support for Selected Proxies from 2017 to 2019

The following section discusses some geographic trends of IRGC, LH, and selected proxies' operations across various provinces from 2017 to 2019. It discusses these trends in juxtaposition with kinetic and non-kinetic support.

Open-source data about operations[437] was only collected for LH, the IRGC, and selected proxies.[438] These proxies are: Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, Fatemiyoun Brigades, Harakat al-Nujaba, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir, and Liwa al-Quds.

434 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," pp. 17-19.

435 "Al-Manar TV shows video of group attacking US vehicles in Iraq," BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, May 9, 2010.

436 Smyth, "Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," pp. 17-19.

437 Data about operations was collected from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) and Janes Intelligence: Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data," *Journal of Peace Research* 47:5 (2010): pp. 651-660; Janes' Terrorism and Insurgency events database. In this data, "operations" are broadly defined to include attacks, movement of troops, and group statements about their operations. From ACLED, this includes attacks (e.g., bombing/explosions, armed assaults, assassinations, kidnapping, explosions/remote violence), battles, establishment of joint bases, and strategic developments (as relevant). From Janes, the following were included: NSAG statements, NSAG attacks, CT statements, CT judicial, CT operations, and NSAG actions. A few notes: First, the data was cross-referenced to ensure that events were not duplicated across datasets. Second, if event descriptions mentioned two actors (e.g., IRGC and the Fatemiyoun Brigades) engaging in the same activity (e.g., a joint movement in a specific location), it was entered twice in the dataset, once under each actor.

438 Data was only collected for these three actors (i.e., IRGC, LH, and selected proxies) primarily because of the scope of this study. LH and IRGC forces were overwhelmingly the most prevalent Iranian forces on the ground in Syria. While the Iranian *Artesh* was also present, it was to a lesser extent. Additionally, in the report, the data collected for this project focused on LH and the IRGC, not necessarily the *Artesh*, though some instances were captured under the Iran (Non-Specific) category.

Figure 4.3.C. Overview of IRGC, LH, and Selected Proxies Operations in Syria from 2017 to 2019[439]

(a) LH 2017-2019

(b) IRGC 2017-2019

(c) Selected Proxies 2017-2019
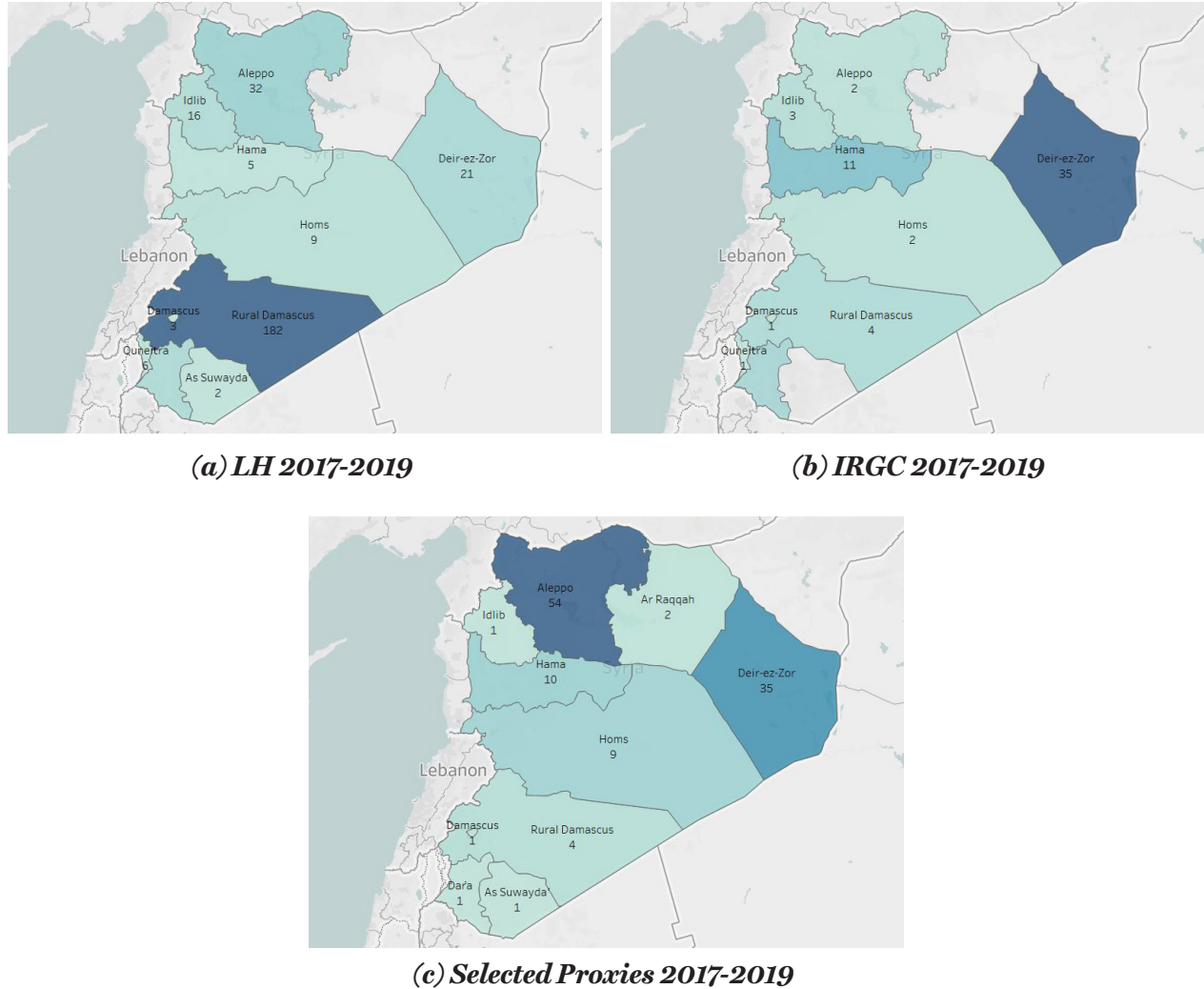
Turning to Figure 4.3.C and Table 4.3.2, from 2017 to 2019, the IRGC, LH, and selected proxies, unsurprisingly, seemed to operate in similar provinces but at different levels of frequency. LH had the highest number of operations overall, in comparison to the IRGC and the selected proxies, seemingly underlining Iran's use of the "train-the-trainer" approach with LH.[440] Rural Damascus had the most events, followed by Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor. LH operations were concentrated in Rural Damascus and Aleppo, while the selected proxies also conducted a high number of operations in Aleppo. The IRGC conducted most of its operations in this period in Deir ez-Zor and Hama.

In looking at the trends by province, a few points bear mentioning. All actors conducted operations in Deir ez-Zor from 2017 to 2019, which is expected given its location as a strategic crossroads for Iran. In the fall of 2017, the Syrian army took full control of the province.[441] The province was critical to Iranian

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439 For a graphic that breaks down the data in this figure annually, see Figures A10 (2017), A11 (2018), and A12 (2019) in the appendix.

440 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, p. 291.

441 "IS 'caliphate' defeated but jihadist group remains a threat," BBC, March 13, 2019; "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State."

supply routes as Tehran used land routes in Deir ez-Zor to transport weapons shipments between Iraq and Syria for several years prior to the start of the Syrian civil war.[442] Additionally, after the reduction of U.S. forces in Syria at the end of 2019, several hundred troops remained in northeastern Syria, with a small contingent in the south at al-Tanf garrison on the border with Iraq and Jordan.[443] This longer-term presence and resulting familiarity with the terrain and social conditions—as well as the placement of U.S. forces—may explain the high operational presence of the IRGC, LH, and selected proxies in Deir ez-Zor through 2019.

Relatedly, some concentration of operations for the different pro-Iranian actors could also have corresponded with Iran's desire to maintain existing or coveted routes of the land and air bridge between Tehran and Lebanon. For instance, a vast majority of LH operations were in Rural Damascus, which corresponds roughly with the aspirational southern route of the land and air bridge that has historically been obstructed by U.S. forces at al-Tanf garrison.[444] Conversely, the IRGC concentration in Deir ez-Zor could maintain the central route, the only route seemingly open to Iran.[445] The proxies' concentration in Aleppo could hold the desired northern one, which is largely closed to Iran due to Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) control.[446]

Iranian-backed forces succeeded in retaking Aleppo and its environs at the end of 2016, during which time there were several Iranian advisors with militias considering how best to conduct the campaign, alongside LH and unspecified proxies that reportedly conducted the majority of the fighting.[447] The significant level of IRGC, LH, and proxy involvement in the Battle of Aleppo may explain some of the operational presence of all three entities in Aleppo province at different points through 2019.

LH's operational presence in Rural Damascus in 2017 is the most concentrated out of any group in any province, in any year. Once again, the group's prior operational history may provide some insight. Specifically, LH intensified its siege over Zabadani, northwest of Damascus, in 2015 to compel the surrender of rebel fighters.[448] LH maintained its siege through 2017 (which is reflected in the data—a little over 70 observations occurred in the city of Zabadani in that year), until the passage of an agreement that effectively left the group in charge of the town's security apparatus.[449] LH's involvement in the Zabadani campaign is potentially one explanation for not only its operational presence in Rural Damascus in 2017, but also the significant decrease in its operations from 2017 to 2018, as it focused its efforts elsewhere. LH's interventions in other provinces from Latakia to Damascus were likely most important because, "if Assad fell, Iran needed these areas to supply Hezbollah and provide strategic depth while being allied with an Alawite-led enclave."[450]

The years 2018-2019 were crucial to holding the recently recovered territory.[451] In 2018, Russian

442 Authors' interview, Oula Alrifai, May 2021.

443 Karen De Young, "U.S. will leave up to 600 troops in northeastern Syria to prevent ISIS resurgence, top general says," *Washington Post*, November 10, 2019; Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, "How the U.S. Military Will Carry Out a Hasty, Risky Withdrawal From Syria," *New York Times*, October 15, 2019.

444 Adesnik and Taleblu; Jones, "War by Proxy."

445 Adesnik and Taleblu.

446 Ibid.; Jones, "War by Proxy."

447 Authors' interview, Oula Alrifai, May 2021; authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

448 Mazen Ezzi, "Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?" European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, November 27, 2020, pp. 6-7.

449 Ibid.

450 Authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

451 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021.

forces focused on airstrikes in eastern Ghouta and later in Dar'a.[452] In the same year, pro-Assad forces regained control in Homs and Hama to maintain a line of control with regime-held Damascus.[453] Previously, Iranian-backed forces had retaken Palmyra (in Homs province) in March 2017, which had fallen back into Islamic State control after the government and Russia had recaptured it nearly a year before.[454] Per the data, of the three actors, the selected Iranian-backed proxies seem to have conducted the most operations in Hama and Homs from 2017 to 2019, but just narrowly more so than the IRGC and LH, respectively.

Also in 2018 and 2019, Iran, Turkey, and Russia met on several occasions to strategize operations in Idlib province, the last front of the conflict.[455] Despite the significance of Idlib to Tehran, Iranian forces stayed out of the province until sometime in 2020.[456] The data indicates the IRGC maintained few operations there (and only in 2019) while seemingly delegating activities to LH. The annual totals of operations decreased over time; there is a noticeable decrease in Hezbollah operations from 2018 to 2019, which could be due in part to its reported reduction of LH forces in 2019.[457]

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452 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021; "Eastern Ghouta: What happened and why," Al Jazeera, April 14, 2018; "Syria war: Thousands flee offensives in Afrin and Ghouta," BBC, March 16, 2018; Armenak Tokmajyan, "Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2020, p. 5.

453 Authors' interview, David Ellis, June 2021; "Syria's war explained from the beginning," Al Jazeera, April 14, 2018.

454 "Syrian government forces enter Palmyra, drive back Islamic State: monitors," Reuters, March 1, 2017.

455 "The Latest: Iran, Russia, Turkey presidents meet in summit," Associated Press, September 7, 2018; Soldatkin, Gumrukcu, and Toksabay.

456 Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, "What the Cease-fire Means for Idlib Residents," Newlines Institute, March 17, 2020; Toumaj, Rondeaux, and Ammar, pp. 64-65.

457 "Hezbollah cut down its forces in Syria: Nasrallah," Reuters, July 12, 2019.

Table 4.3.2. IRGC, LH, and Selected Proxies Operations from 2017-2019
by Province and Year

		2017	2018	2019	Grand Total
Aleppo	Hezbollah	29	3		32
	IRGC	1		1	2
	Proxies	44	8	2	54
Ar Raqqah	Proxies	2			2
As Suwayda'	Hezbollah		2		2
	Proxies		1		1
Damascus	Hezbollah	3			3
	IRGC		1		1
	Proxies		1		1
Dar'a	Hezbollah	6	8	4	18
	IRGC		2	3	5
	Proxies	1			1
Deir ez-Zor	Hezbollah	13	5	3	21
	IRGC	13	8	14	35
	Proxies	7	17	11	35
Hama	Hezbollah	3	1	1	5
	IRGC	6	4	1	11
	Proxies	8	1	1	10
Homs	Hezbollah	9			9
	IRGC	1		1	2
	Proxies	7		2	9
Idlib	Hezbollah	1	12	3	16
	IRGC			3	3
	Proxies			1	1
Quneitra	Hezbollah	1	5		6
	IRGC		1		1
Rural Damascus	Hezbollah	177	1	4	182
	IRGC		3	1	4
	Proxies	1	3		4
Grand Total		333	87	56	476

While visible operations are important, it is also important to consider the absence of activity. Despite its significance to pro-Iranian activity in the later years of the conflict, open-source data did not reveal operations[458] in the province of Hasakah in northeastern Syria from 2017 to 2019. This may

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458 Refer to footnote 437 at the beginning of this section for the datasets and types of events included in the geographical analysis.

be due to operational caution on the part of Iranian actors and their proxies. In 2015, Iranian and LH forces assisted Assad in securing the city of Qamishli from the Islamic State.[459] In later years, the lack of operational activity could be attributed in part to the province's economic and geographical significance to Iran. Notably, there are many Syrian oil fields in Hasakah, underscoring its importance to Iran for the purpose of alleviating financial strain from sanctions.[460] Furthermore, as a bordering province with Iraq, Hasakah is crucial to securing the land supply route from Iran to Syria, in the event the air bridge fails.[461]

Separately, as mentioned previously, Iran supports and collaborates with local tribes. The Baggara tribe that supports the Iranian-backed Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir brigade is located in both Hasakah and Aleppo provinces.[462] Iran also reportedly worked with the al-Magawir tribal militia later in the conflict; the militia exercises considerable influence in the city of Qamishli and Hasakah province more broadly.[463] For the last two years, the majority of Hasakah province has been under the control of the SDF.[464] Furthermore, the fact that Hasakah-based tribal militias have not clashed with SDF in areas under the latter's control[465] may indicate operational hesitancy on behalf of the proxies to conduct armed attacks in areas not under pro-regime control. Iranian actors may also exhibit the same operational hesitancy and thus be more reliant on proxies, a fact that may be supported by the social and financial assistance Iran has provided tribes such as the Baggara.[466]

When these geographic patterns are overlaid with information about the kinetic and non-kinetic support patterns, some interesting trends are evident (see Table 4.3.3). Overall, there is an emphasis on both providing and receiving kinetic support. First, LH seemed to participate in the most operations over this period. It did not, however, provide the most support to proxies from 2017 to 2019, but it provided twice as much kinetic as non-kinetic support. The IRGC, which trailed behind LH in terms of the number of operations, provided the most support to proxies, with a predominant focus on kinetic support. Finally, the selected proxies had the lowest number of operations in comparison to LH and the IRGC. Additionally, they received a consistent level of kinetic and non-kinetic support over time, with an emphasis on the former.

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459 Haian Dukhan and Ammar Alhamad, "Iran's Growing Network of Influence among Eastern Syrian Tribes," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 6, 2021.

460 Ibid.

461 Authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

462 Daphne McCurdy and Frances Z. Brown, "Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition: A Case Study of Eastern Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 12, 2021.

463 Dukhan and Alhamad.

464 Eva Kahan and Tishman Jonathan, "Syria Situation Report March 22 – April 19, 2021," Institute for the Study of War, April 23, 2021; Khaled al-Khateb, "Syrian government reportedly building tribal force in Hasakah," Al-Monitor, April 22, 2021.

465 Dukhan and Alhamad.

466 McCurdy and Brown.

Table 4.3.3. IRGC, LH, and Proxies Trends in Providing and/or Receiving Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Support, 2017-2019

Actor	Year	Provide: Kinetic	Provide: Non-Kinetic
IRGC	2017	18	11
	2018	13	14
	2019	8	4
	Total	39	29
Hezbollah	2017	10	3
	2018	5	3
	2019	6	2
	Total	21	8
		Receive: Kinetic	Receive: Non-Kinetic
Proxies	2017	14	12
	2018	16	14
	2019	17	7
	Total	47	33

Chapter 5. Conclusion and Security Implications

Understanding Iran's support to militias over the course of the Syrian civil war is crucial, given Damascus' significance in Iran's national security doctrine and the long civil war. This report investigated how Iranian support to its proxies operating in Syria has varied by type from 2011 to 2019. While this report employed a macro-level approach to understanding patterns in Iranian patronage to different groups, it surveys various supports and the extent to which they were provided year by year. Further, to provide a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes "Iranian support," this study categorized relevant sub-state and non-state actors where possible: the IRGC, IRGC-Quds Force, and LH. Only when specific actors could not be gleaned would reference to general "Iranian support" be invoked. As the data that underpins this report is drawn entirely from open sources, these numbers are likely subject to reporting effects, outlined in this report's methodology chapter.

In this final section of the report, notable themes and security implications are explored. Before beginning this discussion, it is important to note trends could persist due to reporting effects. Indicators of support can be challenging to observe or investigate early on during a conflict but may become easier to find and report over time due to the increasing exposure of actors involved.

Notable Trends in Iranian-Backed Support to Militias in Syria

Iranian Support to Militias Seemingly Followed a Phased Approach

The data indicated that kinetic support (i.e., training, personnel placement, joint attacks, weapons provisions) peaked in 2015 to 2017 while non-kinetic (i.e., recruitment and social services assistance, funding, logistical support, and meetings with militias) peaked in 2017 to 2018. This could indicate a shift in Iranian strategy, when Tehran poured in materiel, including personnel, in the conflict's early years. As fighting against the Islamic State deescalated—whether due to gains by Damascus or U.S.-led forces—Iran could have adjusted its overall mandate from fighting the opposition or the Islamic State to focusing on more soft-power supports.[467] These support types, such as cultural and reconstruction activities, are integral to cultivating long-term influence among locals. A similar playbook has been utilized by Iran in other places like Lebanon.[468] In some ways, this phased approach is reminiscent of the United States' operations in Iraq, where kinetic military operations were followed by nation-building initiatives.[469]

It also bears mentioning that ramped-up sanctions under President Trump's maximum pressure campaign could also have affected Tehran's ability to foot the bill for proxies in the conflict's later years, by devaluing the Iranian Rial and contracting Iran's GDP, among other factors.[470] It is important to highlight that, while possible, there is no direct evidence to suggest that the sanctions have stopped Iran's ability to support proxies.[471] Even so, proxies continued to underpin Iran's asymmetric regional security policy, and there are only anecdotes in regional press that indicate how sanctions have impacted LH and the Iraqi Shi`a militias vis-à-vis their patron,[472] which may have been true for their Syrian counterparts as well. While this report's data indicates an overall reduction in number of proxies supported in 2018 and 2019, some supports—such as joint attacks, training, weapons, funding,

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467 Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021.

468 Authors' interview, Hanin Ghaddar, June 2021; authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

469 The authors thank Diane Zorri for this important point.

470 Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

471 Authors' interview, Alex Vatanka, June 2021; authors' interview, Colin Clarke, July 2021.

472 Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

coordination, and recruitment—either remained at similar levels or reduced only slightly in the last two years, and one (training support) even increased. Iran's increasing proxy activity may also have structural and not just local drivers, according to Taleblu, as Tehran wanted to punch-back against the financial strain and "signal that continuing a policy of pressure to impede their regional activities would not come cost free."[473]

Proxy Support Was Delegated Among Different Iranian Actors and LH

When comparing Iranian (to include the IRGC and its Quds Force and other nonspecific Iranian support) with LH support, some differences are apparent. While Iran and LH were more balanced in providing various kinetic supports (including placing personnel, launching joint attacks with militias, or providing training or weapons), the actors took up different mantles when providing non-kinetic support (providing funding, logistical, recruitment, or social services support, or arranging in-person meetings). Iran and LH both provided high levels of training support, but the collected data reveals Iran focused on providing weapons while LH launched joint attacks with more than double the number of groups Iran fought with. This could, in part, be explained by differences in capabilities between the two actors—where Iranian actors, in comparison to LH, likely have greater access to weapons and their transport—or, more likely, a result of coordination between Iran and LH. This trend may be an element of Iranian actors simply coordinating this part, which LH could have managed given its considerable abilities and logistic networks throughout the region, but for sundry reasons, Iran took point in weapons support.[474] Meanwhile, according to the data, LH launched joint attacks with more militias, but Iran was reported to have placed more personnel with the groups. This apparent division of labor may have directly enabled LH to, over the course of the conflict, become a much stronger fighting force. Iran was the main provider for various non-kinetic supports, including funding and logistical support. While LH was mostly involved in providing recruitment and meeting support, Iran had nearly three times the amount of support observations than LH over the course of this study, primarily due to the deployment and activities of the IRGC-QF. The data indicated that the Quds Force mostly conducted in-person meetings, many of which were led by the group's now deceased commander, Qassem Soleimani, who was well-known for visiting militias in the battlefield. Overall, the IRGC (inclusive of the Quds Force) was the most prolific provider of kinetic and non-kinetic support to militias operating in Syria.

The Significance of Soft Power

Iranian and Iranian-backed militias' soft power has permeated much of Syrian society. Iran has worked to strengthen and build a Syrian Shi`a religious network, providing a variety of religious and social services.[475] In the context of non-kinetic support, this report examines soft power, namely via recruitment and social service provisions support provided to proxies by Iran. Recruitment support was generally consistent over time, with a small spike in 2018. Tactics included the use of incentives, from residency to financial stipends.[476] It is important to note, compared to other types of support, there was less information available in open sources regarding recruitment support. This also held true for social services support, with only six observations total. Despite this, there is considerable evidence of broad Iranian involvement in these types of soft-power initiatives, including participation

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473 Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021.

474 This is in part supported by earlier discussion of the level of coordination and division of labor between LH and Iranian actors discussed in Chapter 4.

475 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

476 Rasmussen and Nader.

in reconstruction efforts in Syria[477] and the existence of Iran-sponsored recruitment centers.[478] These specific efforts are indicative of the utility of soft-power initiatives, both to decrease recruit attrition via continued benefits and to help Iran and its proxies embed themselves in Syrian communities.

There is a potential danger in relying on the paradigm of identity politics to understand the nature of Iranian support. Iran is much better at exerting soft power to obtain its national interests—despite the identities of the areas where it is exerting power.[479] If only the lens of shared (sectarian) identity is applied to understanding Iran's interactions with its proxies, a swath of collaborating groups would be overlooked, leaving a potential blind spot in an analysis of the Iranian threat network landscape. As this study has indicated, Iran backed groups that did not subscribe to its *velayat-e faqih* worldview, such as Sadrist and non-sectarian groups, which is widely documented in the open source. However, the findings highlighted that support trends were not consistent for different religious affiliations, potentially indicating avenues for disruption. For example, groups loyal to al-Sadr were only seemingly preferred during the conflict's peak (2015 to 2017) and did not receive recruitment assistance, while Khamenei loyalists and groups with other religious affiliations did. Furthermore, reports indicate that in Deir ez-Zor, Iran has offered financial rewards to Sunni recruits' families if they converted to Twelver Shi`a Islam.[480]

Security Implications

Given the constraints of open-source research, the data in this report—at least partially—illustrated how Iran shifts its approach to providing support to proxies over the course of a prolonged conflict. Iran has an ability to adapt to challenging conditions through a "needs-based approach" based on risk-tolerance and deniability, among other factors, and strategically leveraging local partners and its expansive supply routes.[481] This report merely provides some macroscopic evidence of such adaptability in changing conflict conditions.

Looking past the graphs and trends discussed, there are some more practical applications of this report's findings, particularly to forces such as the United States and others, seeking to counter Iran's influence in Syria. There is a need to consider both the strength of Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in the context of proxy support to understand their potential pathways forward. While the conflict in Syria may be waning,[482] it has not altogether ceased, and more recent attacks on Shi`a shrines help Iran maintain ideological justifications for not only its involvement in Syria but also its persistent proxy recruitment efforts.[483]

Countering Iranian Influence in Syria. As Iran continues to compete with Russia, Turkey, and the United States not only in Syria but elsewhere in the region, it is important to consider the tools in Tehran's arsenal for countering adversaries and the nature of their use. This is underlined by evidence that Iran has transferred rocket and drone technology to their proxies, who are using it to target U.S.

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477 Shaar and Fathollah-Nejad.

478 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology."

479 The authors thank Diane Zorri for this important insight.

480 Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology;" Oula A. Alrifai and Ali Alleile, "Iran and Russia Are Exploiting America's Absence in Northeast Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 29, 2021.

481 Authors' interview, Behnam Ben Taleblu, September 2021; authors' interview, Diane Zorri, May 2021; *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 114.

482 Ruth Sherlock, "Syria's Civil War Started A Decade Ago. Here's Where It Stands," NPR, March 15, 2021.

483 Golkar and Aarabi, p. 42.

coalition forces in Syria and Iraq.[484] The Syrian conflict has demonstrated the multifaceted ways in which Iran's proxies can be leveraged as asymmetric hard and soft power tools to undermine Tehran's adversaries. Notably, despite various airstrikes by Israeli and U.S. forces, Iran continues to maintain a substantial physical presence in Syria, indicating how deeply it has embedded in both Syrian political and societal fabric. However, there are indications that Iran has not ingratiated itself with all Syrian political elite, some of whom are reportedly lobbying to push Iran out of Syria.[485]

Additionally, the Syrian conflict has seemingly strengthened overall both Iranian forces and some proxy groups, according to analysts. The IRGC and *Artesh* worked together for the first time since the Iran-Iraq War and—even while suffering significant losses—their fighters accrued considerable combat experience.[486] Lebanese Hezbollah and other proxies did as well, notably Hashd al-Shaabi-linked Iranian-backed militias based in Iraq.[487] While not all Hashd al-Shaabi groups are linked to Tehran, those to which Iran provides support are among the most deeply involved in both Iraqi security and politics. While Iran's influence in Baghdad has been challenged in the recent past,[488] Iranian-backed proxies remain in positions of power in Iraqi politics and within the Hashd al-Shaabi. Separately, its successful deployment of proxies in the conflict arguably strengthened Iran's resolve for its initial intervention in the civil war. With the continued survival of Assad's government with minimal loss of Iranian lives, Iran has likely found continued justification for reliance on proxies in future conflicts.[489] Furthermore, Iran has also demonstrated the extent of its proxy network as a realization of its forward defense strategy. However, issues with shortages in funding, forces, and other resources highlight a vulnerability of this strategy.[490]

The IRGC also remains poised to mutually reinforce its gains in both Iraq and Syria. As of 2019, the IRGC sought to leverage its political connections in the Kurdistan region of Iraq to ensure greater access into Syria, and as a backup to its more commonly used land bridge through Deir ez-Zor province.[491] Relatedly, it is important to consider whether the United States' maximum pressure campaign bore out its intended effects. Even though Iran and its Syrian affiliates dealt with increased internal tension, the maximum pressure campaign did not appear to prevent them from continuing to fulfill their goals.[492] Far from degrading Iran's support to its proxies, the maximum pressure campaign likely reinforced Iran's reliance on them.[493]

The gradation of Iran's proxy relationships indicates potential for exploiting fissures in and the disrupting of Iran-proxy relationships.[494] Proxies, in part, view sponsors as a necessary aspect of establishing their capabilities.[495] However, sponsors can stop supporting proxies for various reasons,

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484 Andrew Hanna, "Iran's Drone Transfers to Proxies," United States Institute of Peace, June 30, 2021; Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Redefining Iran's Role in its Latest 'Shadow War' Against Israel," *National Interest*, May 24, 2021; "Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress - Operation Inherent Resolve: October 1, 2021-December 31, 2021;" "U.S.-led coalition shoots down drone in southern Syria;" Phil Stewart, "U.S. warplanes strike Iran-backed militia in Iraq, Syria," Reuters, June 28, 2021.

485 Ali Hashem, "IRGC Syrian commander removed 'upon request from Assad,'" Al-Monitor, November 15, 2021.

486 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, pp. 281, 291-292.

487 Ibid., p. 291; Knights, "Back into the Shadows?"; *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, p. 111.

488 Alissa J. Rubin, "Iraqis Rise Against a Reviled Occupier: Iran," *New York Times*, November 4, 2019; "Iraq: Anti-government protesters denounce pro-Iran crowds," Al Jazeera, January 2, 2020.

489 Authors' interview, Ali Alfoneh, June 2021.

490 Vatanka, "Whither the IRGC of the 2020s?" pp. 16-18.

491 O'Leary and Heras, pp. 72, 74.

492 Authors' interview, Jennifer Cafarella, June 2021.

493 Authors' interview, Colin Clarke, July 2021.

494 Authors' interview, Diane Zorri, May 2021.

495 Zorri, Sadri, and Ellis, p. 5.

and proxies may seek backing from other sponsors.[496] When there is interest from multiple sponsors, proxies can engage in "principal shopping," which can yield opportunities for intervention.[497] In applying this, states could extend competing offers of support to poach groups away from Iran. According to Jennifer Cafarella, there has been some indication of broad competition between Russia and Iran, with Russia cultivating relationships with militias such as Liwa al-Quds.[498] Soliciting groups that Iran was directly involved in founding versus those that had existed and were courted by Iran requires tailored approaches. As the nature of these principal-agent relationships may be fundamentally different, the latter groups' self-interest in material support could provide an opportunity for disruption.

Future of the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades. During the conflict, Iran institutionalized the recruitment of foreign fighters. This was in part evidenced by Iraqi fighters fighting for Syrian groups, most notably through the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades. Given the recent shift of the United States' role in Afghanistan, it is important to keep track of Fatemiyoun recruitment and deployment. The pathways by which Tehran recruits Afghan and Pakistani fighters both inside and outside of Iran are plentiful and are focused on vulnerable populations, notably migrants and undocumented workers. Ongoing unrest in Afghanistan will likely continue to compel recruits to leave the country and/or travel to Iran. There are indications that Iran is attempting to further entrench these recruits in the country, even after completing their tours in Syria. Fatemiyoun members allegedly receive a document that allows them to move around Iran without fear of deportation and receive a one-year, potentially renewable residency permit.[499] Additionally, there have been reports of former Fatemiyoun fighters living in Mashhad, Iran.[500] However, there is a risk that the Fatemiyoun may wither as Tehran has not kept most of its promises (in terms of incentives) to former and current fighters, in part catalyzed by the financial strain on the Quds Force.[501]

However, maintaining the Fatemiyoun Brigades beyond the Syrian conflict and within Iranian borders ensures they will be available for deployment elsewhere if the need arises. There is speculation that Afghanistan may be the next arena to which Iran deploys the Fatemiyoun.[502] Conversely, Iran may have eroded the appeal of recruitment to the Fatemiyoun for the Hazara. Should Hazara feel Tehran will not protect them against persecution from the Taliban, it is likely they would disengage from the group. Additionally, if the Taliban reneges on their promises toward Shi`a in Afghanistan, even if they do not directly threaten Iran's interests, Iran may transition to a more hands-on approach so as to not lose its other Shiite clients.[503]

In terms of future proxy deployment, with the changing conflict in Syria, Iran may seek to deploy its affiliated fighters elsewhere, such as Iran, Afghanistan, or to bolster LH efforts against Israel. In particular, Assad may feel threatened by some proxies' rising influence and capabilities throughout the conflict.[504] At the end of 2021, Tehran removed the IRGC commander in charge of the Syrian

496   Ibid., p. 5.

497   Ibid., p. 5.

498   Authors' interview, Jennifer Cafarella, June 2021.

499   Kanishka Nawabi, "Fatemiyoun: Iran's 'Good Taliban,'" Tolo News, February 7, 2021.

500   FJ, "Afghan Liwa Fatemiyoun militants and some of their families living in ...," Twitter, January 13, 2020.

501   Authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

502   Omar, "Fatemiyoun fighters disguised as refugees pose 'grave' threat to Afghanistan," *Salaam Times*, June 11, 2019; Alfoneh, "Afghans fear IRGC may deploy Fatemiyoun fighters to Afghanistan."

503   Authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

504   Authors' interview, Diane Zorri, May 2021.

theater, reportedly at Assad's insistence, due to his polarizing effect on Syrian elite.[505] Furthermore, Syrian leadership is said to be divided regarding Iran's presence in the country: Assad's camp seeks to show Iran appreciation for its assistance to Damascus during the conflict but without an Iranian redeployment.[506] Conversely, a second camp purportedly seeks the ouster of Iranian troops as the civil war is now over.[507] Even so, it is difficult to see a future in which Iranian proxies are not involved in Syria. Iran has invested substantial personnel and funds across various sectors, and it would follow that it would wish to reap the benefits of its investment, with proxies being just one part of Iran's seeming strategy to maintain its presence in Syria.

A geographic shift in some proxies, such as the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun, may be seen in the near future.[508] There are growing concerns of Fatemiyoun fighters returning to Iran, whether of their own volition or deployed as an Iranian paramilitary force, much like the IRGC.[509] Some Fatemiyoun fighters were depicted as providing social services in Iran and organizing conferences.[510] While similar concerns have not arisen to the same extent for the Zeinabiyoun Brigades—the Fatemiyoun's Pakistani counterpart—parallel efforts are possible.[511] The Zeinabiyoun's future is also unclear, as Tehran has not protected the group's fighters as promised.[512] Future efforts to expand this work could study how proxies are adjusting their overall operations in Syria as battlefield campaigns wane, whether they are being systematically deployed elsewhere, and/or if they will become a permanent fixture in the country. Additionally, given the lack of recruitment and social services support provided by Iran, it would be enlightening to examine the recruitment process of proxies themselves and whether they provide social services. These considerations have long-term implications for Iran's future in Syria.

Additionally, there is some concern that Iran could deploy the Fatemiyoun—and even Zeinabiyoun—to Afghanistan, potentially following a similar model to the Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi, where they could help further Iranian interests there.[513] This is particularly concerning given Qaani's extensive experience working in Afghanistan.[514] Iran has also dealt intermittently with the Taliban, and may have enough pull with the organization that Tehran's interests may have space to be partially realized in Kabul. Alternatively, with the Taliban's takeover, Tehran may not want to introduce competing interests in Afghanistan; or, on the other hand, have more ability to leverage proxies. In addition to existing domestic militant groups, such as the Taliban, the ability of the Fatemiyoun to enter and operate in Afghanistan may tilt the potential power vacuum left by the departure of U.S. forces toward Tehran.

505 Hashem; Muhammad Hussein, "Despite his gratitude to Soleimani, Assad is clamping down on Iran's presence in Syria," Middle East Monitor Online, January 5, 2022; "Chief IRGC general in Syria was ousted on Assad's orders – report," *Jerusalem Post*, November 10, 2021.

506 Ibid.

507 Ibid.

508 Authors' interview, Diane Zorri, May 2021.

509 Latifi; Bezhan; Clarke and Tabatabai; Alfoneh, "Afghans fear IRGC may deploy Fatemiyoun fighters to Afghanistan."

510 See, for example, "*Hame anche bayad darbareh doh lashkar fatemiyoun va zeinabiyoun bedaneem* [Everything one needs to know about the two Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun divisions]," and Toumaj, "IRGC-led Afghan group holds first 'international conference' in Iran."

511 For example, see Mohammed al-Sulami, "Pro-Iran fighters returning from Syria threaten Pakistan's security," *Arab News*, September 7, 2020.

512 Authors' interview, Amir Toumaj, August 2021.

513 See, for example, Latifi; Bezhan; Clarke and Tabatabai; Alfoneh, "Afghans fear IRGC may deploy Fatemiyoun fighters to Afghanistan."

514 Alfoneh, "Esmail Qaani: the next Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander?"; Bezhan.

Appendix

Groups Found to Receive Iranian and LH Support (Not Coded in Project)

Ahbab Al-Mustafa Battalion
Ansar al-Marja'iyah
Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja
Firqat al-Abbas al-Qataliya
Harakat al-Imam Zain al-Abidin
Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah
Hizballah al-Abrar
Imam Mahdi Brigade
Jabha-ye Moqawamat
Jaish al-Imam al-Mahdi al-Muqawama al-Watani al-Aqaidiya fi Suriya
Kataib al-Fateh al-Mubiin
Kataib al-Muqawama al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq
Kataib al-Zahra
Kataib Rua Allah
Khadam al-Sayyida Zaynab
Liwa al-Sadiqiin
Liwa al-Shabaab al-Rasali
Liwa al-Taff
Liwa al-Tafuf
Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib (LAAG)
Liwa Kafil Zaynab
Liwa Sadiqin
Mukhtar al-Thiqfi Brigade
Ninewa Guards
Qaida Quwet Abu Fadl al-Abbas (QQAFA)
Quwat al-Shaheed al-Awal
Quwat al-Shahid al-Sadr
Rapid Reaction Forces
Rezwan Forces
Saraya Aqadiiyun

Iranian and LH Tactical, Strategic, and Personnel Support Provided to Proxies from 2011 to 2019

Table A1. Tactical

	Year									Grand Total
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Training	2	3	6	7	11	8	11	7	9	64
Joint Attacks			6	4	8	10	13	4	4	49
Funding	1	3	3	6	4	8	8	8	6	47
Coordination		2	3	5	9	5	2	5	2	33
Weapons	1	3	1	3	7	5	5	3	4	32

Table A2. Strategic

	Year									Grand Total
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Recruitment	1	2	3	2	2	3	2	5	3	23
Social Services Provisions				1	1		1	3		6

Table A3. Personnel[515]

	Year								Grand Total
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Meetings	1	2	4	6	9	8	5	1	36
Personnel Placement		1	3	6	4	4	6	2	26

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515 It should be noted that Dual Leadership (with LH) is not included in this study. See page 5 of appendix for definition of this variable.
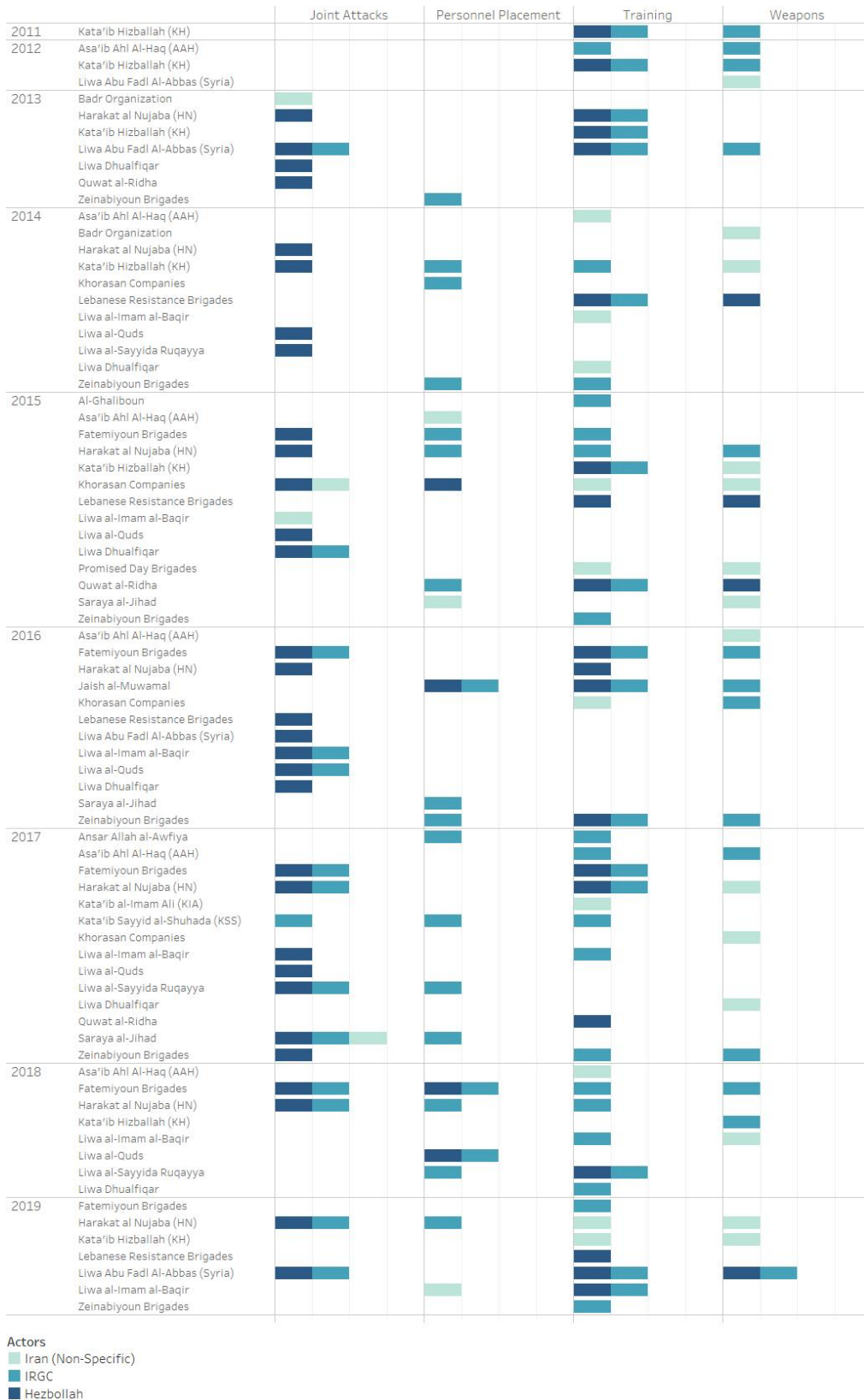
Figure A4. Iran (Non-Specific), IRGC, and LH Kinetic Support Provided to Groups by Type and Year
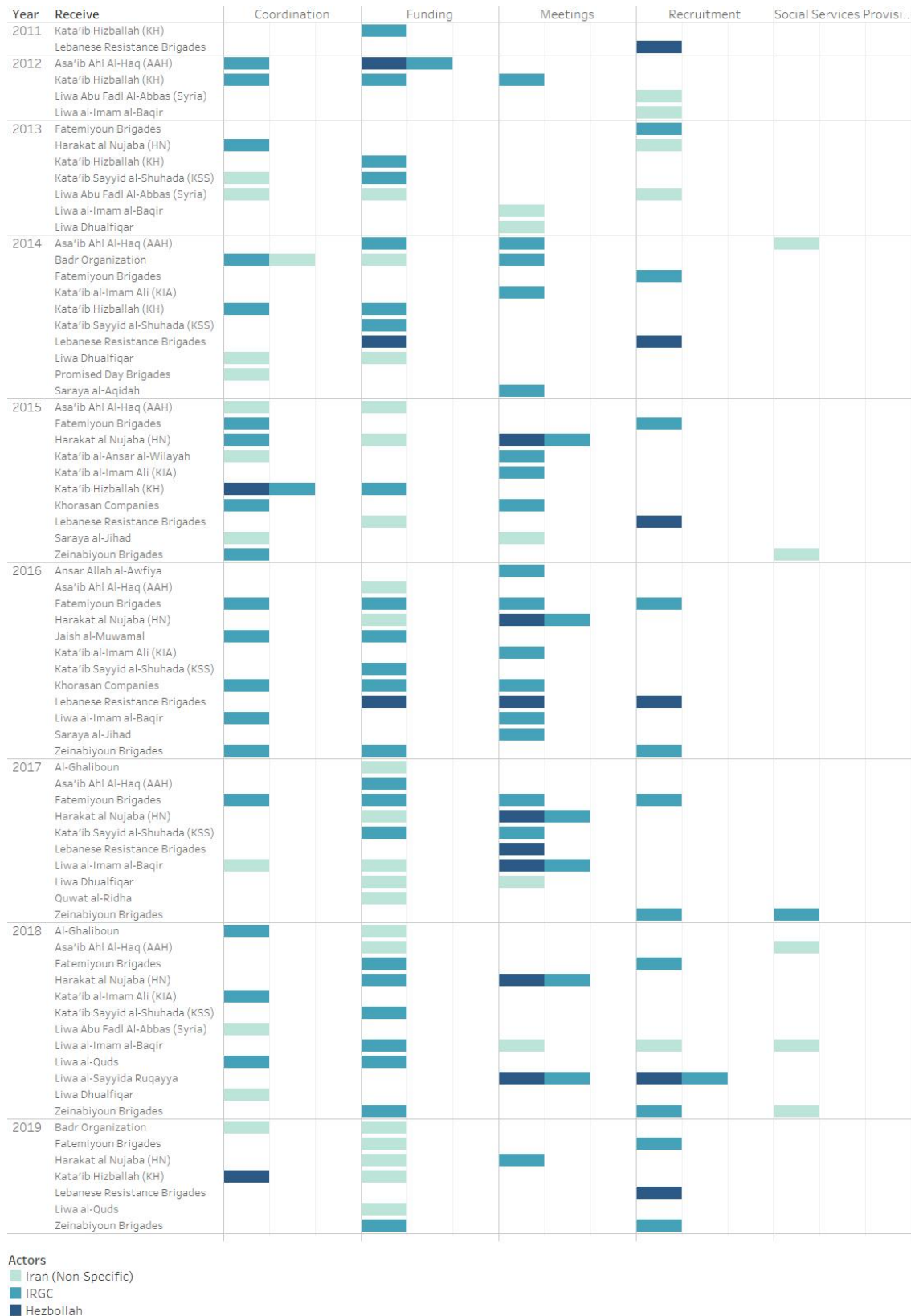
Figure A5. Iran (Non-Specific), IRGC, and LH Non-Kinetic Support Provided to Groups by Type and Year

Iranian Actors and LH Provisions to Proxies

While not pictured in the graphics below, for reference, in the total dataset, there are 316 relationships between Iranian entities (including the IRGC, IRGC-QF, and non-specific mentions of the Iranian government) or Lebanese Hezbollah and the groups. Of these, 78 were attributed to LH and 238 from Iranian actors. It should be noted that this includes 12 relationships that are not included in the analysis: nine of these are "other" tactical relationships (i.e., those that do not fit within the types of support outlined in Section 2.2) and three are dual leadership relationships, in which LH and militias shared leadership (which are not analyzed in this report).

	Joint Attacks	Personnel Placement	Training	Weapons	Funding	Coordination	Meetings	Recruitment	Social Services Provisions	Grand Total
Iran (Non-Specific)	4	3	10	14	20	12	5	5	5	78
IRGC	14	19	34	14	24	19	23	12	1	160
Hezbollah	31	4	20	4	3	2	8	6		78
Grand Total	49	26	64	32	47	33	36	23	6	316

Figure A6. Iranian and LH Support to Proxies by Support Type

Breakdown of Received Support for Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades, Iraqi-Based Groups, and Syrian-Based Groups

This graphic below shows the proportion of kinetic, non-kinetic, and other supports that were given to the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades, Iraqi-based groups, and Syrian-based groups (all of which operate in Syria).
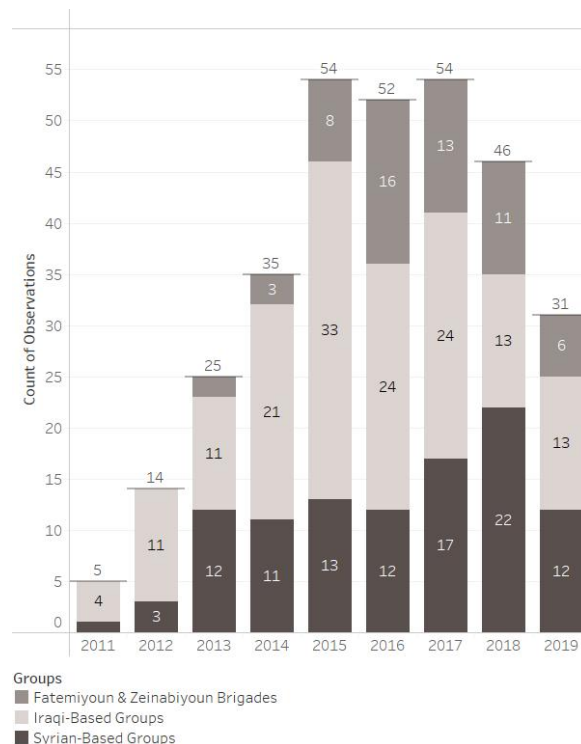
Figure A7. Total Observations for Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun Brigades, Iraqi-Based Groups, and Syrian-Based Groups Observations by Year
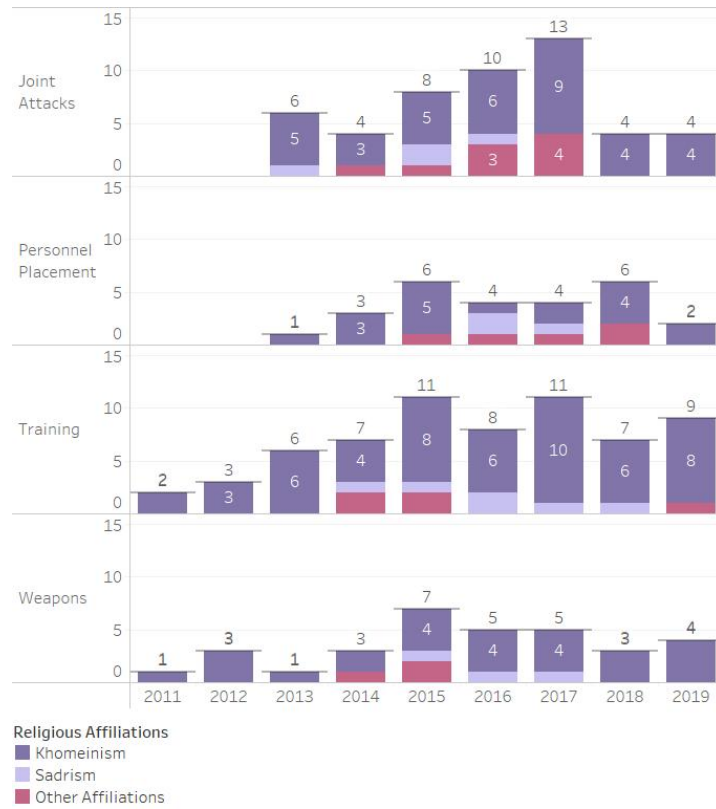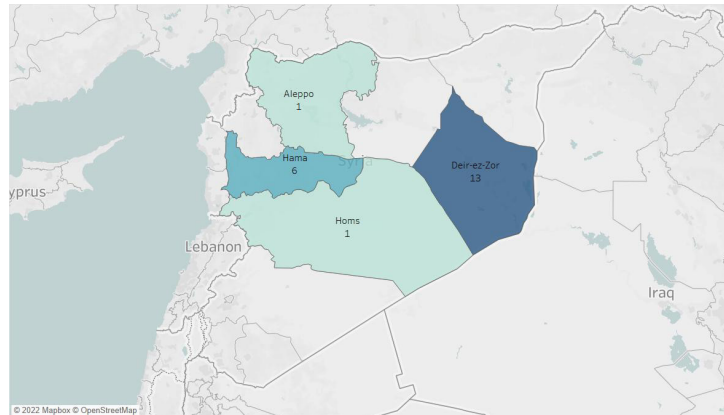
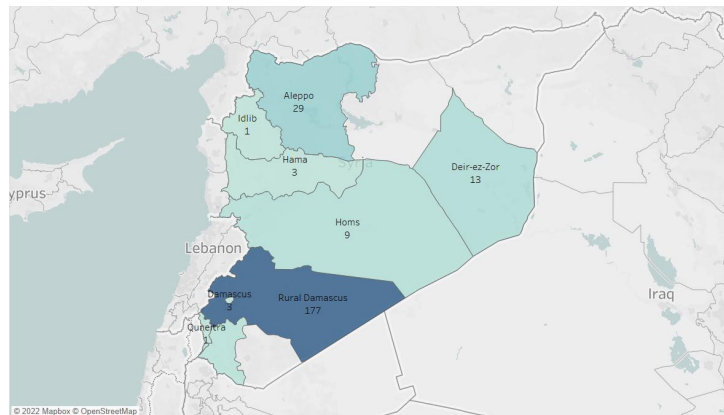**Figure A8. Kinetic Support Trends by Religious Affiliation**

Figure A9. Non-Kinetic Support Trends by Religious Affiliation
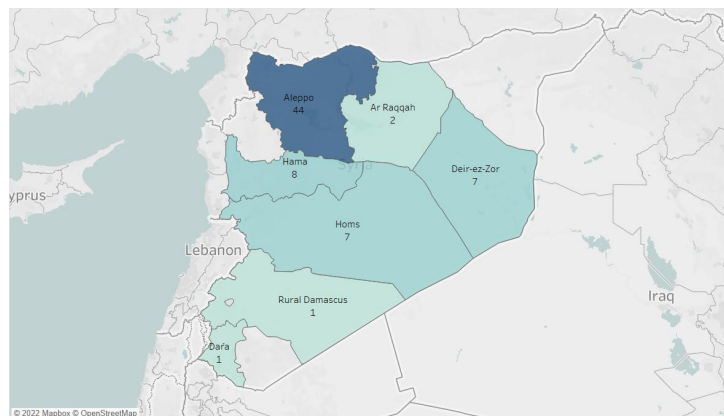
Geographic Trends for LH, IRGC, and Selected Proxies, 2017-2019

Figure A10. IRGC, LH, and Selected Proxies Operations in Syria, 2017
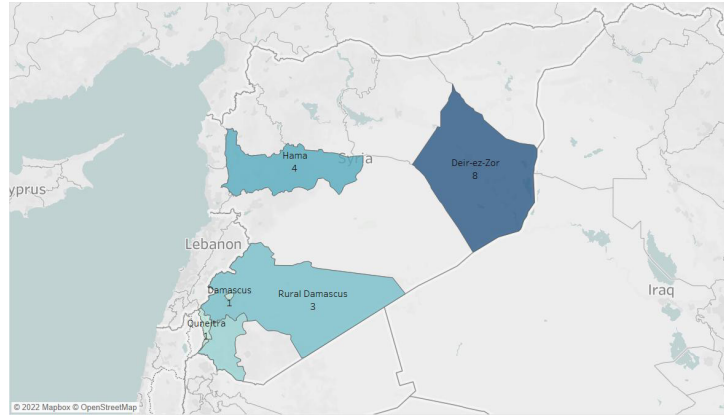

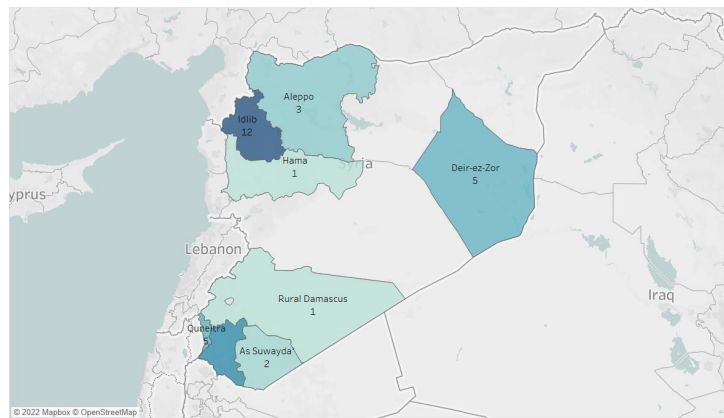*(a) IRGC 2017*
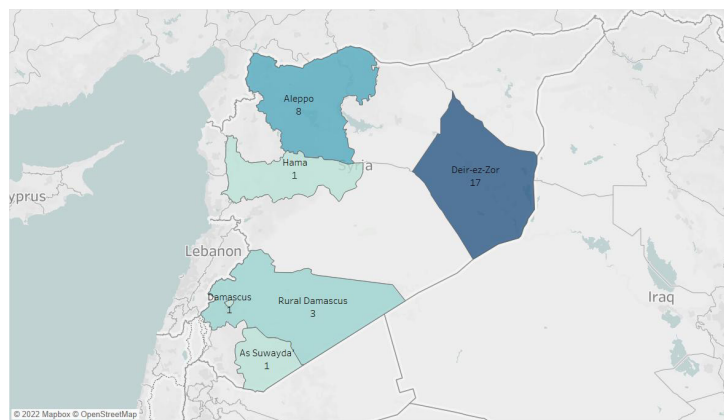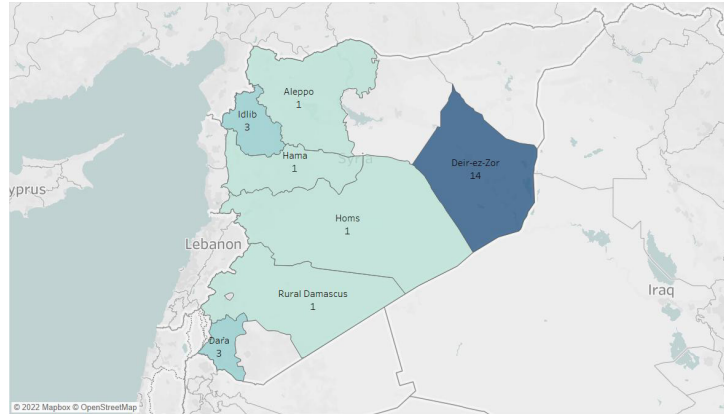

(b) LH 2017

(c) Proxies 2017

Figure A11. IRGC, LH, and Selected Proxies Operations in Syria, 2018
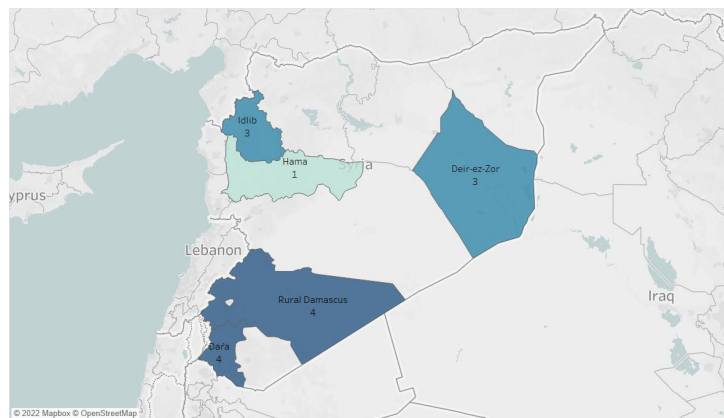

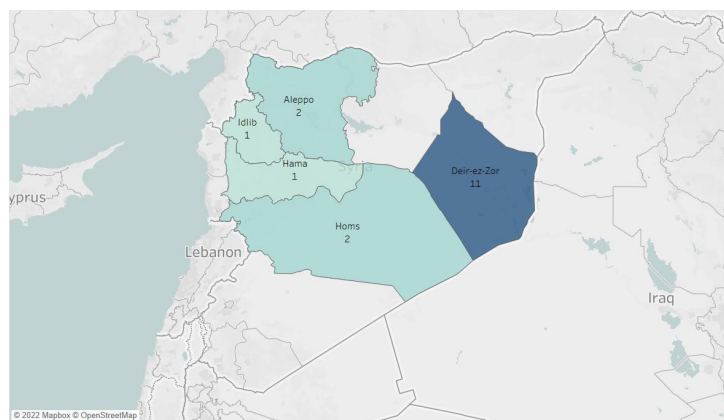(a) IRGC 2018

(b) LH 2018

(c) Proxies 2018

Figure A12. IRGC, LH, and Selected Proxies Operations in Syria, 2019

(a) IRGC 2019

(b) LH 2019

(c) Proxies 2019

Harakat al-Nujaba Article – February 2018

الشيخ الكعبي يلتقي المسؤول الثقافي في حزب الله لمناقشة أوضاع المنطقة

17 فبراير، 2018

POPULAR CATEGORIES

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اخبار عربية3308
اخبار دولية2829
اخبار حركة النجباء1835
صور حركة النجباء399
مقالات386

الشيخ الكعبي يلتقي المسؤول الثقافي في حزب الله لمناقشة أوضاع المنطقة

موقع حركة النجباء_لبنان

التقى الأمينُ العامُ للمقاومة الإسلامية حركةِ النجباء الشيخ أكرم الكعبي في لُبنانَ المسؤولَ الثقافيَّ في حزبِ الله الشيخ أكرم بركات. وناقشَ الجانبانِ التطوراتِ السياسيةَ والامنيةَ في المنطقةِ وسُبُلَ دَعْمِ المقاومةِ الاسلاميةِ لمواجهةِ الارهابِ والعدوانِ الصهيونيَ، من جانبِهِ ثمَّنَ الشيخُ بركات دَوْرَ المقاومةِ الاسلاميةِ حركةِ النجباء في القضاءِ على الجماعاتِ الارهابيةِ والتصدي للاحتلال الصهيوني :

Must Read

Translation:
February 17, 2018

Sheikh Ka'abi meets with Hezbollah's Cultural Official in order to discuss the situation in the region

Secretary General of the Islamic Resistance Harakat al-Nujaba Sheikh Akram al-Ka'abi met with Hezbollah's Cultural Officer Sheikh Akram al-Barakat in Lebanon. The two discussed political and security developments in the region and ways to support the Islamic Resistance in facing terrorism and Zionist aggression […]s