



# Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Iran is a rising power in the Middle East, having exploited opportunities arising from the U.S. invasion of Iraq and wars in Syria and Yemen. But where the Islamic Republic's enemies see a grasping would-be empire, its own strategists see an embattled state redressing historical wrongs.

**Why does it matter?** On several fronts, from Syria to Yemen, tensions between Iran and its foes are heightening. In the overheated atmosphere of mutual mistrust and demonisation, even a miscalculation could easily plunge a region already in flames into wider conflagration.

**What should be done?** To craft sensible policy toward Iran's regional ambitions, its adversaries must better understand what drives Iranian leaders, particularly their strong defensive impulse. The Islamic Republic must accept that its approach is perceived as offensive – and adjust accordingly. Ending the wars where Iranian and rival interests clash is paramount.

## *Executive Summary*

Iran is ascendant in the Middle East, spreading its influence in a contiguous geographic arc from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. Its rise, which began with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and accelerated when civil wars erupted in Syria and Yemen, has generated a perception that Iran aspires to be the region's hegemonic power. To the U.S. and its allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – such an ambition constitutes an intolerable threat. Iran, however, sees itself as breaking out of prolonged isolation and stifling sanctions – precipitated by the 1979 Islamic Revolution – that it perceives as historic injustice. It sees a region dominated by powers with superior military capabilities. After the 2011 Arab uprisings, Iran applied military force to protect a longstanding ally, the Syrian regime, viewing its loss as a possible prelude to its own encirclement. It is in part the gap in perceptions that has locked Iran and its rivals in an escalatory spiral of proxy fights that is destroying the region. A first step toward closing the gap is to better understand how Iran debates and fashions its regional policy.

Iranian leaders' first priority, regardless of where they stand on the political spectrum, is to ensure the Islamic Republic's perpetuation. This imperative includes deterring adversaries that have stronger militaries and/or Western support. Iran's sense of insecurity is rooted in the tumultuous post-1979 era, particularly the sense of strategic solitude it experienced during the traumatic eight-year war with Iraq, when the West and almost all Arab states supported the Saddam Hussein regime to contain Iran's emerging revolutionary order, which seemed bent on exporting its revolution throughout the Muslim world. It was then that Iran forged a close bond with the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad and helped establish Hizbollah in Lebanon, a group it has supplied militarily via Syria ever since.

Outgunned (though not vanquished) by Iraq during the 1980-1988 war and with limited access to the international arms market since the revolution, Iran has long sought to compensate for its sense of encirclement and relative conventional military weakness by achieving self-sufficiency in asymmetric military capabilities and increasing its strategic depth. Iran has heavily invested in its ballistic missile program, a legacy of having been a victim of these weapons during the war with Iraq and something it sees as a reliable deterrent against Israel. It also has built a network of partners and proxies to protect against external threats. Tehran dubs this its "forward-defence" policy: an effort to exploit weak states, such as Lebanon and post-2003 Iraq, where it can meet its enemies on the battlefield through proxies without direct harm to Iran and its people.

This policy's most visible manifestation is what Tehran calls the "axis of resistance", an alliance of Iran, Syria, Hizbollah and, at times, Hamas against what it perceives as Israeli and U.S. hegemony in the region. After 2011, when the Assad regime came under threat, jeopardising Iran's supply line to its other ally Hizbollah, the Islamic Republic transformed its military doctrine and regional force projection from primarily defensive to expeditionary warfighting. It vastly increased its military footprint in Syria, and applied its forward-defence model in Yemen as a low-cost way of keeping

Saudi Arabia tied down; the Saudi leadership's new assertiveness is partly a response to its perception of Iranian ascendancy and hegemonic ambitions.

This overall strategic stance is not a subject of debate among Iranian policymakers: both more pragmatic and more ideological elements deem it critical for national security. There is a vibrant debate, however, about how best to serve these security imperatives. Discussions in Iran's multipolar power structure funnel through a consensual decision-making process within a central institution, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). The SNSC, which sets major domestic and foreign policy, is chaired by the president and comprises senior government and military officials, as well as decision-makers representing Iran's main political factions. Its decisions, when backed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, who is also commander-in-chief, are final.

Over the years, the SNSC appears to have become increasingly agile in devising tactical responses to regional developments, be it supporting Iraqi Kurds when they were threatened by the Islamic State's onslaught in 2014 or condemning the 2016 coup attempt against the Turkish government. Contrary to conventional wisdom, SNSC debates are not invariably won by the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its expeditionary Qods force led by General Qasem Soleimani. The IRGC has a strong voice on issues of hard power, but not a veto. Examples of this abound.

Iran's consensus-building mechanism, however, does not lend itself to swift strategic turnabouts. It took nearly a decade of highly perilous standoff, a massive economic toll of international sanctions and significant changes in the U.S. stance – ie, removing regime change from the agenda and accepting Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program – for the state to alter its nuclear policy, after Hassan Rouhani replaced Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2013. This history offers an important guide for the future: a modification of Tehran's longstanding defence doctrine is most likely to flow from a change in its threat perception. But threat perception is a two-way street. As long as Iran pursues a policy in the region that, however defensive in origin it may be, others view as aggressive, tensions will persist and the possibility will rise of direct military confrontation.

This report is the first of two. A follow-up report will look at the region from the Saudi/Emirati perspectives, and examine how regional policy is fashioned in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

**Tehran/Washington/Brussels, 13 April 2018**

# Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East

## I. Introduction

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There is almost no crisis in today's Middle East that can be analysed without attention to Iran's role in it. Some of Tehran's neighbours and Washington accuse the Islamic Republic of exploiting regional disorder to resuscitate the Persian Empire – with a Shiite overlay. But how do Iranian policymakers from across the institutional and political spectrum see their country's role in a turbulent region?<sup>1</sup> Do they see Iran as an expansionist power with hegemonic aspirations? As a revolutionary regime seeking to propagate its model of constitutional theocracy? As a Shiite metropole driven by sectarian sentiment to pursue empowerment of co-religionists throughout the region? As a power seeking to overthrow hostile regimes? As an encircled state hoping to deter external foes from undermining it? As a combination of the above?

This report goes beyond the polarised debate about Iran's regional role and objectives by presenting a variegated view of how stakeholders from across Iran's political and institutional spectrum perceive their country's threat environment and its responses, and what that holistic – yet nuanced – picture implies for those wanting to confront, contain or cooperate with Tehran. It is based on interviews conducted over the past two years with nearly 100 officials and experts from across Iran's multipolar power centres and political factions, mainly in Tehran, but also outside Iran. To devise policies to deal effectively with Iran's regional activities, a dispassionate understanding of what motivates its leadership and how decisions are made is essential.

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of Iran's factional landscape, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°166, *Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, 15 December 2015.

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## II. Sources of Iran's Regional Posture

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Iranian leaders, regardless of where they stand on the political spectrum, are principally concerned with the Islamic Republic's survival and perpetuation. They wish to extricate Iran from its four-decade relative isolation, while deterring adversaries that have superior military capabilities and Western support. They are quick to reject the notion that Iran's revolutionary rhetoric is the root cause of its isolation and its neighbours' fears, and provides justification for a Western military presence in the region. Their abiding sense of insecurity is rooted in the turbulent post-1979 revolution era, when the new order struggled to consolidate power in the face of fratricidal internal rivalries, the threat of ethnic separatism,<sup>2</sup> near total rejection by an international order allergic to what it perceived as radical Islamist politics, a standoff with Washington over the U.S. embassy takeover in Tehran and American hostages in Lebanon, and a military invasion by Iraq. The traumatic 1980-1988 war with Iraq, in which the West and almost the entire Middle East – except Syria and Oman – supported the Saddam Hussein regime and closed their eyes to its extensive chemical weapons use against soldiers and civilians alike, constitutes most Iranian leaders' formative experience, shaping the way they see Iran and the requirements for its survival in a hostile environment.<sup>3</sup>

To Iran's neighbours, of course, this story is very incomplete. They point to Iran's highly bellicose rhetoric, with expressed intent to export the Islamic Revolution throughout the Muslim world and topple the Gulf monarchies.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. embassy takeover in Tehran was an early sign of unbridled revolutionary fervour. The year 1982 was pivotal for outward power projection: Iran exploited the instability caused by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon to help create Hizbollah, forged a strong bond with the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad and expelled Iraqi forces from its own territory. Subsequently, for six fruitless years, Tehran tried to topple the regime in Baghdad through repeated offensives on Iraqi territory. These actions combined helped the revolutionary regime mobilise popular support and consolidate itself. But they also raised regional and international fears of Iran's intentions and triggered concerted efforts at containing it. To Saudi leaders, Iran represented a direct threat to the legitimacy of the House of Saud, its leadership in the Muslim world as "Custodian of the Two Holy Shrines" (*Khadim al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn*) and the country's competitive position in the energy market – and therefore its national security.

The war with Iraq ended in stalemate and popular demoralisation after Tehran's most powerful adversary, the U.S., interfered directly.<sup>5</sup> Then, in the aftermath of the

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<sup>2</sup> Historically, separatist movements have existed among Iranian Azeris in the north-west, Iranian Kurds in the west, Iranian Arabs in the south-western province of Khuzestan and Iranian Baluch in the south-eastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan.

<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge, 2015); Joost Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> "Khomeini urges export of Iranian revolution", *The New York Times*, 5 October 1981.

<sup>5</sup> In April 1988, an Iranian mine damaged a U.S. warship in the Gulf. The U.S. retaliated with Operation Praying Mantis, sinking an Iranian frigate, a gunboat and several speedboats, and damaged two Iranian navy ships and several oil platforms. In July 1988, the USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian passenger plane over the Gulf, killing 290 people. The U.S. also supported the Iraqi war

1991 Gulf War, Iranian leaders witnessed a U.S. military build-up in the region, Iran's continuing isolation through Washington's "dual containment" strategy vis-à-vis both Iran and Iraq, and U.S. invasions of Afghanistan to its east in 2001 and Iraq to its west in 2003. In addition to this partial encirclement, Iran had to deal with chaos and burgeoning radicalism in Afghanistan and Iraq, which posed threats of their own even as it put U.S. troops on the back foot. Yet Iran's security situation benefitted from the fall of both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein regimes.

Iran has long rejected the notion that the Islamic Revolution or Shiite sectarianism drive its regional strategy, citing its support of the Palestinian cause as evidence of its pan-Islamic and anti-imperialist ideology. As a senior Iranian diplomat put it: "It would be folly for a minority group to use the sectarian card".<sup>6</sup> But as Syria's post-2011 zero-sum proxy war deepened and the Islamic State (ISIS) conquered a third of Iraq in 2014, Tehran shed even the pretence of staying above the sectarian fray. It began recruiting Shiites from across the region into militias fighting in Iraq and Syria, facilitating the atrocities they have committed in these countries' Sunni heartlands. This move has stoked resentment and provided radical Sunni groups with a potent recruitment tool.

The aspiration to export the Islamic Revolution or Iran's model of governance – based on the principle of *velayat-e faqih* – to the region remains part and parcel of Iran's discourse; but forty years after the revolution exporting revolution does not appear to be a realistic policy objective as no other country or movement has adopted the model.<sup>7</sup> Its erstwhile aspirations notwithstanding, nothing suggests that Iran will be any more successful in exporting its governance model in the future, or that it sees the need to do so when its alliances are functioning on the basis of realpolitik considerations.

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effort with satellite intelligence, which helped Iraqi forces target their adversaries more precisely, including with chemical weapons. Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interview, Berlin, November 2016. Historically, Iran has chosen its alliances pragmatically, based on state interest, aligning itself with Christian Armenia against Shiite Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, supporting Sunni groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and striking tactical bargains with (Sunni) al-Qaeda and the Taliban, while largely ignoring the plight of Saudi and Pakistani Shiites. It deems itself leader of Shiites worldwide, however, and on that basis, at times, has championed their rights. For instance, Tehran objected strongly to the Nigerian army's raid on the house of a leading Shiite cleric, Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, in December 2015, and the execution of another, Nimr al-Nimr, by Saudi Arabia in January 2016. "Iran leader sees 'divine vengeance' for Saudi cleric execution", Reuters, 3 January 2016.

<sup>7</sup> *Velayat-e faqih*, a concept specific to Shiite Islam, holds that, in the absence of Imam al-Mahdi, the twelfth imam who Shiites believe has gone into occultation and will reappear, the Islamic nation should be under the guardianship (*velayat*) of a supreme leader acting as jurisprudent (*faqih*). Article 5 of Iran's constitution stipulates: "During the occultation of the *Vali-e Asr* [the 12th imam], the guardianship and leadership of the *umma* [Islamic community] devolve upon the just and pious jurisprudent, who is fully aware of the circumstances of his age, courageous, judicious and capable". Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said: "It is not our goal to export the revolution to this or that country – not in the conventional political sense of the word 'export'. The revolution is not something that can be exported through political means or advanced through military and security operations. This is wrong. We closed this path since the very beginning". See "What does exporting the Islamic Revolution mean in Ayatollah Khamenei's view", Khamenei.ir, 21 January 2018; and Eldar Mamdov, "Does Iran's constitution promote export of Islamic Revolution?", Lobelog, 27 February 2018.



Iran is also outgunned by its rivals. Unlike them, it lacks a security guarantor; and it has been under arms embargo (a U.S.-led one for nearly four decades and a UN ban since 2006). In 2017, its annual military expenditure of \$16 billion lagged behind Israel's \$18.5 billion (excluding \$3.5 billion in military aid from the U.S.) and paled in comparison to Saudi Arabia's \$76.7 billion.<sup>8</sup>

To compensate for its sense of encirclement and its handicapped conventional military capacity, Tehran has striven to increase its strategic depth and achieve self-sufficiency in asymmetric military capabilities. To achieve the former, Iran's leaders have built a network of partners and proxies to ward off external threats. Tehran dubs this its "forward-defence" policy: an effort to gain influence in weak states, such as Lebanon and Iraq, where it can meet its enemies on the battlefield through proxies without direct harm to Iran and its people. The most visible manifestation of this policy is what Iran calls the "axis of resistance"—an alliance of Iran, Syria and Hizbollah—to what it perceives as Israel's and U.S. hegemony in the region. Iran's Sunni neighbours refer to this alliance as the "Shiite crescent".<sup>9</sup> Since 2003, but especially since the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq, Iran has tried (so far unsuccessfully) to draw Iraq into this alliance.

In parallel, Iran has heavily invested in its ballistic missile program—a legacy of having been a victim of these weapons during the war with Iraq, but also to counter-balance against Israel's more advanced missile program. Tehran deems these missiles an additional deterrent against Israel, and an essential asset with which to reach its enemies on their own soil or, in the case of the U.S., on their bases in the region. This assessment reduces its sensitivity to international sanctions imposed because of the missiles.<sup>10</sup> (Its alleged aspiration to develop a third deterrent, its nuclear program, was at least temporarily dispelled by the 2015 nuclear accord.<sup>11</sup>)

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<sup>8</sup> "Military balance 2018", International Institute for Strategic Studies, 14 February 2018. Israel has significant domestic military production as well; Iran produces some weapons systems; Saudi Arabia none. While boasting about their domestic capabilities and self-reliance—especially compared to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states—Iranian officials complain about the West's provision of cutting-edge military technology to Iran's regional rivals. For example, see Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Hasan Rouhani stands by Iran's missile programme", *Financial Times*, 22 May 2017; Javad Zarif, "'Beautiful military equipment' can't buy Middle East peace", *The New York Times*, 26 May 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Hamas, a Palestinian resistance movement linked to the (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood, also has been a member of this axis. The Syrian regime cannot be defined in confessional terms, but it has a strong Alawite component in the Assad family and the ruling elite. Syrian Alawites belong to an esoteric sect that, like Shiite Muslims, reveres the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali. But the Alawites' tenets fundamentally differ from Shiite orthodoxy: they believe in a holy trinity (Muhammad, Ali and Salman the Persian, one of Muhammad's companions), reincarnation, and lax rules with regard to hijab and alcohol consumption. For centuries, they have been deemed heretics by Shiites and Sunnis, and faced persecution.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats, military and national security officials, Tehran, 2015–2017. Ayatollah Khamenei said: "If a nation manages to send a proper response to one who launches a missile from a distance, well, this is power. [The West] wants to take away our means of national power and defence". Quoted in "Why is the U.S. frightened of Iran's missile capabilities?", Khamenei.ir, 27 January 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Iran has consistently argued that its nuclear program was designed and developed for strictly non-military purposes. Its critics argued the opposite. For now, the 2015 nuclear accord has rendered the matter moot.

Iran's civilisational pride and desire for a regional power status worthy of its historical and demographic weight also drive its regional policy.<sup>12</sup> Its neighbours see this as a bid for hegemony in the Gulf and the Arab Mashreq more broadly, as unbearable to them as Iran's isolation from the region is intolerable to Tehran. While Iran historically has not been a territorially expansionist state,<sup>13</sup> statements by some of its officials evoking Iran's imperial legacy have fed regional fears and reinforced the narrative of an irrepressibly ambitious Iran.<sup>14</sup> In May 2017, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself referred to Saudi leaders as "fools" and "lowlives" for allying themselves with the U.S., adding that their policies would lead to their "certain downfall".<sup>15</sup>

Other significant factors driving Iran's regional policy are domestic politics, which in turn are affected by external factors,<sup>16</sup> as well as economic interests. The latter are largely a legacy of the sanctions era (2006-2015), when Iran's commercial ties with its neighbours served as vital lifelines; today, Iran also has a vested interest in the war economy and post-war reconstruction in Iraq and Syria.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Shah, promising to restore Persian civilisation's pre-Islamic glory, had – with U.S. support – assumed the role of the Gulf's custodian. "Shah of Iran warns outsiders against Gulf military positions", *The New York Times*, 17 January 1972. In 2003, Ayatollah Khamenei presented a development vision worthy of the country's "national grandeur", which foresees Iran in 2024 as "a developed country in first place in the region in the realms of economy, knowledge and technology; with an Islamic and revolutionary identity, an inspiration for the world, and with productive and influential interaction in international affairs". See "20-year development vision", Khamenei.ir, 23 November 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Since Iran tried to recapture the city of Herat in today's Afghanistan in 1837, it has not invaded another country.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, in 2014, a hardline member of parliament, Alireza Zakani, said: "Three Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian revolution", referring to Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus, and noted that Sanaa in Yemen would soon join that trio: "Sanaa is the fourth Arab capital to join the Iranian revolution". Quoted in *Middle East Monitor*, 27 September 2014. In 2015, Ali Younesi, an adviser to President Hassan Rouhani and former intelligence minister, said that Iraq is "not only part of our civilisational influence, but it is our identity, culture, centre and capital .... Because Iran and Iraq's geography and culture are inseparable, either we fight one another, or we become one". Arash Karami, "Rouhani adviser summoned over Iraq comments", *Al-Monitor*, 18 March 2015. A senior Iranian diplomat said in response to such remarks: "Iran is a big country. Inevitably you can find a few people with big mouths. Not only does Iran not control four Arab capitals, it has to invest blood and treasure to preserve its influence". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in: "Khamenei calls Saudi leaders 'fools' for U.S. deals, relations", Radio Farda, 28 May 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Relations with Saudi Arabia, for example, became a wedge issue in the May 2017 presidential election campaign. Rouhani's rivals accused him of a futile effort to appease Saudi Arabia; in turn, he pointed a finger at them for the January 2016 mob attack on Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran. Rouhollah Faghihi, "Who was the winner of Iran's first presidential debate?", *Al-Monitor*, 30 April 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°138, *Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions*, 25 February 2013. Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, a military adviser to the supreme leader, said: "Iran needs to recover costs it has incurred in Syria. Syrians are also willing to do so through their oil, gas and phosphate mines. Currently Iran is exporting phosphate from Syrian mines". Quoted in "مشاور رهبر ایران: در حال صادرات از معادن سوریه هستیم" ["The leader's adviser: We are exporting from Syria's mines"], BBC Persian, 17 February 2018. An official at Iran's chamber of commerce complained that Iraq had increased tariffs on Iran's dairy exports from 5 to 25 per cent; and that custom duties in Syria are too high and Syrians prefer smuggled Turkish goods to Iranian

### III. Inside Iran's National Security Apparatus

It took an eight-year war with Iraq for Iran's leadership to realise the value of a centralised national security apparatus.<sup>18</sup> The revolution had produced competing power centres and security structures; these may have helped its leaders rally popular support and navigate the revolution's turbulent early years, but they proved to be major obstacles to prevailing in war and then to carrying out effective governance once the war ended and the dust settled on the domestic front. Constitutional revisions in 1989 produced a body designed for this purpose: the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), a consensus-building mechanism for setting major domestic and foreign policy and comprising senior officials from all government branches and key decision-makers representing Iran's main political factions.

The SNSC is chaired by the president and also includes the heads of the legislative and judicial branches; the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff of the armed forces; the head of the planning and budget organisation; two representatives of the supreme leader, one of whom is its secretary; the foreign affairs, interior, defence and intelligence ministers; the commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the army; and the affected cabinet minister in a given meeting.<sup>19</sup> Its decisions, when backed by the leader, who is also commander-in-chief, supersede legislation.<sup>20</sup>

The SNSC convenes meetings at four levels: directors-general or deputies of the relevant ministries and institutions; ministers and military generals, managed by the SNSC secretary; all SNSC members, chaired by the president; and extraordinary sessions in which the supreme leader participates. While the latter occurs rarely, Ayatollah Khamenei's broad policy preferences are communicated to SNSC members through his representatives.<sup>21</sup> He often plays a balancing role between power centres

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products. Quoted in "سوريه عملا مانع صادرات ما شده است" ["Syria has effectively thwarted our exports"], ILNA.ir, 24 November 2017.

<sup>18</sup> During the war, an informal committee comprising the heads of the executive, legislative and judicial branches, as well as Ahmad Khomeini, son and confidant of the system's founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, took key strategic decisions.

<sup>19</sup> See Chapter 13, Section 176 of the Islamic Republic's constitution. The SNSC has five subcommittees that cover foreign relations, military affairs, domestic security, economic affairs, and cultural and social affairs. It has between 80 and 100 staff members. The SNSC should not be confused with the interior ministry's National Security Council, which oversees internal security.

<sup>20</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei has rarely vetoed the SNSC's consensual decisions. He did so when the SNSC decided to invade Afghanistan in 1999 in retaliation for the Taliban's assassination of eight Iranian diplomats. According to Hossein Mousavian, who then headed the SNSC's foreign relations committee, "the leader was reluctant to launch a war in a country known as the graveyard of empires. That's why he vetoed the decision". Crisis Group interview, New York, September 2016. In some cases, mostly related to initiatives that could improve relations with the U.S., Ayatollah Khamenei refrains from responding, at times to test the ideas and at times to thwart them. Crisis Group interviews, national security officials, Tehran, 2015-2016.

<sup>21</sup> The supreme leader sets the state's major strategic orientation, which is immune to government changes, but the government decides on tactics. "رهبر ایران: سیاست خارجی ما انقلابی است و با عوض شدن دولت‌ها تغییر نمی‌کند" ["Supreme leader: Our foreign policy is revolutionary and does not change with a change of governments"], BBC Persian, 1 November 2015. The current SNSC secretary, Ali Shamkhani, and his predecessor, Saeed Jalili, represent the leader. Shamkhani is a former commander of the IRGC's navy and a former defence minister; Jalili is a former SNSC secretary (2007-2013).

and political factions with competing visions, which in turn strive to influence his decisions; his views often reflect a growing consensus within the SNSC.

The president implements the country's foreign policy, which gives him a certain latitude in determining tone and tactics, but can also shape the system's grand strategies through the SNSC, at least half of whose members are his appointees.<sup>22</sup> The SNSC's secretary sets the agenda and leads the policy debate at the ministerial-level meetings; currently, it is Ali Shamkhani, a former commander of the IRGC's navy and a former defence minister. Familiarity with military or security affairs helps the secretary in creating consensus between the civilian and military stakeholders, and even within Iran's bifurcated military.<sup>23</sup>

General Qasem Soleimani, head of the IRGC's elite expeditionary Qods force, is sometimes invited to ministerial or extraordinary sessions or takes part in smaller working groups and ad hoc crisis cells to address an emergency. But he does not have a vote.<sup>24</sup> On issues where Iran employs hard power, the military has a strong voice in SNSC meetings but does not always win the debate, as will be argued in the next section.<sup>25</sup> When diplomacy is the focus, the foreign ministry leads the debate. The IRGC's role matters whenever the topic is regional affairs, as it is involved on both the secu-

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At times, as during the nuclear negotiations, a smaller group of SNSC representatives meets with Ayatollah Khamenei on regular basis. The latter receives foreign policy and military advice through a wide formal and informal network. Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister, and Yahya Rahim Safavi, a former IRGC chief commander, advise him on foreign and military affairs, respectively. In 2006, Khamenei established the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations to provide him with advice on foreign policy strategies. Former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi heads the council, which also comprises Saeed Jalili; former Defence Minister Ahmad Vahidi; Ibrahim Sheybani, former head of the Central Bank; Mohammad Hossein Taremi, former ambassador to Saudi Arabia and China; and Mehdi Mostafavi, former head of the foreign affairs department in the leader's office.

<sup>22</sup> As the SNSC's first secretary (1989-2005), who played a critical role in designing its structures and procedures, President Rouhani is particularly well versed in its politics and dynamics today.

<sup>23</sup> The Islamic Republic inherited the former regime's Western-trained army (or *Artesh*), which it never fully trusted. It therefore created the IRGC to preserve the revolution. See Section 150 of the Islamic Republic's constitution. The two have historically competed, with the IRGC invariably having the upper hand in controlling strategic weapons and staffing prominent positions in the defence ministry and the army general staff. Frictions have lessened in the past few years, due to increased IRGC professionalisation and cooperation in the campaign against ISIS. See Matthew McNinnis, "The future of Iran's security policy: Inside Tehran's strategic thinking", American Enterprise Institute, 31 May 2017. In 2017, Rouhani tapped an army general, Amir Hatami, as defence minister for the first time in three decades. Both organisations are under command of the armed forces general staff, which since July 2016 is headed by Major General Mohammad Bagheri, who was previously in charge of IRGC intelligence. The only exception is the IRGC's expeditionary elite force, known as the Qods force under the command of General Qasem Soleimani, who is directly accountable to the supreme leader. Ayatollah Khamenei has called Soleimani a "living martyr" for the risks he has taken in advancing Iran's regional interests. Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford, 2016). Iran has sixteen intelligence agencies, directed and overseen by a coordination committee. "دستگاه‌های اطلاعاتی ایران چگونه «هماهنگ» می‌شوند؟", *Fars News*, 14 October 2014. ["How are Iran's intelligence agencies coordinated?"], *Fars News*, 14 October 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national security officials, Tehran, 2015-2016.

<sup>25</sup> Iran's diplomatic representatives in countries in the region in which Iran has major influence (Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) traditionally have a security background and may be affiliated with the IRGC, in particular, taking their cues from it.

rity and the policy side.<sup>26</sup> Disagreements may spill over into the public sphere as rival stakeholders try to leverage public pressure to advance a specific agenda. Yet, as the nuclear talks demonstrated, once the SNSC takes a decision, all fall in line.<sup>27</sup> Before consensus is reached, however, there is space for uncoordinated actions.<sup>28</sup>

The supreme leader and any SNSC member can request that an issue be put on the council's agenda. Ideas tend to filter upward from the technocratic to the ministerial level, but voting takes place at sessions chaired by the president. As such, key national security decisions are made by a small group of senior officials, who are both relatively insulated from, and yet reflect, alterations in formal institutional structures as a result of elections or personnel changes. These decision-makers, who are mostly the original revolutionaries, have been in the inner power circles for nearly four decades and have intertwining personal histories. Likewise, diplomats tend to remain in the same post for years or, when they do rotate, stay in the same geographic zone. This continuity reinforces the coherence of Iran's regional policies stemming from the SNSC's consensual approach to decision-making, while increasing the risk of groupthink. Nevertheless, the process is highly effective in making tactical decisions, and often slow in strategic turnabouts.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For example, all key stakeholders, including the IRGC, have representatives in the Iranian delegation to the Astana talks over Syria. See "آغاز استقرار نیروهای ناظر آتش بس در سوریه" ["Peacekeeping forces are being deployed"], *Khorasan*, 27 October 2017.

<sup>27</sup> In 2017, the IRGC criticised the government for delaying the testing of a satellite rocket launch out of fear of U.S. sanctions, while Rouhani accused the IRGC of aiming to undermine the nuclear deal by boasting about its underground ballistic missile depots. "موشک ماهوار میر آماده پرواز ما را داخل" ["They put our satellite launching missile in a depot"], *Fars News*, 9 March 2017; Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Revolutionary guards tried to sabotage Iran's nuclear deal, says president", *The Guardian*, 5 May 2017. Vested economic interests also can be a source of tension between the government and the IRGC. "Iran cracks down on revolutionary guards business network", *Financial Times*, 13 September 2016. Despite being highly critical of the nuclear agreement, neither the IRGC nor the deal's opponents tried to block it, and candidates in the 2017 presidential election pledged to honour it.

<sup>28</sup> A senior Iranian diplomat provided a telling example: "In 2015, the IRGC decided to send a shipment of humanitarian aid directly to a Yemeni port held by the Huthis. The SNSC intervened while the vessel was en route, redirecting it to the UN distributors in Djibouti to avoid a clash with the Saudis or the U.S." Crisis Group interview, Tehran, July 2016. "Iran's Yemen-bound aid ship docks in Djibouti", Reuters, 22 May 2015. In the same vein, in March 2016, the IRGC test-fired two ballistic missiles with the phrase "Israel must be wiped out" written on them in Hebrew. The Iranian foreign ministry complained to the SNSC that such actions undermine Iran's global standing and provide ammunition for Israel to demonise Iran. IRGC commanders claimed that they learned about the slogan after the fact. Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats, Tehran, February 2017.

<sup>29</sup> A national security official noted that when Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdish region, asked Tehran for immediate assistance in the face of an imminent threat against Erbil, the Kurdish capital, in August 2014, the SNSC decided to support him within 24 hours and promptly deployed military equipment and advisers. Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2016. Likewise, an Iranian diplomat said it took the SNSC's crisis cell less than a half-hour during the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey "to conclude that any alternatives to the status quo in Turkey would be worse for us, and to publicly condemn the coup". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, August 2016. A senior Iranian diplomat said, "it took eight years of escalation between Iran and the West under [former President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad for a new consensus to emerge in the SNSC to move toward a nuclear compromise". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, July 2017.

## IV. Policy Debates

### A. *Iraq: Strategic Depth*

The Iranian leadership is unanimous in considering Iraq as Iran's most important security priority outside of its borders. As a neighbour with which it shares its longest land border (approximately 1,500km), the only country to have attacked it in the past two centuries,<sup>30</sup> a shelter for armed opposition groups and home to Shiite centres of higher religious learning in Najaf and Karbala that compete with its own *hawza* (theological seminary) in Qom, Iraq holds a special place in its strategic thinking.<sup>31</sup> The leadership concurs on Iran's strategic interests in Iraq:

- ❑ Ensure a central Iraqi government that, while strong enough to keep the country together and secure its borders with Iran, is not so strong as to, once again, pose a threat.<sup>32</sup>
- ❑ Preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, a need deriving from deep-seated fear that its disintegration could have a domino effect, eventually affecting Iran, which similarly is a mosaic of ethnic and religious communities. This is nowhere clearer than in Iran's consistent opposition to Kurdish independence and, relatedly, to the Kurdistan regional government's attempt to incorporate Kirkuk into the Kurdish region.<sup>33</sup> In supporting the Iraqi government's successful effort to retake Kirkuk and its oil fields in October 2017 following the Kurdish independence referendum two weeks earlier, Tehran claimed to have helped preserve Iraq's territorial unity.<sup>34</sup>
- ❑ Prevent Iranian opposition groups or external enemies from setting up bases in Iraq to push back Iran's influence or attack Iran.<sup>35</sup> Despite the evident benefit Iran derived from the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime that was responsible for the 1980 invasion of Iran, Tehran worked hard to contain the threat posed by

<sup>30</sup> Iran suffered war casualties surpassed in numbers only by the 1220 Mongol invasion. As an official in the president's office put it, "Iraq's invasion of Iran was our leadership's 'never again' moment". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, February 2015.

<sup>31</sup> During the Baathist years, Iraq served as a haven for dissidents against Iran's Pahlavi dynasty, such as Teymour Bakhtiar, head of the Shah's intelligence agency turned opposition leader. Ayatollah Khomeini was exiled to Najaf for thirteen years (1966-1979). Iraq continued to host and aid Iranian exiles following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, notably the Mujahedin-e Khalq and Kurdish militant groups such as the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Komala. Najaf's *hawza* is a millennium older than its counterpart in Qom, and in contrast to the latter has largely preserved its clerical independence. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who was born in the Iranian city of Mashhad, is widely recognised as the Shiite world's paramount religious authority.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and national security officials, Tehran, 2015-2016.

<sup>33</sup> To keep the Kurdish region weak, Iran has pursued a divide-and-rule approach, exploiting existing intra-Kurdish divisions. See Joost Hiltermann, "Iraq: The Battle to Come", *NYR Daily*, 1 July 2017; and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°55, *Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis*, 17 October 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, adviser to the supreme leader, Tehran, 10 January 2018.

<sup>35</sup> The majority of policymakers in Tehran express fear of a grand U.S.-Israeli design to break down the region's larger states, such as Iran, turning them into statelets more vulnerable to coercion. Those in Tehran who hold this view cite Israel's support for an independent Kurdish state as evidence. Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and national security officials, Tehran, 2015-2016. "Israel endorses Kurdish independence in lone show of support", Bloomberg, 13 September 2017.

the U.S. military presence in Iraq from 2003 until the 2011 troop withdrawal, which it notched up as a success. It did this through a combination of political co-optation and support for Shiite militias that targeted U.S. forces.<sup>36</sup> Iran was unable to veto the Iraqi government's decision to invite U.S. forces back in 2014 to fight ISIS,<sup>37</sup> and may even have welcomed U.S. support of Tehran's ally in Baghdad despite misgivings about U.S. strategic intentions.

Since 2003, Iran has struggled to strike the right balance in securing these strategic interests. The Iraqi central state's weakness following the 2003 U.S. invasion and its leadership's inability – or unwillingness – to meaningfully include Sunnis in the country's governance fed Sunni resentment and support for ISIS. This in turn led Iran to create, arm and train militias known as “popular mobilisation units” (PMUs, from the Arabic *Hashd al-Shaabi*), which challenge and undermine the central state's authority.<sup>38</sup> Iranian officials attribute the PMUs' rise to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's June 2014 call (in the form of a religious edict, or *fatwa*) for volunteers to counter ISIS rather than to an Iranian design, and argue that this mobilisation was the only effective way to confront ISIS given the army's collapse.<sup>39</sup> As a senior Iranian diplomat put it, “this is not about fragmenting a state but about protecting an already fragmented state”.<sup>40</sup>

In practice, however, while most pro-Sistani groups are under army command, Iran reinforced existing Shiite militias operating outside Baghdad's control, and placed them under the overall command of the Qods force. In 2016, in a dexterous move of window-dressing, Iran agreed to have these militias placed under the formal authority of Iraq's prime minister, knowing that these militias and the Qods force would have preponderant influence in a weak state with a weak army.<sup>41</sup>

Some of the PMUs' worst excesses have exposed fault lines within Iran's decision-making apparatus. Shiite militias have committed atrocities against vulnerable groups in areas in which Shiites are present or from which Shiites were driven by ISIS, especially in Diyala governorate, emptying and destroying Sunni Arab towns and villages in 2014 and killing and expelling Sunni Kurds in the town of Tuz Khurmatu in October 2017.<sup>42</sup> They also have indulged in triumphalist practices (for example, hoisting portraits of Ayatollah Khamenei at major intersections in Iraqi cities) that

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<sup>36</sup> An Iranian diplomat said: “In early 2003, Iraq was a weak state under Saddam's rule; in late 2003, it housed a 100,000-strong U.S. armada”. Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2017. Also see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°38, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, 21 March 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, IRGC commander, Tehran, October 2016; senior Iranian diplomat, New York, September 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's future”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 April 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and national security officials, Tehran, 2015–2016. A diplomat said: “There is one particular problem, and that is the persistence of weak governments in the region. These governments are not able to create security and stability. Sometimes you need non-state actors to provide support to weak governments”. Crisis Group interview, October 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Berlin, November 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Mansour and Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's future”, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> “Iraq: Fresh evidence that tens of thousands forced to flee Tuz Khurmatu amid indiscriminate attacks, lootings and arson”, Amnesty International, 24 October 2017. Tuz Khurmatu has a population of Sunni Kurds and Shiite Turkmen.

have rubbed salt in the wounds of the vanquished – subject populations that equally were victims of ISIS but are deemed guilty by sectarian association.<sup>43</sup> The Qods force, with its commander Qasem Soleimani in the forefront, has encouraged such conduct through material support and undivided praise, sanctioning no one. Iranian diplomats and foreign ministry officials, by contrast, have complained that such behaviour is contrary to Iran's interest, giving credence to allegations of Iran harbouring hegemonic ambitions and inflicting a reputational cost not just in Iraq but in the Arab world generally.<sup>44</sup> Some in Iran's foreign ministry also seem concerned that the growth and empowerment of Shiite militias will embolden a sorcerer's apprentice and undermine an allied Iraqi state on which Iran relies for its own security.<sup>45</sup> IRGC commanders do not share these concerns, having applied the model in Lebanon and Syria, and indeed in Iran itself after the revolution.<sup>46</sup>

ISIS's violent takeover of Mosul and other Iraqi cities in June 2014 prompted a debate about Iran's success in managing Iraq's political process until then. It focused in particular on Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had just won parliamentary elections following his second term in office but whose army collapsed in the face of ISIS's onslaught, which even approached the outskirts of Baghdad. Maliki had powerful supporters in Iran – Ayatollah Khamenei and Soleimani in particular, who saw him as a competent and firm leader who had secured the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal.<sup>47</sup> But Iran's pragmatists, who had long deemed Maliki a liability for his sectarian policies, felt he should be abandoned given his evident failure to reliably serve Iran's interests and argued that Iraq needed a new prime minister.<sup>48</sup> The IRGC acknowledged Maliki's failings but argued that changing the government when Iraq, or at least its Shiite-led order, was facing a potentially existential threat from a lethal enemy

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Oil and Borders*, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and IRGC commanders, Tehran, 2015-2016. For instance, Soleimani boasted: "The PMUs liberated Tikrit, Saddam's birthplace, with only 5 per cent destruction, as compared with U.S.-led forces, which destroyed 95 per cent of Ramadi". "سليمانی: «مانع تشکیل حکومت داعش شدیم» [Soleimani: We prevented ISIS from establishing a government]", *Tasnim*, 28 May 2016; "After Iraqi forces take Tikrit, a wave of looting and lynching", Reuters, 13 April 2015. Soleimani is not known to have criticised the PMUs even once.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats, Tehran, 2016-2017. An Iranian academic close to the foreign ministry noted that Iran's greatest challenge in the short and medium term is to deal with the gamut of small local players (various Shiite, Sunni and Yazidi groups that fall under the PMUs) who are part of the Iran-led alliance in Iraq and in Syria, specifically how much margin of manoeuvre to give them in localities in which they are deployed. He argued that the system of using PMUs "works well only because they are local. They should have decision-making authority in their localities and some degree of autonomy from Iran". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, May 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, IRGC commanders, Tehran, 2015-2016. An IRGC commander said: "The PMUs can be integrated into the Iraqi state after the conflict [with ISIS] ends, just as the Badr Brigade [the erstwhile military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a party founded in Iran in 1982 that has since changed its name and cast off its military arm] eventually was integrated. But even if these forces become a parallel state institution, this doesn't mean the sky is falling. We have the same model in Iran [ie, Basij paramilitary units] and still have a strong central state". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2017.

<sup>47</sup> An ex-Qods force commander said: "Maliki successfully managed the U.S. exit from Iraq and restored Baghdad's place as the centre of power in Iraq". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and presidential advisers, Tehran, 2015-2016.



comprising former regime elements bent on vengeance was dangerous and would cause Iran's other allies in the region to question its reliability.<sup>49</sup>

The pragmatists prevailed. After hearing both sides' arguments and as instructed by the supreme leader, Shamkhani, the SNSC secretary, travelled to Najaf to solicit Ayatollah Sistani's views on the matter.<sup>50</sup> As soon as it became clear that the religious leader favoured a political change in Baghdad, Shamkhani forged a consensus at the SNSC in favour of replacing Maliki with Haider al-Abadi, also a member of the Daawa Party, while giving a face-saving role to Maliki as one of Iraq's three vice presidents in the new government. Ayatollah Khamenei, his personal affinity for Maliki notwithstanding, signed off on the decision.<sup>51</sup>

Iran's prime objective in Iraq in the coming years, amid instability caused by weak governance, endemic corruption and the absence of intercommunal reconciliation, is to prevent the emergence of new threats, be it from the U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia or their proxies.<sup>52</sup> It will do so by ensuring continued rule by Shiite-led governments, backing the PMUs for additional military leverage and preserving its influence over critical elements of the security and intelligence apparatus.<sup>53</sup>

#### B. *Lebanon: "Forward Defence"*

Lebanon is the only state in the region where Iran has been able to produce a reality fashioned roughly on its own early revolutionary model (later abandoned), which gave sub-state forces a role equal to or greater than formal state institutions.<sup>54</sup> It took

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian national security officials, Tehran, 2015-2016. A former IRGC commander explained: "Iran's regional allies and partners must believe they can count on us, unlike the U.S., which can easily pull the rug from under its friends' feet. And why should Tehran go along with a change that our adversaries [ie, the U.S. and Iran's regional rivals] demand and welcome?" Crisis Group interview, Tehran, October 2016.

<sup>50</sup> A senior cleric with close ties to Ayatollah Khamenei's office noted: "Because Ayatollahs Khamenei and Sistani respect one another's prerogatives, they refrain from openly challenging each other on their respective turfs". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, June 2016. Ayatollah Khamenei is the head of state in Iran, whereas Ayatollah Sistani is a religious leader. Nonetheless, the former has never made public statements in clear contradiction of the latter's views on Iraqi politics, and Ayatollah Sistani has never publicly challenged Ayatollah Khamenei's authority despite his refusal to subscribe to the *velayat-e faqih* principle.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian national security officials, August-December 2016.

<sup>52</sup> A senior national security official said: "Iraq's constitutional democracy will keep Shiites in power, regardless of what the Saudis do". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, September 2017. An IRGC commander said: "We don't fear Saudi influence in Iraq. For years, we have managed the influence of the U.S. and Turkey. We can now manage the Saudis, too". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, September 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Iranian officials say they distinguish "influence" from "control", which they claim not to seek in Iraq. As a national security official put it: "Iraq is an independent country. We might have influence, but we do not have control. Had we been in control, we would have taken advantage of this to resolve our differences over border demarcation". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2016. The Shah reached an agreement with Saddam Hussein in 1975 over the Shatt al-Arab border demarcation, the so-called Algiers Agreement, but the latter reneged on it when he sent Iraqi forces into Iran at the outset of the Iran-Iraq war five years later.

<sup>54</sup> In Iran, the IRGC and Basij Resistance Force, a volunteer paramilitary organisation that was integrated into the IRGC in 2008, rival state institutions such as the army, inherited from the Shah, as well as the police, which falls under the authority of the interior ministry.

the form of Hizbollah, the “Party of God”.<sup>55</sup> Having thrown out Iraq’s invading forces in 1982, the IRGC saw the circumstances in the aftermath of Israel’s Lebanon invasion and occupation that same year as fertile ground for increasing Iran’s strategic depth and also finding a way to confront Israel by proxy.<sup>56</sup> It sent hundreds of commanders to Lebanon to advise and train fighters of the fledgling party as it strove to expel Israeli forces.<sup>57</sup> Over the years, the patron-client relationship has evolved into one of mutual, albeit uneven, dependence.<sup>58</sup>

Several factors have helped in recalibrating the relationship: Hizbollah’s resistance to the Israeli occupation of parts of Lebanon, which led Israel to withdraw in 2000; its 2006 success in standing its ground against Israel in a 34-day war; its perceived deterrent value against an apparent Israeli desire to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities at the height of the nuclear standoff (2010-2012) – even if U.S. opposition to such an attack may have been decisive;<sup>59</sup> and its involvement in the Syrian civil war, which helped preserve the Assad regime and thus Iran’s arms supply channel to Hizbollah.<sup>60</sup> Iran sees the relationship’s principal component to be Hizbollah’s role as a “forward defence” for itself, knowing it lacks the long-range capability to directly deter Israel from striking Iranian territory. For Hizbollah, in turn, its access to Iran-supplied rockets provides a measure of protection against an Israeli military action; Israel and Hizbollah have maintained effective mutual deterrence on the Lebanese border since 2006.<sup>61</sup>

Given this history, Iran’s ties to Hizbollah are not a subject of serious debate in Tehran, even if the question has been raised publicly, including during the January 2018 street protests in various Iranian cities.<sup>62</sup> Iranian officials assert that, when it comes to domestic Lebanese politics, Hizbollah operates autonomously; Hizbollah

<sup>55</sup> The party fed on the Lebanese Shiite population’s myriad resentments: their political under-representation, the presence of Palestinian militants (who launched attacks on Israeli soil from southern Lebanon) and Israel’s indiscriminate response, of which they were the main victims. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°153, *Lebanon’s Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, 27 May 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian officials, Tehran, 2015-2016. Also see “Hizbollah and the Shiite community: From political confessionalization to confessional specialization”, Aspen Institute, November 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Iranian diplomat, Istanbul, March 2016; IRGC strategist, Tehran, May 2016. See also Nizar Hamzeh, “Lebanon’s Hizbullah: From Islamic Revolution to Political Accommodation”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1993).

<sup>58</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°175, *Hizbollah’s Syria Conundrum*, 14 March 2017.

<sup>59</sup> “Israeli PM Netanyahu ‘ready’ to order strike on Iran”, BBC, 6 November 2012; “Peres bomb-shell: I stopped an Israeli strike on Iran”, *Jerusalem Post*, 30 September 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and military officials, Tehran, 2015-2016.

<sup>61</sup> Apart from the danger of spillover of a possible confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah/Iran in Syria, there is also some risk Israel might seek to prevent Hizbollah from acquiring the capacity to produce precision-guided missiles in Lebanon. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°182, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria*, 7 February 2018.

<sup>62</sup> According to a poll commissioned by the Rouhani administration, 69 per cent of the demonstrators were principally motivated for participating in the January 2018 protests by economic concerns, whereas 30 per cent were driven by anger at corruption, and 13.5 per cent pointed to Iran’s costly support of non-state actors in the region. “۳۱ اکثریت ناراضی اند،” “درصد اصلاح را ممکن نمی‌دانند” [“Polling on the protests: Majority are discontented, 31 per cent see reform as impossible”], BBC Persian, 7 February 2018.

officials concur.<sup>63</sup> There is no reliable data on the level of Iranian support for Hizbollah and its evolution over the years, but it is reasonable to assume Tehran has largely covered the movement's financial and military costs.<sup>64</sup> As Crisis Group has argued at greater length previously, however, this enduring reliance on Tehran should not be equated with compliance with Iran's preferences on all fronts at all times.<sup>65</sup>

Iranian officials interviewed for this report stressed the relationship's reciprocal nature. A prominent parliamentarian said: "Cooperation and coordination between us have become much stronger. Because of the Syrian conflict, we now share a common path and destiny".<sup>66</sup> They also contend that Iran's decision to intervene in Syria was mostly aimed at preserving Hizbollah, and executed at the party's request.<sup>67</sup> Of course, they readily acknowledge that Hizbollah's survival is a vital Iranian interest, one they say has less to do with ideology or religion than with Iran's need for regional support against Israel and the U.S.

Domestically, Hizbollah's enemies accuse it of sacrificing Lebanon's interest for Iran's by entering the Syria war. Yet, the party's presence in Syria is equally motivated by self-preservation. There is some evidence that even in the conduct of the Syrian conflict, Iran is deferential to the party. According to memoirs of General Hossein Hamedani, a senior Qods force commander who was killed in Syria in October 2015, Ayatollah Khamenei had asked Hizbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, to manage the grand Syrian strategy of the "axis of resistance".<sup>68</sup> As an Arab force, Hizbollah, has a more natural affinity for Syrians than Iran does; it therefore made sense for Iran to lead from behind.

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<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and military officials, Tehran, 2015-2016. Hizbollah officials have been making this claim since at least the mid-1990s. A former IRGC general said: "The reason our partners, unlike those reliant on other regional countries and the U.S., don't bite back is: 1) we are consistently reliable and our support is not a function of our politics, and 2) we respect their independence and refrain from dictating our whims to them. They have the ground knowledge, so we rely on their understanding, rather than on our own". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, November 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Reacting to U.S. sanctions in 2016, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared: "Hizbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran .... As long as Iran has money, we have money". Al-Manar Television, 24 June 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*, op. cit. In 2012, Nasrallah denied that the movement took instructions from Tehran. Laila Bassam, "Hizbollah says gets support, not orders, from Iran", Reuters, 7 February 2012.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2016.

<sup>67</sup> A senior Iranian national security official was therefore being less than frank about Iran's interests when he remarked: "It was Hizbollah that conveyed its fears and concerns to the Iranian leadership. Both our intervention in Syria and theirs was done at their behest, not ours". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, October 2016.

<sup>68</sup> He wrote: "We developed a roadmap under General Soleimani's supervision, covering five areas: military, security, political, economic and cultural. It was presented to Nasrallah. He said: 'the governing elite in Syria are drowning in a swamp' and thus 'the priority should be to focus on the military and security dimensions'. He also instructed us to present the plan to Syrian officials incrementally, so that it would be easier to persuade them". See Golali Babaei, *The Message of the Fishes* (Tehran, 2016). Other Qods force commanders confirmed Hamedani's account. Crisis Group interviews, Tehran, January-July 2016.

The only subject of debate in Tehran with regard to Lebanon pertains to the consequences of Hizbollah's intervention in Syria. While military and security officials emphasise enhancement of the party's hard power as a result of its experience in the Syrian conflict, due especially to its collaboration with the Russian military,<sup>69</sup> some Iranian diplomats expressed concern about the war's potential toll on Hizbollah's reputation on the Arab street.<sup>70</sup>

### C. *Syria: The Arch-ally*

Forged during the Iran-Iraq war, the Iran-Syria alliance is among the oldest and most sustainable in the region. It grew out of common cause against mutual foes: both felt enmity toward the Baathist regime in Baghdad, opposed the U.S. presence in the region and viewed Israel as a threat.<sup>71</sup> This seemingly incongruous alliance – between an Arab secular state and a Persian theocracy – has endured the test of time and regional upheaval.

A few objectives in Syria are universally shared among Iranian leaders, most importantly the need to preserve Syria's geostrategic orientation as part of its axis of resistance.<sup>72</sup> While there has never been much love lost between Iranian leaders and the Assad clan, from the outset of the Syrian crisis most Iranian officials expressed fear of either Western-fomented regime change or the Syrian state's takeover by jihadist forces; each would trigger a domino effect ending in Iran's full encirclement by adversaries.<sup>73</sup>

To prevent such a scenario, Iranian leaders contend that in the Syrian uprising's early days, Tehran advised Assad against resorting to excessive violence, only to soon realise that he knew no other way.<sup>74</sup> As soon as the protests turned violent in

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<sup>69</sup> An IRGC commander, however, opined: "Soft power is meaningless when faced with hard threats". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tehran, 2015-2017.

<sup>71</sup> Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (New York, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> A senior Iranian diplomat described the broadly shared view in Tehran: "Iran's regional rivals never accepted the post-2003 order [in the Middle East] and have continuously sought to restore the status quo ante, either through adding fuel to sectarian fires in Iraq or by seeking to topple the Syrian government. We will obviously resist encirclement, whatever the cost". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, June 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and military officials, Tehran, 2015-2016. A senior IRGC commander likened the loss of Syria to the creation of "a Salafi black hole between Lebanon and Iraq". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2016. Another Iranian objective is to preserve Syria's territorial integrity, lest its breakdown fuels irredentist sentiments within Iran, especially among its Kurdish population, and provide its adversaries with footholds. For some Iranian officials, this fear extends to all forms of decentralisation, which they view as a stepping stone toward partition. As a senior Iranian national security official put it, "decentralisation is another way of weakening a state that our adversaries couldn't affect by military means". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2016. Another Iranian national security official added: "Successful federalism is often the product of union between several smaller entities rather than division of a larger state". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2016. Antagonism toward decentralised federal models of government is prevalent in the region, especially if the envisioned entities have an ethnic or confessional basis.

<sup>74</sup> Iranian officials assert that Tehran took no steps toward the crisis without prior consultation with the Syrian government, but found the regime immune to pressure. As a former Qods force com-

response to the regime's brutal crackdown and morphed into an armed uprising, a debate commenced in Tehran, including in the SNSC. President Ahmadinejad and his supporters reportedly saw the uprising as a genuine popular revolt, akin to what had happened in Tunisia and Egypt, against Assad's authoritarianism; the IRGC, by contrast, perceived it as a plot by Iran's regional rivals to oust a key Iranian ally.<sup>75</sup>

The proponents of the former perspective warned against intervening militarily in Syria, lest it prompt a sectarian backlash against Iran and dilute Iran's revolutionary ideal of siding with the downtrodden; instead, they championed reforms to counter the protests.<sup>76</sup> The latter, by contrast, argued for aiding Damascus in suppressing the uprising.<sup>77</sup> The resulting deadlock in the SNSC was broken by the parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, who sided with the interventionists, but suggested offering a package deal to Damascus that, in addition to Iran's military backing, contained demands for reforms.<sup>78</sup> It remains unclear precisely what reforms Iran proposed beyond Syria making a transition to a more inclusive form of government, or whether Iran was willing to back up its proposal with genuine pressure. The fact is that whatever reforms may have been considered were overtaken by military priorities, as the uprising turned into a civil war and then a sectarian-tainted, zero-sum regional proxy conflict in which the regime's survival rendered moot any notion of reform.<sup>79</sup>

A dominant view within the leadership was – and remains – that, however critical to Iran, the Syrian conflict also could become a trap, a war of attrition that would drain its human and financial resources.<sup>80</sup> Tehran therefore sought to limit its involvement. In 2012, Ayatollah Khamenei put a cap of 1,500 on the number of military advisers

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mander who was then based in Damascus explained, "Bashar didn't even possess anti-riot forces. He only had the army, which knew only one way of dealing with protesters: with brute force, as enemies on the battlefield". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2016. An IRGC commander noted, "The failures at the early stages cannot be entirely blamed on Assad. The Baath party has its own methodology that even Assad cannot challenge". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2016. A senior SNSC official told Crisis Group that Syria would need a new constitution, one that would not allow one-party rule by the Baath. Crisis Group interview, Tehran, 19 May 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Iranian diplomat, Tehran, September 2016; former Qods force commander, Istanbul, April 2017.

<sup>76</sup> According to an IRGC commander, Ahmadinejad believed that Assad was a lost cause, but the supreme leader was of the opinion that if Iran took even one step back, it would find itself on a slippery slope. Quoted in "احمدی‌نژاد می‌گفت در سوریه هزینه نکنیم" ["Ahmadinejad believed we should not spend our resources in Syria"], IRNA, 3 March 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former Qods force commanders and Iranian diplomats, Tehran, 2015-2016.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Iranian national security officials, Tehran, April 2016; former Qods force commander, Istanbul, May 2017. Soleimani publicly thanked Larijani for his help in creating an internal consensus for intervening in Syria. "ایستادگی ایران مقابل تکفیری‌ها مانع تشکیل حکومت داعش در سوریه شد" ["Iran's resistance against takfiris prevented the emergence of an ISIS government in Syria"], *Fars*, 28 May 2016.

<sup>79</sup> A Qods force analyst said: "The reforms contained in Iran's proposed package never materialised. Assad resisted them and then they were overtaken by events". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, December 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national security, military and foreign ministry officials, Tehran, May-December 2016.

and personnel to be deployed in Syria.<sup>81</sup> But over time, with the gradual erosion of the Syrian army, Iran faced a slippery slope: resorting to IRGC military advisers, followed by Hizbollah, followed by Syrian volunteer fighters, then Shiite militias from across the region and finally the Russian military.<sup>82</sup> Because each escalation prompted a counter-escalation, Iran felt the need to mobilise Shiite fighters from across the region; this shifted the domestic narrative from denial that Iran had troops in Syria to use of national security justifications for the deployment of its military advisers (an unknown number of whom, including senior generals, were killed) and eventually the purely sectarian claim that Iran and its allies were in Syria to defend the country's Shiite shrines against possible attacks by Sunni jihadists.<sup>83</sup>

Even foreign fighters proved insufficient to preserve the regime, compelling Iran in the summer of 2015 to seek Russia's cooperation by dispatching Soleimani to Moscow.<sup>84</sup> The solicitation of Russian airpower caused a fissure within the SNSC between those who remained highly sceptical of Russian intentions, given a long history of mistrust, and those who saw an opportunity to operate alongside a global power.<sup>85</sup> Regardless, the military saw a partnership with Russia, however uncomfortable,

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<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national security officials, Tehran, December 2016-June 2017. In the early 1980s, Iran sent the same number of IRGC advisers to the then Syrian-controlled Beqaa valley in Lebanon to train Shiite militants fighting Israel, thus watering the seeds of Hizbollah's growth. Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Hizbollah", *Third World Quarterly*, op. cit. As of April 2016, Iran has deployed an unknown number of soldiers, ostensibly "to increase their military experience". See Abbas Qaidari, "Who sent Iranian Green Berets to Syria?", *Al-Monitor*, 29 April 2016. The Green Berets are the Iranian army's special forces.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national security, military and foreign ministry officials, Tehran, 2015-2016. In 2012, General Hamedani tried to convince the Syrian regime to create a volunteer militia to help its eroding army. Yet he faced what he called the Baath party's "iron door and steel walls": Syrian officials resisted the idea, seemingly because of its financial burden and security risks but probably – as some Iranian officials acknowledge – because Damascus feared that Iran would use the militia to undermine the state. Babaei, *The Message of the Fishes*, op. cit., as confirmed in Crisis Group interviews, former Qods force commanders, Tehran, May 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Between 2012 and 2013, an Iranian journalist reporting on Iranians killed in Syria could face prosecution at home. But as of 2014, Iran could no longer hide its military involvement in Syria. In 2016, Ayatollah Khamenei said: "If your martyrs had not gone to fight the enemy, the enemy would have come to enter our country. We would have to fight the enemy here in Kermanshah and Hamedan and other provinces", Khamenei.ir, 2 February 2016. Afghan fighters are mobilised in the IRGC's Fatemiyoun brigade and Pakistani fighters in the Zeinabiyoun brigade. According to credible reports, some have been minors. By March 2017, Iran's state-backed Martyrs Foundation financially supported more than 2,100 families of Iran-backed forces killed in Syria, including Afghans. Ali Latifi, "How Iranians recruited Afghan refugees to fight Assad's war", *The New York Times*, 30 June 2017; "Iran: Afghan children recruited to fight in Syria", Human Rights Watch, 1 October 2017; "تعداد شهدای مدافع حرم اعلام شد" ["The number of shrines defending martyrs was announced"], *Mashreq*, 7 March 2017; "How does Iran justify its role in Syria?", *IranWire*, 18 September 2017.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national security, military and foreign ministry officials, Tehran, 2016-2017.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats, Tehran, January-July 2016. Iran has a long list of grievances against Russia: from the tsars snatching nearly a fifth of Iran's territory in the nineteenth century to the Soviets refusing to withdraw the Red Army from Iran after the second world war. In addition, the Soviets established two short-lived puppet republics in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces in 1946 and supported Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war. After the Soviet Union imploded, Russia voted to impose UN sanctions on Iran between 2006 and 2010 and delayed the delivery of

as unavoidable.<sup>86</sup> As a former Qods force commander put it, “the choice was clear: either cooperate with Russia or forget about Syria”.<sup>87</sup>

The middle ground, championed by Rouhani, eventually prevailed in the SNSC. This idea was to back cooperation with Russia while working proactively to prevent it from gaining the upper hand in influencing the Assad regime.<sup>88</sup> While fruitful, the Russian-Iranian venture has not been without its challenges – which Assad has been able to exploit. Yet it has gradually turned into a strategic partnership on issues beyond Syria: from intelligence sharing and cooperation in Afghanistan to Russia vetoing Western-led resolutions against Iran in the UN Security Council.<sup>89</sup>

ISIS's 2017 territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria gave rise to a new debate in Tehran about the country's exit strategy from Syria. Iranian officials contend that given the prohibitive cost of the Syrian conflict for Iran – in blood, treasure and soft power – they have pursued a negotiated settlement for a long time,<sup>90</sup> but that the “right” time

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S-300 missile defence systems in 2010. Mohsen Milani, “Iran and Russia's Uncomfortable Alliance”, *Foreign Affairs*, 31 August 2016.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, current and former IRGC commanders, Tehran, 2015-2016.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2017. Soleimani apparently was directly involved in planning and coordinating the September 2015 intervention with Russian defence officials. Crisis Group interview, Qods force commanders, Tehran, March 2016. Russian officials contend their decision to intervene in Syria had less to do with Iran's request than with dynamics on the ground. Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, 23-24 October 2017. For more on the Russian intervention, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°47, *Russia's Choice in Syria*, 30 March 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Iranian official, Moscow, October 2017. The Russian-U.S. deal on a cessation of hostilities in February 2016 and Russia's agreement with Turkey prior to the latter's military advance toward the city of al-Bab (Operation Euphrates Shield) without consulting with Tehran frustrated the Iranians; so did Moscow's promise to Israel to prevent Iran from gaining a foothold on Israel's border. Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and national security officials, Tehran, March 2016-May 2017. In May 2016, Russia's delay, or reluctance, in providing air support to pro-regime forces in Khan Touman village south of Aleppo resulted in one of the deadliest episodes of the war for the IRGC, when thirteen of its forces were killed and two dozen others were wounded in clashes with al-Nusra Front jihadists. See “Members of Iran's elite force killed in Syria clashes”, AFP, 7 May 2016. In the Astana talks, both the design and the implementation of de-escalation zones have caused contention between Iran and Russia. “آغاز استقرار نیروهای ناظر آتش بس در سوریه” [“Peacekeeping forces are being deployed”], *Khorasan*, 27 October 2017. Also see: “Syria crisis: Russian Caspian missiles ‘fell in Iran’”, BBC, 8 October 2015; “Russia ‘showed off’ over use of Iran airbase for Syria strikes”, BBC, 22 August 2016. A former senior Qods force commander noted: “There is a limit to how far we can go in exercising our influence on Assad. Too much pressure could push him further into Russia's arms”. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Robin Wright, “Russia and Iran deepen ties to challenge Trump and the United States”, *New Yorker*, 2 March 2018.

<sup>90</sup> Tehran joined the Quartet process on Syria (Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia) initiated by Egypt in 2012, but the Saudis never attended. Then Iran reached out to Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, but talks failed to find a power-sharing arrangement Tehran could accept. In 2013, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif – in consultation with Soleimani – developed a four-point plan for resolving the conflict, which was largely neglected as Iran was excluded from the UN-sponsored Geneva I and II processes. After the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was invited to and attended the International Syria Support Group's (ISSG) meetings, which led to UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Crisis Group interviews, Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, Vienna, 19 November 2014; IRGC commanders, Tehran, 2015-2016. Also see Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, “Iran's four-part plan for a political solution in Syria”, *Al-Monitor*, 5 March 2014.

for diplomatic engagement with the internal and external actors in the Syrian conflict never came. And they say that the bar for such diplomacy has been lower for the foreign ministry than for the IRGC. For instance, in 2016, the IRGC was reluctant to agree to ceasefires that would prevent consolidation of the Syrian regime's control over key territories such as eastern Aleppo and parts of Idlib, whereas the foreign ministry was keen on exploring diplomatic options, given the war's slow progress.<sup>91</sup> For its part, the SNSC decided to advance the military option while participating in parallel diplomatic efforts to bring about ceasefires and create de-escalation zones largely favourable to the Assad regime – the so-called Astana process, in which Iran cooperated with Russia and Turkey.<sup>92</sup>

Iran benefitted from Astana, as it saw the process as replacing a Geneva track from which it had been mostly excluded and with whose objectives it mostly disagreed. Still, as part of Astana it had to tolerate the participation of Turkey, whose ambitions in northern Syria it suspects and whose alliances – with anti-regime rebels – it opposes.<sup>93</sup> While Iran supported the notion of de-escalation zones, some in Tehran were uneasy about giving Ankara legal cover for its military presence in Syria through the deployment of Turkish monitors in Idlib after September 2017.<sup>94</sup> Iran had long argued that the presence of its own and Russian forces in Syria was legitimate because they had been invited by the Syrian government;<sup>95</sup> such was not the case for Turkish forces (Operation Euphrates Shield) – until Astana enabled it. Turkey's Afrin operation in February-March 2018 likewise presented a challenge; Iran could put up little more than token resistance to the Turkish invasion – via pro-regime militias supporting the Kurdish insurgents controlling the territory – out of deference to Moscow's evident greenlighting of Ankara's move.<sup>96</sup>

As the war grinds on, decision-makers in Tehran appear more consumed with tactical exigencies on the ground than grand strategies. For instance, in April 2017, their perception that the U.S. was trying to sever Iran's access to Syria via Iraq pushed Iranian and allied Iraqi militias to rush to take over part of the border – north east of

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior national security official, Tehran, October 2016, IRGC strategist, December 2016. Also see the IRGC's criticism of the foreign ministry's acquiescence to the Vienna II meeting's statement on 14 November 2015, endorsing a political transition: "پیش به سوی پرتگاه با نقشه" "راه وزارت خارجه" ["Toward the precipice with the foreign ministry's plan"], *Ya Sarat*, 22 November 2015.

<sup>92</sup> A senior Iranian diplomat said, "Astana and Geneva are complementary: one supports a ceasefire, the other a political process, but the participants are different, with Iran having a real role in Astana only. Turkey and Saudi Arabia preferred Geneva as a way to exclude Iran". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, May 2017.

<sup>93</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°51, *Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals*, 13 December 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Qods force official, Tehran, January 2018. He said: "Turkey has a stronger presence in Syria now than before Astana. This is not comforting .... Astana legitimised Turkey's presence in Syria". He indicated that he accepted this but opposed Turkey's declared motives for being in Idlib.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, adviser to the supreme leader and former IRGC commander, Tehran, January 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Russia controlled the skies over Afrin and must have allowed Turkish warplanes to operate there. For a review of Iran and Turkey's strategic rivalry, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals*, op. cit.



the al-Waleed border crossing with Syria, mirroring the perception in the region and the West that Tehran was seeking to establish a land corridor linking Iran with the Mediterranean. Iran has not denied that it would benefit from such an east-west corridor, but maintains that acquiring the passage is not a driver of its policy in Syria or Iraq.<sup>97</sup> A senior Iranian diplomat observed:

Iran and its rivals share the same pathology: excessive optimism about the impact of one's regional intervention coupled with a tendency to ascribe broad strategic goals to the other side's more tactical, ad hoc actions, and resorting to these [imputed] strategic challenges with ad hoc tactical responses that lack a strategic vision.<sup>98</sup>

Nonetheless, with the outcome of the Syrian conflict uncertain and tensions between Iran and the U.S. increasing, Iranian officials predict a long-term Iranian military commitment in Syria.<sup>99</sup> An IRGC commander said: "Syria will probably look like Afghanistan: a weak central government with geographically contained pockets of insurgency. That is not an optimal outcome for anyone, but Iran is used to managing chaos, having honed its skills in Afghanistan and Iraq".<sup>100</sup>

#### D. *Yemen: Saudi Arabia's Achilles' Heel*

Iranian officials claim that Yemen is not a strategic priority. Yet the failure of the political transition, brokered in part by the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, provided an opportunity for Tehran to gain leverage against a rival it perceived as undermining its strategic interest in the Levant, or as several Iranian officials put it, "strike a balance against Riyadh".<sup>101</sup> Iran stepped up its support of the Huthis, an insurgent group that took over the capital in 2014.

<sup>97</sup> A senior Iranian diplomat said: "The U.S. desire to establish a north-south corridor would have been a disaster for the region, as it would have implied a Kurdish belt stretching from Turkey's border to Jordan's. That would have been a threat to us, Turkey and Iraq. It was a policy doomed to fail, and we made sure it would". Crisis Group interview, New York, July 2017. A former Qods force commander questioned the corridor's utility: "The axis of resistance's logistical support is an important consideration but certainly not a driver of Iran's policy. Moving substantial amounts of weaponry across a 1,000-mile stretch of difficult territory in Iraq and Syria isn't what we are seeking. Plus, if needed, Iran can fly supplies into Damascus airport, and, from there, move them to Hizbollah in Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, May 2017. Martin Chulov, "Iran changes course of road to Mediterranean coast to avoid U.S. forces", *The Guardian*, 16 May 2017; "For the first time in years, Iraqi and Syrian soldiers meet at the border", Associated Press, 18 June 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interview, Oslo, May 2017.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian national security and military officials, Tehran, February 2017-February 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2016. See also Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and national security officials, Tehran and Istanbul, 2015-2016; and "مصطفی زهرانی: ایران در استراتژی "خروج از سوریه دچار مشکل شده است" [Mostafa Zahrani: Iran is facing problems in its exit strategy from Syria], IRDiplomacy.ir, 30 March 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and military officials, Tehran, February 2016-May 2017. A senior Iranian diplomat said: "We don't have much to gain in Yemen, while Saudi Arabia has a lot to lose there". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, August 2015. A national security official added: "A Saudi victory in Yemen would be as dangerous and disruptive for the regional balance of power as Iran's loss would be in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, October 2016.

Huthi thought is rooted in Yemen's Zaydi Shiite tradition, which is distinct from the Twelver Shiism practiced in Iran.<sup>102</sup> The group's origins lie in an internally diverse Zaydi revivalist movement in the 1980s and 1990s that sought to protect religious and cultural traditions from Salafi/Wahhabi encroachment in their home areas. In 2004, a part of the revivalist movement under the leadership of Hussein al-Huthi abandoned parliamentary politics and turned to active insurgency against the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

They engaged in six rounds of fighting against the government, but in 2012, after the popular uprising the previous year and the creation of the transitional government of Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, they re-entered politics and joined the UN-led, GCC-supported national dialogue conference. When that process collapsed in 2014, they stormed into Sanaa, the capital, with the help of Saleh-allied forces, overthrowing the Hadi government and striving to take control of all of Yemen. They were pushed out of Aden following a Saudi-led military intervention in 2015 but have since retained control of most of north-west Yemen. By December 2017, when the Huthi alliance with Saleh's forces collapsed, ending in Saleh's death, the war had evolved into an apparent stalemate.

The precise nature of the Huthis' relationship with Iran has long been a matter of speculation. While locally rooted and doctrinally distinct from Iranian Twelver Shiites, the Huthis align closely with Iran's regional political orientation in their anti-U.S./anti-Israeli/anti-Salafi-Wahhabi perspective.<sup>103</sup> Over the course of the current war, their relationship with Iran and Hizbollah has deepened, to include not only moral/political support and some military training, but also the transfer of weapons and weapons technologies.<sup>104</sup>

Iran's involvement in the Yemeni war appears to be mainly about its Gulf rivalry with Saudi Arabia. At the time of the Saudi intervention in March 2015, the ruling elite in Tehran held two divergent views on Saudi Arabia. One, represented by the Rouhani government, argued for finding accommodation with Riyadh, pointing to Saudi angst amid domestic uncertainties related to the royal succession that had occurred two months earlier, its regional setbacks – as seen from Tehran, Riyadh's inability to overthrow the Assad regime, weaken Hizbollah, curb Iran's influence in Iraq or thwart the nuclear deal – and a perceived U.S. retreat from the region. That view also understood that Saudi overproduction of oil could drown the global market, slashing prices and imposing immense pressure on an anaemic Iranian economy weighed down by sanctions.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Zaydis represent approximately one third of Yemen's population, the majority of whom are Shafei, one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. Zaydis are based in the northern highlands, with strongholds in Saada, Hajja and Dammar governorates as well as the capital, Sanaa. For additional background on Zaydism, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009.

<sup>103</sup> Huthi leader Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi shifted the focus from protecting religious/cultural traditions to political activism in the 2000s, borrowing heavily from Iran's political slogans and rhetoric. See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°154, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian officials, Istanbul and Tehran, 2015-2016. "Iranian president: Saudi Arabia is a 'friend and brother'", Al-Arabiya, 19 September 2013.

By contrast, the supreme leader and the IRGC argued that the Saudis had tried to subvert Iran for years – by supporting Iraq in its war against Iran in the 1980s and the U.S. effort to contain Iran subsequently, and by manipulating the oil market – and would back off only if they faced strong counter-pressure.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, Rouhani won the SNSC's support to try diplomatic engagement,<sup>107</sup> and the foreign ministry received the green light to send out feelers for Track I or II initiatives.<sup>108</sup>

For its part, Riyadh was loath to engage with Iran, declaring the Iranians had no business interfering politically and militarily in Arab affairs, seeing no evidence of a less assertive approach in Tehran (to the contrary) and fearing the cost of entering talks with an aspiring hegemon from a position of relative weakness. It also claimed that Rouhani's reassuring rhetoric was wholly belied by the IRGC's actions in the region.<sup>109</sup> This, combined with spreading sectarian-infused conflicts in the region, worsened mutual relations. It culminated in Saudi Arabia severing diplomatic ties with Iran following a mob attack on its embassy in Tehran during protests against the Saudi execution of a prominent Shiite cleric in January 2016, while Iranian security forces stood there, watching.<sup>110</sup> Having exhausted their political capital on the 2015 nuclear deal and rebuffed by Saudi Arabia, Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif shifted toward a more aggressive stance in mid-2016, lest they be accused of naïveté by their domestic rivals, in parallel with deepened Saudi concerns that the financial and political benefits from the nuclear accord could unleash Iran in the region.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian officials, Tehran, 2015-2016. An adviser to Ayatollah Khamenei opined: "It is not true that Saudi animosity derives from Iran's ascendancy after 2011. [Saudi] King Abdullah was exhorting the U.S. to 'cut off the head of the snake' in 2008. Their problem with us is not our policies but the nature of our system". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2017; "Kerry: Saudi Arabia, Egypt wanted US to bomb Iran", *Middle East Monitor*, 19 February 2018. See "'Cut off head of snake', Saudis told U.S. on Iran", Reuters, 28 November 2010. Most Iranian officials interviewed for this report believe that Saudi Arabia was key to the U.S. success in sanctioning Iran's oil exports in 2011-2012 and in prompting a precipitous drop in oil prices during the nuclear negotiations. Crisis Group interviews, Tehran, 2015-2016. See also, "Iran's Rouhani blames fall in oil prices on 'treachery'", *The National*, 10 December 2014.

<sup>107</sup> Rouhani appointed as ambassador to Riyadh Hussein Sadeghi, who had presided over the high point in the two countries' ties in the 1990s. It took several months for the foreign ministry to obtain his security clearance, over the IRGC's opposition, due to Sadeghi's sympathy for protests after the 2009 presidential election. His second Riyadh tour lasted from August 2014 to January 2016.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian and Saudi officials, Tehran and Riyadh, 2015-2016. A senior Iranian diplomat said: "We even offered direct negotiations with the Qods force if they doubt the foreign ministry's authority. But Riyadh responded, 'Arab affairs are none of your business'". Crisis Group interview, New York, July 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Saudi officials, Riyadh, May 2017. See also "Powerful Saudi prince sees no chance for dialogue with Iran", Reuters, 2 May 2017.

<sup>110</sup> Iranian public opinion of Saudi Arabia was additionally affected by the molestation of two teenage Iranians at Jeddah airport by Saudi police in April 2015 and the deaths of 464 Iranian pilgrims in a stampede during the pilgrimage to Mecca in September 2015. "Iranians protest Saudi Arabia over alleged abuse of pilgrims", Associated Press, 11 April 2015; "Bodies of all missing Iranian hajj pilgrims identified", *Tehran Times*, 7 January 2016; "Iran upholds sentences for Saudi embassy attackers", *Al-Monitor*, 31 July 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei warned that the House of Saud could face "divine retribution" for executing Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and threatened a "harsh" response in the event the Saudis failed to swiftly repatriate the bodies of Iranian victims of the 2015 Mecca stampede. The two sides' contrasting views

As the Saudi-Iranian rivalry's zero-sum dynamics worsened, proponents of broader support for the Huthis gained the upper hand in the SNSC.<sup>112</sup> Iran's objectives in Yemen became to deny Saudi Arabia a victory that could embolden it regionally and to ensure Riyadh got sucked into a deepening quagmire. U.S. as well as Saudi officials claim that Tehran began providing substantial military support to the Huthis in the form of missile parts and training.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, there is evidence of Iranian weapons supplies to the Huthis, including the transfer of missile parts and drone technology, as well as of advisory and training support, notably via Hizbollah. There is evidence that weapons transfers are on the rise, with a January 2018 UN panel of experts report accusing Tehran of violating the arms embargo against Yemen, although the full extent of military assistance is uncertain.<sup>114</sup> That said, there is no clear evidence that the Huthis are Iranian puppets. They have ignored Tehran's advice on consequential decisions in the past, for example when they entered Sanaa and subsequently moved south to Aden.<sup>115</sup>

How to proceed in Yemen has been a subject of debate in Tehran. One view, prevalent in the military and security establishment, considers the Huthis a potential long-term ally, and accordingly argues for strengthening the group to keep Saudi Arabia off balance. The other is the government's perspective; it fears that Iran's ties with the Huthis could be a liability given that the group's actions outside of Tehran's control might harm Iran's strategic interests, and it therefore advocates caution and support for a diplomatic approach.<sup>116</sup> As an Iranian diplomat put it, "the fact that the Huthis are fiercely independent means that they might choose a policy that could backfire on Iran without us having played a role in it. That is dangerous".<sup>117</sup>

Entering its fourth year, the Saudi-led war has caused a humanitarian catastrophe and comes at great financial and reputational cost to Saudi Arabia.<sup>118</sup> For Iran,

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were best illustrated by competing op-eds by their respective foreign ministers in the U.S. media: Javad Zarif, "Riyadh's reckless sectarianism", *The New York Times*, 11 January 2016; "Rid the world of Wahhabism", *The New York Times*, 4 September 2016; and "Arms deals won't bring peace", *The New York Times*, 26 May 2017; Adel Al-Jubeir, "Why Iran is still dangerous", *The New York Times*, 20 January 2016; and "Iran can't whitewash its record of terror", *Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2016.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interviews, national security officials, May–October 2016.

<sup>113</sup> See "Facts about Iranian Involvement in Huthi Aggression against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia", Saudi embassy in Washington, 7 November 2017; Eric Schmitt, "Iran is smuggling increasingly potent weapons into Yemen, U.S. admiral says", *The New York Times*, 18 September 2017; "Iranian technology transfers to Yemen", Conflict Armament Research, March 2017.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and national security officials, Tehran, April 2016–May 2017. "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen", S/2018/68, UN Security Council, 26 January 2018. See also "Guards chief rejects Trump 'slander' that Iran behind Saudi missile", Reuters, 5 November 2017. The accusation, as outlined by the UN, is that Iran transferred missile parts and knowledge to the Huthis. Rick Gladstone, "Iran violated Yemen arms embargo, UN experts say", *The New York Times*, 12 January 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian national security officials and diplomats, Tehran, 2015–2016.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iranian diplomats and IRGC commanders, Tehran, March–November 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2017.

<sup>118</sup> Letter dated 27 January 2017 from Panel of Experts on Yemen to President of Security Council, UN Security Council, S/2017/81, 31 January 2017; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°52, *Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen*, 13 April 2017.

by contrast, it has been a low-cost way of harming Saudi Arabia, and keeping it pre-occupied on the Arabian Peninsula and on the defensive. This approach enjoys widespread support, particularly at a time when Iranian officials sense that Saudi Arabia is banking on the U.S. to rush to its rescue should the need arise. A senior Iranian diplomat said, “the Saudis don’t want to resolve their differences with Iran. They want to heat things up so that the U.S. will ‘cut off the head of the snake’”, meaning Iran.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, New York, September 2017.

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## V. Policy Implications

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The scale and scope of the debate in Tehran over the country's regional policies and priorities present a complex picture, but one that is less opaque or liable to generate unpredictable responses than at times is assumed. Understanding the elements that shape Iran's strategic decision-making process could help others in affecting Tehran's thinking or dealing more effectively with its actions.

Other considerations aside, an important driver of Iran's regional policies is a sense of insecurity that informs its search for greater strategic depth in its "near abroad" and resort to asymmetric deterrence.<sup>120</sup> To be sure, ideological, sectarian and economic calculations also inform Iran's policy decisions,<sup>121</sup> but on the whole Iran has pursued a militarised approach toward some of the region's crises primarily to protect longstanding alliances in Lebanon and Syria that came under threat, and secured its presence in neighbouring Iraq by fighting ISIS. In all these cases, it has been able to pocket its adversaries' mistakes and filled security vacuums created by failing states. In Yemen it came to the aid of an ally, taking advantage of both a failing state and a mistake by an adversary, but for now its investment has been minor compared to the resources it has expended elsewhere.

What Tehran presents as defensive understandably is perceived as aggressive in the Gulf and by Israel. This gap has given rise to a destructive dynamic. The Arab uprisings brought turmoil and uncertainty to the wider region, with new threats as well as opportunities. Iran has moved to shape the evolving situation to its advantage. Its Gulf neighbours, feeling intensely vulnerable in the face of a faltering Arab order, are pushing back, seeking to elicit a more assertive U.S. role and Israeli support. This in turn fuels Iran's suspicions and informs its more belligerent responses.

This vicious circle is compounded by another: Tehran wants to expel the U.S. military from its near abroad, but instead of discouraging the U.S., Tehran's policies are part of the reason why the U.S. has yet to withdraw its forces following the military defeat of ISIS.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> As a prominent scholar wrote, "Iran is closer to modern Russia and China than to their revolutionary predecessors. Like them, it is a revisionist power, not a revolutionary one. It opposes a regional order designed to exclude it". Vali Nasr, "Iran Among the Ruins", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018.

<sup>121</sup> A Qods force official said, "One shouldn't under-estimate the attachment the Iranian population has to Shiite Imams and the shrines dedicated to the Prophet's family members. We have so many volunteers who beg us to be deployed to Syria to defend the holy shrines, but we send them away". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, April 2017. A national security official said, "Yes, there are those who benefit from war economies, but correlation is not causation". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, March 2016. See also, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards reaps economic rewards in Syria", Reuters, 19 January 2017; "Iran signs deal to repair Syria's power grid", Reuters, 12 September 2017; Tamer Badawi, "Iran's Iraqi market", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 July 2016. An Iranian academic wrote: "What stands out about Iran is that its foreign policy is not a reflection of its national economic interests. Indeed, Iranian leaders proudly boast that their policies are driven by a desire to fight injustice rather than further the economic interests of the state". Mahmoud Sariolghalam, "Prospects for change in Iranian foreign policy", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 February 2018.

<sup>122</sup> For instance, David Satterfield, U.S. acting assistant secretary for the Near East, said: "A premature U.S. departure from Syria would enable ISIS to return, place the U.S. strategy in Iraq at risk, increase the risk to Syria's neighbors and enable Iran to expand its malign influence throughout the

It will be hard to find a way out of these vicious circles. Iranian leaders resist the notion of putting their support of Hizbollah and other allies, as well as most of their other regional policies or their ballistic missile program, on the bargaining table.<sup>123</sup> In that regard, Iran's policies have not changed since the 1980s, with its overarching strategy set by the supreme leader. Nor will they change, absent a major shift in Iran's threat perception.

The negotiations that led to the Iran nuclear deal offer a few lessons. They succeeded not only because sanctions had inflicted acute pressure on Iran's economy, but also because the U.S. took regime change off the table; Washington recognised Tehran's core interest in protecting its rights as a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and did not try to circumvent key power centres in the Islamic Republic. Together, pressure and engagement helped shift the Iranian leadership's calculus: it still rejected the U.S. presence in the region, but saw an opening for an outcome that would meet some of its core security interests.<sup>124</sup>

To break the cycle of escalation and counter-escalation in the region's zero-sum proxy conflicts, Iran and its adversaries should consider the following:

- ❑ Iran should recognise that the more its military doctrine promotes expeditionary warfighting, the more it will prompt aggressive pushback by its adversaries. Its current approach is a formula for enduring and even worsening regional instability.<sup>125</sup>
- ❑ In the same vein, Iran's claimed fear of spreading sectarian strife has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: its actions have helped feed the very radicalisation it professes to be damming up by fighting violent Sunni jihadists in Iraq and Syria.
- ❑ Moreover, if Iranian leaders are sincere in their declaration that Iran is committed to non-interference in others' internal affairs, they cannot sub-contract Iran's regional policies to non-state actors. To persuade the world to acknowledge its rightful place in the region, Iran should encourage the integration of its non-state allies into their countries' security architectures and allow them to be placed under the direct and effective control of their central governments.

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region, especially to threaten Israel through Iranian backed proxies like Hizbollah". See "Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee", U.S. Senate, 11 January 2018.

<sup>123</sup> In response to U.S. sanctions against Iran's ballistic missile tests, both the Iranian parliament and President Rouhani, generally supportive of a more pragmatic approach toward the West, instead doubled down on their support for the missiles program. Thomas Erdbrink, "Iranian parliament, facing U.S. sanctions, votes to raise military spending", *The New York Times*, 13 August 2017. Where there are differences, they are more over tactics and tone. Whereas the government opposes carving provocative messages on missiles during parades or boasting of underground missile facilities, and at times has been able to delay or stop these steps, the IRGC hews to a more assertive tone. "Revolutionary Guards commander says Iran's missile work will not stop", Reuters, 10 March 2016.

<sup>124</sup> President Barack Obama sent three letters to Ayatollah Khamenei, in part reassuring him that Washington was not pursuing regime change. For more background, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefings N°34, *Iran and the P5+1: Getting to "Yes"*, 27 August 2014; and N°43, *Iran Nuclear Talks: The Fog Recedes*, 10 December 2014.

<sup>125</sup> "Iran may seek naval bases in Yemen or Syria: chief of staff", Reuters, 27 November 2016. Ali Akbar Velayati, Ayatollah Khamenei's top foreign policy adviser, said: "Just like the U.S., which has bases in India, the Caucasus, Bahrain and elsewhere to safeguard its interests, we need to put our security barriers beyond our borders". *Mizan*, 29 October 2015.

Iran should reassure its neighbours that it will not offensively use its cyberweapons capabilities against their critical infrastructure; that it will silence inflammatory media that personally target the Gulf ruling families or incite sectarian tensions; and that it will sever links to anti-regime Shiite organisations, specifically in Bahrain and Kuwait.

- ❑ For Iran's adversaries, it would be a mistake to inflate Iran's capabilities or reach. As a Persian power neighbouring the Arab world and a majority-Shiite country in a Muslim world in which Shiites constitute a minority, Iran's influence, as former U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker has observed, is inherently self-limiting.<sup>126</sup> Iran may have more influence in Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa today than it did fifteen years ago, but all four states have been seriously weakened by instability or war, with large areas destroyed; keeping them in its orbit will be a difficult long-term struggle in which Iran will be seriously challenged by rivals should they play their cards well.<sup>127</sup> Rhetoric about the advent of a resurgent Iranian empire pre-empts smart policymaking, which would include focusing on conflict resolution (eg, in Yemen) and avoiding escalation (eg, in Lebanon) as well as engaging on issues of pressing common interest, such as sharing water resources and addressing the devastating effects of climate change, from which no regional country is immune.
- ❑ While Iran's clout in the region has a ceiling, it also has a floor. Iran is an integral part of the region and cannot be excised from it. Iran will need to be more systematically engaged by its neighbours (and by the U.S.) on regional issues such as the future of Yemen, Syria or Iraq.
- ❑ Iran is likely to respond to Western states' conventional arms supplies to their Middle East allies by sharpening its own asymmetric tools, and vice versa. Such a cycle is fraught with dangers of inadvertent and uncontrollable escalations due to miscalculations or misinterpreted incidents.
- ❑ The most effective way for Iran's foes to contain its influence would be to help end local conflicts which Iran exacerbates, from which it profits, which are polarising and increasingly metastasising, and which could trigger a larger regional war with unpredictable outcomes.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>126</sup> He said: "Iranian influence [in Iraq] is self-limiting. The harder they push, the more resistance they get". Quoted in Bob Dreyfuss, "Crocker on Iraq: Baghdad will ask US to extend its military role", *The Nation*, 25 October 2010.

<sup>127</sup> Even – or perhaps especially – the Shiite clerical establishment in Najaf, the Shiite holy city in Iraq, has taken a dim view of Iranian interference in Iraqi and local affairs. When the Qom clerical establishment sent Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, head of Iran's expediency council and possibly Iran's candidate to one day replace Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as the Shiites' paramount religious authority, on a charm offensive to Najaf in September 2017, he reportedly received a frosty reception. Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran vying for leadership of Shi'ites in Iraq", Reuters, 7 November 2017; "Leading Iraqi clerics call for dismantling Iran-backed Shi'ite militias", Radio Free Europe, 5 August 2017.

<sup>128</sup> A senior Iranian diplomat said: "Neither the U.S. nor Saudi Arabia learn from their mistakes. They supported Iraq's war effort against Iran in the hope of nipping the Iranian revolution in the bud. Instead it consolidated it. The 2003 invasion of Iraq was supposed to contain us. Instead it



- ❑ Prospects for a more peaceful and stable region will be enhanced through a more sustainable regional security arrangement in which all stakeholders see their core interests protected. Section 8 of UN Security Council Resolution 598 (1987), which ended the Iran-Iraq war, mandates the UN secretary-general to convene a regional security dialogue to lay the ground for a security architecture tolerable to all sides.<sup>129</sup> Time arguably is ripe for the UN to take the lead on kick-starting such a dialogue.
- ❑ Some in Tehran seem to be sensing the risks of continuously rising tensions, and even generally hardline politicians say they see Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel colluding to heat up the region's conflicts in order to push the U.S. and Iran into a military confrontation. Building on such concerns, and given that its interest and investment in Yemen have been minor compared to what it has expended in Syria and Iraq, Iran could take a first step toward de-escalating regional tensions by pressing for an end to Huthi missile strikes in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states, and for a return to the negotiating table. More than a risk, Yemen offers an early opportunity for constructive Iranian steps. In Syria, too, Iran could do a good deal more to rein in the worst excesses of a regime that has been operating without any form of restraint – in part because of unquestioned Iranian and Russian support – and help steer the conflict toward a genuine nationwide ceasefire and peace talks. And in Iraq, Iran could encourage its allied militias to integrate into the state's security forces as a way of strengthening the state rather than undermining it.
- ❑ Such steps combined could also serve to strengthen the hands of the European signatories to the Iran nuclear deal as they try to defend or preserve it.

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increased our strategic depth. And post-2011 efforts to curb our influence in Syria and Yemen have only increased our clout there as well". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2017.

<sup>129</sup> See UN Security Council Resolution 598, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/598>. A senior Iranian diplomat said: "As a permanent member of the Security Council, the U.S. will have a role in those talks and we will recognise its interests in the region". Crisis Group interview, New York, September 2017.

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## **VI. Conclusion**

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The debate in Tehran about how best to serve the imperatives of Iran's national security funnels through a consensual decision-making process that is quite effective in devising tactical responses to regional developments, but slow in strategic about-faces. With a worldview formed in the traumatising crucible of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, positioned in a region engulfed in the chaos of failing or failed states, and faced with more heavily armed adversaries, Iranian leaders – regardless of their various political inclinations – firmly subscribe to the country's strategic doctrine, which is based on its asymmetric military capabilities and support for regional allies, including armed non-state actors.

A change in Tehran's strategic doctrine likely will require regional and extra-regional stakeholders engaging Iran in a contentious but necessary discussion of a future regional security architecture. The nuclear negotiations, which constituted the only example in nearly forty years of a major turnaround in Iranian policies, illustrate the utility of an approach that combines pressure and realistic engagement.

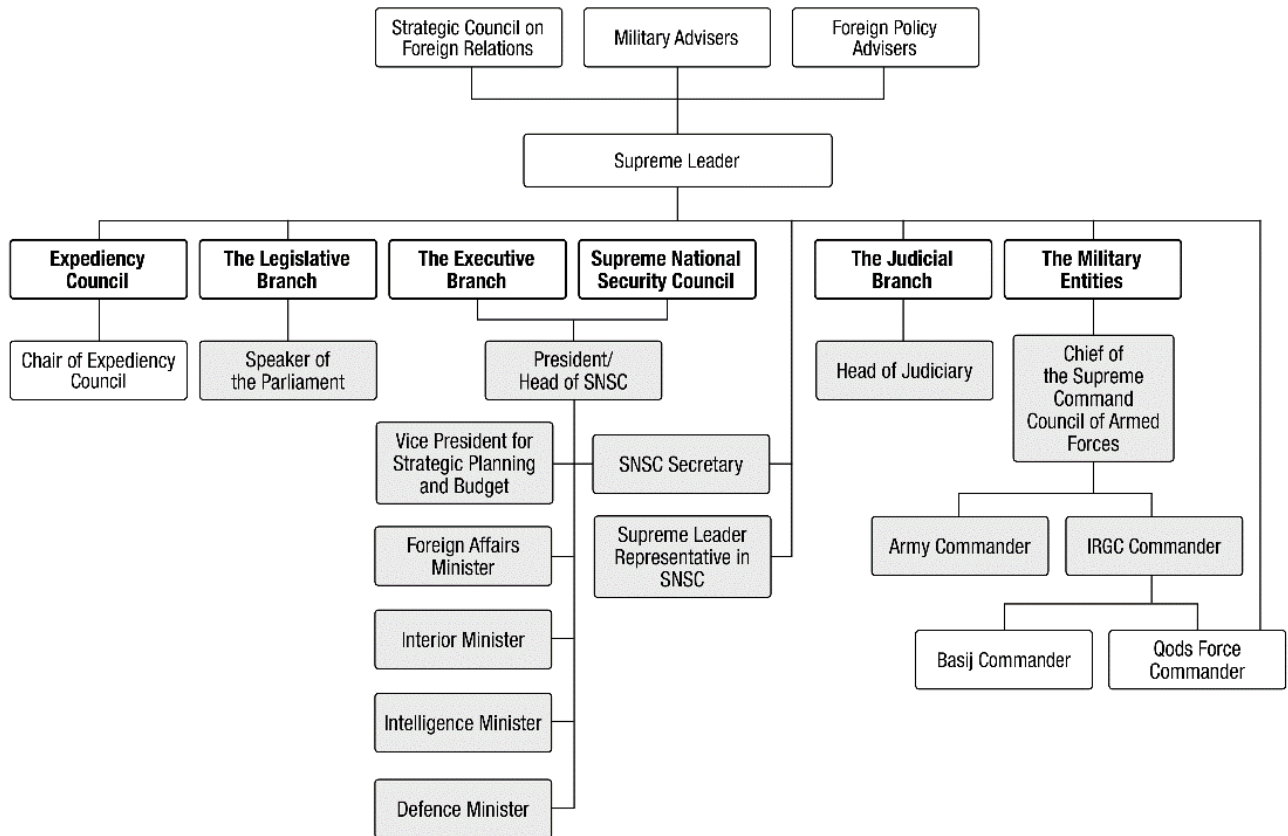
In contrast, efforts that focus exclusively on aggressively pushing back against Iran are likely to prompt the leadership to double down on their current approach; likewise, endeavours that exacerbate regional conflicts are liable to give Iran new opportunities to exploit chaos. To break the current vicious circle, Iran's foes ought to recognise its legitimate security concerns; for its part, Iran will need to take steps demonstrating its preparedness to live up to responsibilities that come with the regional stature to which it aspires, notably respect for state sovereignty; and global as well as regional actors should work toward a broader, more inclusive security architecture. The alternative can only be more chaos and more bloodshed in the region.

**Tehran/Washington/Brussels, 13 April 2018**

## Appendix A: Map of Iran and Neighbours



## Appendix B: Security Decision-makers in Iran



 Shaded background: Member of SNSC

## Appendix C: Timeline

### October 1968

Iran and Saudi Arabia sign security cooperation agreement after UK vacates Gulf.

### August 1971

Shah accepts UN referendum on Bahraini independence.

### November 1971

Iran seizes three Gulf islands of Big Tunb, Little Tunb and Abu Moussa.

### June 1972

Iranian special forces deploy to Oman to assist sultan's armed forces in Dhofar counter-insurgency campaign.

### March 1975

Iran and Iraq sign border demarcation agreement in Algiers.

### February 1979

Islamic Revolution.

### February 1979

Iran cuts diplomatic relations with Israel.

### April 1979

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is founded.

### November 1979

Iranian students occupy U.S. embassy in Tehran.

### April 1980

U.S. cuts diplomatic relations with Iran.

### September 1980

Iraq invades Iran over disputed waterway.

### January 1981

Iran releases U.S. hostages after 444 days.

### May 1981

Gulf Cooperation Council is established in Saudi Arabia.

### June 1982

Following Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Iran dispatches IRGC forces to Lebanon, through Syria, to train and support Hizbollah militia.

### November 1982

Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is founded in Tehran.

### October 1983

U.S. accuses Iran of aiding suicide bombing at Marine barracks in Beirut.

### November 1986

Lebanese magazine discloses secret arms-for-hostages deal between Iran, Israel and the U.S., known as Iran-Contra affair.

### July 1987

Hundreds of Iranian pilgrims are killed in incident during Hajj in Mecca.

### April 1988

Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic relations with Iran after its embassy in Tehran is ransacked.

### July 1988

U.S. shoots down Iranian civilian aircraft.

### August 1988

Iran-Iraq war ends following Iran's acceptance of UN ceasefire.

### June 1989

Ayatollah Khamenei is appointed supreme leader following death of Ayatollah Khomeini.

### September 1990

Iran, Iraq resume diplomatic relations; Iran remains neutral in Iraq-Kuwait war.

### 1991

Iran restores diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

### April 1992

Iran takes full control of Abu Moussa island in Gulf.

### June 1996

Iran is suspected of masterminding bombing of Khobar Towers, a U.S. air force housing complex in Saudi Arabia.

### August 1998

Taliban kill nine Iranians, including eight diplomats, in Afghanistan.

### September 1998

Iran deploys troops to Afghan border.

### April 2001

Following President Khatami's visit to Riyadh, Iran and Saudi Arabia sign security agreement.

### September 2001

Iran condemns 9/11 attacks in U.S.

### October-December 2001

Iran cooperates with Northern Alliance and U.S. to bring down Taliban.

### January 2002

President George W. Bush declares Iran part of "axis of evil".

### March 2003

Following U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Iran intensifies bilateral cooperation with Syria and starts to support militias in Iraq.

### 2003

Iran and U.S. reportedly hold series of meetings on Iraq.

**July 2006**

UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1696 on Iran's nuclear program.

**March 2007**

UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1747, tightening sanctions on Iran's nuclear program.

**October 2007**

On his first official visit to Iran, Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

**March 2008**

UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1803 against Iran for failing to suspend uranium enrichment.

**June 2010**

UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1929, imposing additional sanctions on Iran.

**September 2011**

Ayatollah Khamenei declares support for Syrian government against rebels.

**2011**

Iran provides military advisers to Syrian government in civil war.

**October 2011**

Iran is accused of attempting to assassinate Saudi ambassador to the U.S. Adel Al-Jubeir.

**November 2011**

UK suspends diplomatic ties with Iran following attack on its embassy in Tehran.

**November 2013**

Iran assists UN-led effort in Syria to eliminate regime's chemical weapons stockpile.

**2014**

IRGC forms and deploys Fatemiyoun Brigade of Afghan Shiite fighters to Syria.

**June 2014**

President Rouhani announces that Iran, if asked by the Iraqi government, will fight ISIS in Iraq.

**2014**

Iran provides advisers and weapons to Iraqi government, Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Shiite militias to fight ISIS.

**July 2015**

Iran and UNSC 5+1 reach nuclear deal.

**October 2015**

Yemeni government severs diplomatic relations with Iran due to alleged Iranian support of Huthis.

**January 2016**

Iranian protesters storm Saudi Arabia's diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad following execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr.

Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran; several other Arab countries also downgrade relations with Iran.

**September 2016**

Iran bars citizens from going on hajj following deaths of several Iranian pilgrims in 2015.

**June 2017**

Several people are killed in ISIS-coordinated attacks on parliament and shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran.

**August 2017**

Qatar restores full diplomatic relations with Iran following tensions with Saudi Arabia.

**September 2017**

Iran voices strong concern over Kurdistan independence referendum in Iraq.

**January 2018**

UN panel finds Iran in violation of 2015 weapons embargo in Yemen for alleged transfer of missile parts and technology to Huthis.

## Appendix D: Acronyms

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GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council

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## Appendix E: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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**April 2018**



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Individual and corporate supporters who play a key role in Crisis Group's efforts to prevent deadly conflict.

CORPORATE	INDIVIDUAL	
<b>Anonymous</b>	<b>(3) Anonymous</b>	<b>Faisal Khan</b>
<b>APCO Worldwide Inc.</b>	<b>Mark Bergman</b>	<b>Cleopatra Kitt</b>
<b>Atlas Copco AB</b>	<b>Stanley Bergman &amp; Edward</b>	<b>Michael &amp; Jackie Lambert</b>
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<b>Eni</b>	<b>Eric Christiansen</b>	<b>Malcolm Hewitt Wiener</b>
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	<b>Ana Luisa Ponti</b>	<b>Kerry Propper</b>
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	<b>David Jannetti</b>	<b>Nina K. Solarz</b>
		<b>Clayton E. Swisher</b>
		<b>Enzo Viscusi</b>

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**AMBASSADOR COUNCIL**

Rising stars from diverse fields who contribute their talents and expertise to support Crisis Group's mission.

<b>Amy Benziger</b>	<b>Lindsay Iversen</b>	<b>Nidhi Sinha</b>
<b>Tripp Callan</b>	<b>Azim Jamal</b>	<b>Chloe Squires</b>
<b>Kivanc Cubukcu</b>	<b>Arohi Jain</b>	<b>Leeanne Su</b>
<b>Matthew Devlin</b>	<b>Christopher Louney</b>	<b>Bobbi Thomason</b>
<b>Victoria Ergolavou</b>	<b>Matthew Magenheimer</b>	<b>AJ Twombly</b>
<b>Noa Gafni</b>	<b>Madison Malloch-Brown</b>	<b>Dillon Twombly</b>
<b>Christina Bache</b>	<b>Megan McGill</b>	<b>Annie Verderosa</b>
<b>Lynda Hammes</b>	<b>Hamesh Mehta</b>	<b>Zachary Watling</b>
<b>Jason Hesse</b>	<b>Tara Opalinski</b>	<b>Grant Webster</b>
<b>Dali ten Hove</b>	<b>Perfecto Sanchez</b>	

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**SENIOR ADVISERS**

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

<b>Martti Ahtisaari</b>	<b>Kim Campbell</b>	<b>Aleksander Kwasniewski</b>
Chairman Emeritus	<b>Jorge Castañeda</b>	<b>Todung Mulya Lubis</b>
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<b>Óscar Arias</b>	<b>Jacques Delors</b>	<b>Timothy Ong</b>
<b>Ersin Arioglu</b>	<b>Alain Destexhe</b>	<b>Olara Otunnu</b>
<b>Richard Armitage</b>	<b>Mou-Shih Ding</b>	<b>Lord (Christopher) Patten</b>
<b>Diego Arria</b>	<b>Uffe Ellemann-Jensen</b>	<b>Victor Pinchuk</b>
<b>Zainab Bangura</b>	<b>Gernot Erler</b>	<b>Surin Pitsuwan</b>
<b>Shlomo Ben-Ami</b>	<b>Marika Fahlén</b>	<b>Fidel V. Ramos</b>
<b>Christoph Bertram</b>	<b>Stanley Fischer</b>	
<b>Alan Blinken</b>	<b>Carla Hills</b>	
<b>Lakhdar Brahimi</b>	<b>Swanee Hunt</b>	