

Steinberg, Guido

**Research Report**

## The "axis of resistance": Iran's expansion in the Middle East is hitting a wall

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SWP Research Paper

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*Guido Steinberg*

# The “Axis of Resistance”

Iran’s Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

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- Since 2011 the Islamic Republic of Iran has significantly extended its influence in the Middle East. The expansion reached its apex in 2018. It has since entered a new phase in which Tehran, despite not suffering any strategic military setbacks, is hitting a wall.
- Iran's biggest fundamental problem is that a majority of its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen are primarily military and terrorist actors. They frequently succeed in armed confrontations. Yet they are subsequently incapable of ensuring political and economic stability.
- The best option for German and European policymakers is a strategy of containment so as to put an end to Iran's expansion in the four countries mentioned above, but also to acknowledge in the short term that Tehran and its allies are in a position of strength.
- Part of such a containment strategy would be to impose the most far-reaching isolation and sanctions possible on Iran's armed partners. This includes adding Lebanese Hezbollah, the Hezbollah Battalions, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and other militias loyal to Iran, including their leaders, to all relevant terrorism lists.
- Should Iranian institutions and actors involved in its policy of expansion in the Middle East also be listed as terrorists? The close ties between the Quds Corps – which is in charge of Iran's policy towards its Arab neighbours – and unequivocally terrorist organisations such as Lebanese Hezbollah suggest that this step is necessary.

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Stiftung Wissenschaft und  
Politik  
German Institute  
for International  
and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4  
10719 Berlin  
Germany  
Phone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-200  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

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*Dr Guido Steinberg is Senior Associate in the Middle East and Africa Division at SWP.*

## **The “Axis of Resistance”. Iran’s Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall**

Since 2011 the Islamic Republic of Iran has significantly extended its influence in the Middle East. In Syria, its intervention alongside Russia from 2015 onwards contributed to the Assad regime’s victory in the civil war. In Iraq, Iranian military advisors and Iran-controlled local militias helped in the fight against Islamic State (IS). In Yemen, the Islamic Republic has been extending its support for the Houthi rebels since 2014, to the extent that the Houthis were able to assert themselves in the war against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In 2015 Iran went on the offensive. Its military tried to establish itself in Syria, with the aim, *inter alia*, of creating a “second front” in the conflict with Israel. To this end, it equipped its ally Hezbollah with more, and more accurate, missiles. In Iraq, militias loyal to Iran and led by the Quds Corps secured the “land bridge” over which personnel, equipment and arms were transported from Iran towards southern Syria and Lebanon. They also attacked US troops in the country to force their withdrawal. In Yemen, Tehran’s allies, the Houthis, have been attacking Saudi-Arabian targets with Iranian rockets, cruise missiles and drones since 2017.

Important US allies in the Middle East have long called for decisive action against the Islamic Republic and its “axis of resistance”, as the network of armies, militias, terror groups, parties and people allied with Tehran is often called. Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened in Yemen in 2015 to prevent a victory by the Houthi rebels. Since 2017 Israel has been attacking targets in Syria and Iraq with the aim of stopping the construction of the “second front” and the “land bridge”. The new US President Joe Biden has repeatedly declared his intention of using the negotiations about Iran’s nuclear programme to discuss Iran’s expansion. European governments have also repeatedly made it clear in the past few years that they consider the Islamic Republic’s approach in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen problematic.

This leads to the conclusion that Iran’s policy and practice towards its western neighbourhood will become an important topic on the international stage in coming years: either as part of the negotiations with



Tehran, or as a problem that Germany and Europe need to tackle in a different way. However, events have raised the question of Iran's actual strength in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Has Iran's expansion already peaked and is it now waning, or will Tehran manage to consolidate its successes of the past few years?

The overall picture is that Iran's expansion peaked in 2018 and has since entered a new phase, in which Tehran has not suffered any strategic military setbacks but is hitting a wall. The Islamic Republic's biggest fundamental problem is that its allies are mostly military and terrorist actors. They often succeed in armed confrontations, but are then incapable of applying the influence thus gained to secure political and economic stability. This is true, for instance, in Lebanon and Iraq, where various forces loyal to Iran have a de-facto veto in politics and use the resources of the two countries, but without displaying any interest in a functional state. These actors are militarily so strong that they cannot be driven from power; at the same time, the states dominated or blocked by them are at risk of political and economic failure and remain chronically unstable. And yet these actors' opponents are unable to push them back anywhere to any considerable extent.

This is mostly to do with the military strength of Hezbollah, the Iraqi militias and other pro-Iranian actors. In most countries, this situation leads to a stalemate:

- After years of deployment in Syria, Hezbollah is mightier and more forceful in Lebanon than ever before, and its rockets and drones continue to be the most dangerous threat to Israel. Simultaneously, the economic situation has been worsening to such an extent due to corruption, mismanagement and the consequences of the war that a protest movement emerged in late 2019, including against Hezbollah. However, the demonstrators were unable to lessen the Shi'ite party's influence. Hezbollah remains the predominant military force in the country and thus prevents policy reforms in Beirut.
- In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad has won the civil war with Iranian (and Russian) assistance, but parts of the country are still not under his control. Furthermore, the economy is in such a bad state that any stabilisation of the country lies in the distant future. In 2017 the Israeli army started its attacks, which means that since 2018 Iran has been unable to expand its visible presence. However, there are no signs that Iran intends to abandon the

expansion of the land bridge and establishment of the second front, or to discontinue the supply of more and better rockets to Hezbollah.

- In Iraq, Iran is more powerful than ever before due to the newfound strength of the militias loyal to it and their political wings. Between October 2019 and April 2020, there was a series of protests against Iran's allies, but the demonstrators were unable to decisively weaken the pro-Iran Shi'ite militant groups and parties. In May 2020 Tehran even allowed a politician to become prime minister who is relatively critical of Iran: Mustafa al-Kadhimi. However, his attempt to push back the pro-Iran militias failed from the outset: they are not subject to any command and control by the government in Baghdad, and they dominate all Iraqi sections of the land bridge.
- Since 2014 Iran's relations with the Houthis in Yemen have become ever closer. With the help of the rebels, who launch frequent attacks on Saudi Arabia's critical infrastructure and population centres, the Islamic Republic has been relatively successful at keeping the Kingdom in check. Since the Houthis have gained the military advantage in Yemen, and since Saudi Arabia is under pressure from the Biden administration to end the war, the country on the Gulf of Aden continues to offer opportunities for military expansion. However, the Houthis will not be able to bring its southern part under their control as well. Additionally, the economic situation is catastrophic, which will contribute to Yemen remaining a failed state – and thus a weak ally – for years to come.

# The Quds Corps: Leaders of the Axis of Resistance

The “axis of resistance” (Persian: *mehwar-e moqawemat*; Arabic: *mihwar al-muqawama*) is an important component of Iran’s military strategy. The latter is largely based on asymmetrical instruments since the Iranian troops are aware of their own conventional weakness and aim to avoid direct confrontations with superior opponents. The Iranian military is preparing for various scenarios, including, since the mid-2000s, a large-scale (US) invasion of Iran, which seemed conceivable after the US war in Iraq in 2003. Since the late 2000s, however, the main plausible threat is Israeli and/or US air attacks of differing scope and intensity on facilities linked to its nuclear programme. To have the capability to counter such attacks, Iran’s military leadership is banking on ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones, which it would deploy in case of war against America’s armed forces and its allies in the region – in other words, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the smaller Gulf States.

For this same purpose Iran also maintains close ties to an alliance of substate actors such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Shi’ite militias in Iraq, Afghan and Pakistani volunteer troops, and Yemen’s Houthis. What unites all these organisations is an anti-Western and anti-Israeli worldview. In case of conflict, it would be their task to use Iranian rockets, cruise missiles and drones to fire at the Islamic Republic’s regional enemies. Since 2004 the leadership in Tehran and its allies have more and more frequently called this alliance – which also includes the regime of Bashar al-Assad – the “axis of resistance”. The overarching objective of the alliance system is to protect the Islamic Republic from the USA, Israel and pro-Western states in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia. The leadership in Tehran likes to claim that the alliance it has formed is defensive in character, but since 2012 the Iranian military has pursued a strategy of „forward defence”, under which Iran is to fight its enemies beyond its borders so as to avoid conflict

within the country.<sup>1</sup> Since the stated aim of Iran’s elites is to force a US withdrawal from the Middle East through sustained “resistance” – one of their favourite words – and to destroy Israel, the strategy has a strongly offensive tone. Iran wants a revision of the balance of political power in the Middle East: it wants hegemony.

The political and ideological head of the “axis of resistance” is Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, whose military and intelligence apparatus dominates Iranian security policy. Militarily, the alliance is led by the Quds Corps (Persian: *Niru-ye Qods*; Arabic: *Failaq al-Quds*), one of the branches of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.<sup>2</sup> The Guards are a political-ideological army that answers to the revolutionary leader alone. They were created in 1979 in competition with the conventional army (Persian: *Artesh*) because the architect of the Islamic Revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini, was worried about a coup d’état by the military. The task of the Revolutionary Guards has since been to protect the Islamic Republic from internal and external opponents. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) the Guards became the country’s dominant military actor. Their leaders have since set the agenda in Iran’s strategic debate and function as the Supreme Leader’s most important security advisors. Since the 1990s, the Revolutionary Guards have benefited from

1 Amr Yossef, *Upgrading Iran’s Military Doctrine: An Offensive “Forward Defense”* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute [MEI], 10 December 2019),

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/upgrading-irans-military-doctrine-offensive-forward-defense> (accessed 19 May 2021).

2 Overall the Guards consist of at least five units: the ground forces, airforce (including air defence), navy, and Basij and Quds Brigades. Some sources also list (counter-)intelligence and security as units, see, e.g., “Iran ‘Engaged in 24/7 Global Intelligence War’, Says Guards Commander”, *Radio Farda* (online), 6 May 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/airan-engaged-in-24-7-global-intelligence-war-says-guards-commander/29922400.html> (accessed 19 May 2021).

the support of Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, who is close to the military. Its commanders — Mohsen Rezaee (1981 — 1997), Yahya Rahim Safavi (1997 — 2007), Mohammad Ali Jafari (2007 to April 2019) and now Hossein Salami — are some of the most important public figures of the regime and the conservative right wing of Iranian politics. Today the Revolutionary Guards number 125,000.<sup>3</sup>

The mission of the Quds Corps is to identify and build up ideological and military allies for the “axis of resistance” in the Arab world and Afghanistan, and in rare cases also beyond, and to support them in the long term with advice, training, leadership and money.<sup>4</sup> Though it is a part of the Revolutionary Guards, and thus officially a military formation, the Quds Corps is a hybrid structure that uses military, terrorist, intelligence and political means. Like the special forces of many armies, the Corps trains and advises combatants from allied organisations and leads them in battle; like an intelligence service, it supplies them with money, arms and information; and like a government, it deploys diplomatic personnel. Iran's ambassadors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen are usually officers from the Quds Corps.<sup>5</sup>

By itself, the Quds Corps is not very powerful, as its small size, estimated at 15,000-plus men today, immediately indicates. This size is the result of a growth process that started in the 1990s with around 5,000 men, before the activities of this elite unit were expanded in three stages — as of 1996/97, after 2003,

and after 2011.<sup>6</sup> Fifteen thousand is still not very high, especially given the broad theatre of operations of the Quds Corps. Its special strength therefore lies in its management of proxy forces. Many states using proxy forces find that, over time, such proxies develop divergent interests and become difficult to control. Not so Iran, which has been leading several loyal proxies for a long time, namely since the early 1980s: Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Badr Corps. Shared religion and ideology are likely to be one cause for the stubborn loyalty of some of these groups, alongside the strategic patience, professionalism and reliability of the Quds Corps. The often lengthy tours of duty of the unit's leaders and officers also favour the forging of alliances that are resilient in the long term.

Overall the Quds Corps is an organisation with many officers — as can be seen, for instance, in the frequent reports of brigadier generals, colonels and majors killed in Syria. The deployment of a high number of officers is proof that members of the Quds Corps act primarily as commanders, advisors and instructors and that the respective allies supply the mainstay of the troops (and thus the lower ranks). An added reason could be the egalitarian tradition of the Revolutionary Guards, who only introduced insignia after the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, and this despite misgivings from within their own ranks. Members of the Guards apparently saw themselves more as a revolutionary Islamic brotherhood than a military formation.<sup>7</sup> To this day, that tradition seems to shape the Quds Corps, which is seen as a sort of elite troop within the Guards. This is due to the unit's mission and its importance in Iranian politics, but also to the fact that its members receive military and intelligence training that is particularly multifaceted.

The beginnings of the Quds Corps as it stands today go back to the early 1990s. At the time, the Corps was still part of the Revolutionary Guards' ground forces. Its rise began in the context of increasing instability in Iran's neighbourhood, signalled as early as 1996 when the (anti-Shi'ite and anti-Iranian) Taliban conquered large parts of Afghanistan. In response, Tehran supported the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953 — 2001) — with the Quds Corps

3 The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2019* (London: Routledge, 2019), 320 — 79 (“Middle East and North Africa”, p. 343). For a comprehensive overview of the Guards, see Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

4 Walter Posch, “Suleimanis Auftrag”, *Zenith* 4 (2014): 30 — 32 (31).

5 Martin Chulov, “His Power Is Absolute. No One Can Challenge Him”, *The Guardian*, 29 July 2011; Omar Al-Jaffal, “Iran Chooses Quds Force Stalwart for New Ambassador to Iraq”, *Al-Monitor*, 13 February 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/irji-masjdi-qods-force-iran-iraq.html>; Saleh Hamid, “Iran Assigns New Ambassador to Syria after Three Months' Vacancy”, *Al Arabiya*, 1 January 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/01/01/Iran-assigns-new-ambassador-to-syria-after-three-months-vacancy.html> (both accessed 19 May 2021); “Iran Posts Guard Figure as Envoy to Houthis, Sparks Concern”, *The Arab Weekly*, 19 October 2020.

6 Anthony Cordesman and Martin Kleiber cite an initial figure of 5,000 men, rising to 15,000 in 2006, Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2007), 78 — 79.

7 Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam* (see note 3), 124f.

in overall control. The Corps played a part in helping the Alliance to survive in the years that followed, and to prevent the Taliban from conquering the whole of Afghanistan.

By March 1998 at the latest Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani had taken over the unit's reins; he was managing Iran's Afghanistan policy and within a few short years became a prominent commander.<sup>8</sup> In 2005 Ali Khamenei called Soleimani a "living martyr of the revolution", a statement that, inter alia, put the public spotlight on the general.<sup>9</sup> The importance of the Quds Corps and its commander grew again after the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. Tehran felt threatened by the presence of hundreds of thousands of US troops in two adjacent countries, Iraq and Afghanistan. At the time, the Quds Corps began extending Iran's influence over Iraqi politics and sending Shi'ite terror groups into the war on the US military.<sup>10</sup> The unit was also decisively involved in Hezbollah's successful summer war against Israel in 2006. Despite being under massive attack, Hezbollah managed to hold its ground and fire rockets onto Israeli territory up to the last day of the war.<sup>11</sup>

### From 2011 the Quds Corps was in charge of Iran's expansion in the Middle East.

These remarkable achievements by the Quds Corps contributed to its reorganisation in 2009 as an

<sup>8</sup> Ali Alfoneh, *Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani: A Biography*, AEI Middle Eastern Outlook 1 (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research [AEI], January 2011), <https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/suleimani-1.pdf> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander", *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>10</sup> A detailed overview of the Quds Corps' modus operandi can be found in Qais al-Khazali's interrogation records, subsequently published. Al-Khazali had been arrested in March 2007 for his involvement in the murder of five US soldiers in January of that year. See *The Qayis al-Khazali Papers* (Washington, D.C.: AEI, n. d.), <https://www.aei.org/the-qayis-al-khazali-papers/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>11</sup> On the presence of the Quds Corps and General Soleimani during the war, see "Untold Facts on Israel-Hezbollah War in an Interview with Major General Qassem Suleimani", *khamenei.ir*, 1 October 2019, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/7074/Untold-facts-on-Israel-Hezbollah-war-in-an-interview-with-Major> (accessed 19 May 2021).

independent branch of the Revolutionary Guards distinct from the ground forces. Around the same time, Soleimani was promoted to Major General, effectively the Guards' highest rank. This meant that he answered directly to the Supreme Leader and was among Khamenei's most important security advisors, at least on his unit's range of duties. From 2011 the Quds Corps was in charge of Iran's expansion in the Middle East. This effectively extended its theatre of operations since it added Syria and Yemen to the previous focal points of Lebanon and Iraq. Simultaneously, it expanded not only its portfolio of allied organisations – newcomers included militias of various backgrounds in Syria as well as the Houthi rebels in Yemen – but also increased the numbers of combatants that it led, trained, equipped and financed. According to one estimate, the total rose from 110,000 to 130,000 men in 2011, to about 140,000 to 180,000 men in 2018.<sup>12</sup> The Revolutionary Guards boast that the Quds Corps established 60 new "brigades" with 70,000 fighters in Syria alone.<sup>13</sup> Combatants loyal to Iran were now coming – as well as from Lebanon and Iraq – largely from Syria, and to some extent Afghanistan and even Pakistan. It is likely that the Quds Corps' extended responsibilities also led to the renewed increase in its strength to more than 15,000 men, post 2011. Its losses mounted too, since the Iranian commanders or advisors were often right at the front or at least in the battle zone. In Syria, the Iranians have lost over 2,000 men since 2011 – at first only in the fight against Sunni insurgents, but as of 2018 also as a consequence of Israeli attacks. However, only a part of the casualties belonged to the Quds Corps, the rest to other units of the Revolutionary Guards and to the army, which had been deployed in Syria to support the elite unit. Among the victims were several high-ranking officers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Seth Jones, *War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East*, CSIS Briefs (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 11 March 2019), <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>13</sup> "Khamenei Senior Advisor: Suleimani Established 82 Brigades in Syria, Iraq", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 12 January 2021.

<sup>14</sup> The biggest loss was that of Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani in October 2015. Hamadani was the commander of the Iranian contingent in Syria.

**Along with old and new allies,  
the Quds Corps operates increasingly  
as the leader of a transnational  
Shi'ite army.**

The war in Syria especially transformed the Quds Corps into a more militarily active organisation. Along with old and new allies, the Corps operates increasingly as the leader of a transnational Shi'ite army that conquers territory and then holds it, secures front and supply lines as well as borders, and establishes new fronts. This has been apparent since 2017, in particular in the context of the “land bridge” to Syria and Lebanon and the “second front” at the Golan border. The Quds Corps and militias erected bases along key strategic communication routes.<sup>15</sup> Important sectors of the Iraqi border with Iran are controlled by Iraqi militias loyal to Tehran.

The undisputed gravitational centre of the alliance was, until his death in January 2020, General Soleimani. Soleimani was not only the charismatic leader of the Quds Corps and the axis of resistance, but also their public figurehead. From 2014 the Quds Corps repeatedly published images and videos showing Soleimani in Syria and Iraq on visits to militias loyal to Iran on the frontline or in their living quarters, alongside the most important commanders or ordinary fighters. Iran thus demonstrated to its opponents that the Revolutionary Guards were advancing far beyond its borders. Soleimani does not seem to have expected the US and/or Israel to use his frequent semi-public appearances to attack him personally – possibly because he was also a regular soldier and/or because Israel had not taken advantage of opportunities up to that point.<sup>16</sup> He died on 3 January 2020 during an attack by a US drone on his vehicle convoy in Baghdad.

Soleimani was hard to replace for the Quds Corps. The commander had managed the unit for 22 years, benefiting from his close relationship with Supreme

Leader Khomeini and his personal contacts, some built up over decades, with the military chiefs of the axis of resistance. The Iranian leadership relied on several figures to carry on the tasks of the murdered major general. First and foremost, it appointed Soleimani's long-standing deputy, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, to be his successor. Like his predecessor, Qaani had carved out his career during the Iran-Iraq War as a divisional commander of the Revolutionary Guards. Subsequently he had been deputy commander of its ground forces, among other positions. As Soleimani's deputy, he had acted behind the scenes, taking on primarily administrative tasks and managing the deployments of the Quds Corps beyond Iran's eastern border, in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> After his appointment as Soleimani's successor, he initially seemed to experience some difficulties in keeping control over Shi'ite militias in Iraq. The press cited his insufficient knowledge of Arabic and his lack of close personal relationships with Arab commanders as his shortcomings.<sup>18</sup> According to observers, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah was therefore tasked at least intermittently with ensuring cohesion among Iran's Arab allies.<sup>19</sup>

Qaani's new deputy, Brigadier General Mohammad Hejazi, probably balanced out a few of his superior's deficits as well. Hejazi was – he died unexpectedly in April 2021 – better known than Qaani since he had previously not only served as commander of the Basij militias (1998–2007) but then also as overall deputy commander of the Guards and deputy chief of general staff.<sup>20</sup> However, the main reason for his appointment is likely to have been his experience in Lebanon.

<sup>15</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, *The Fatemiyoun, Imam Ali Base and Recent Moves by US, Russia, Israel and Iran* (Oak Bluffs: Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis [MECRA], 16 May 2020), <https://www.mideastcenter.org/post/the-fatemiyoun-imam-ali-base-and-recent-moves-by-us-russia-israel-and-iran> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>16</sup> In February 2008 Mossad allegedly refrained from killing Soleimani in Damascus, Adam Entous and Evan Osnos, “Qassem Suleimani and How Nations Decide to Kill”, *The New Yorker*, 3 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/35o7hlu> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Ali Alfoneh, *Who Is the New Chief Commander of Iran's Quds Force?* (Washington, D.C.: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 3 January 2020), <https://agsiw.org/who-is-the-new-chief-commander-of-irans-quds-force/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Samya Kullab, “Iran General Visits Baghdad, Tries to Forge Political Unity”, *Associated Press*, 1.4.2020.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Chulov and Dan Sabbagh, “After Suleimani: Iran's Scramble to Recover from General's Death”, *The Guardian*, 18 February 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Ali Alfoneh, *Who Is Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi, the New Deputy Commander of Iran's Quds Force?* Policy Watch 3245 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 22 January 2020), [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-mohammad-hossein-zadeh-hejazi-the-new-deputy-commander-of-irans-quds](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-mohammad-hossein-zadeh-hejazi-the-new-deputy-commander-of-irans-quds) (accessed 19 May 2021).

According to Israeli information, in the years preceding his appointment he was in charge of equipping Hezbollah with more accurate missiles — one of the Quds Corps' most important projects of all.<sup>21</sup> In any case, over the course of the year there were multiple indications that the Corps was once again effectively managing relations with the militias in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. The alliance led by the Quds unit remained intact and powerful despite the loss of its most important leader.

<sup>21</sup> Raz Zimmt, *Implications of the Appointment of Mohammad Hosseinzadeh Hejazi as the Deputy Commander of the Qods Force* (Ramat Hasharon: The Meir Amit Terrorism Intelligence and Information Center, 23 January 2020), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/implications-appointment-mohammad-hosseinzadeh-hejazi-deputy-commander-qods-force/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

# Hezbollah in Lebanon: Junior Partner of the Quds Corps

Lebanese Hezbollah remains Iran's most important non-state ally to this day, and the most prominent success story of the Islamic Republic's expansion in the region. The significance of Hezbollah for Iran has in fact increased over time since it not only mans the frontlines in the fight against Israel, but has also been helping the Quds Corps for almost two decades to mobilise, train and lead allies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, among others. The prominent position of Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah has also contributed to making the Lebanese militia into a junior partner of the Quds Corps in leading the axis of resistance. How close the ties are between Tehran and South Beirut (where Hezbollah has its headquarters) is exemplified by the fact that there have never been well-founded reports of differences of opinion between the two, even in times of crisis. When Hezbollah came under pressure from October 2019 onwards, it was mainly due to the inclination of large parts of the Lebanese people to hold Hezbollah and its allies in Lebanese politics (co-)responsible for the country's economic crisis.

The Revolutionary Guards played an important part in founding Hezbollah in 1982. They trained many of the combatants in the new group, which also received arms and money from Tehran from the outset. Hezbollah shows its gratitude by remaining true to Iran's principles and by becoming the first non-Iranian organisation to pledge itself to the rule of the religious jurist (Persian: *velayat-e faqih*; Arabic: *wilayat al-faqih*), the concept developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902 – 1989). According to this concept, the mantle of religious and political leadership of the Islamic state has to fall on the shoulders of a religious scholar, in the absence of the twelfth imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (who disappeared in the year 941 and is expected to return as a messiah-like figure at the end of days by Twelver Shia). Until his death in 1989, Khomeini was the supreme religious and political

authority of Iran and Hezbollah. Today that position is held by his successor Ali Khamenei.

**Hezbollah's loyalty to Iran is based on ideology, but also quite simply on Tehran's financial support.**

Cooperation between the Quds Corps and Hezbollah was close from the beginning. Soleimani and Nasrallah were the leadership duo of the axis of resistance from the mid-2000s on. Nasrallah (born 1960) has been leading the organisation as its third secretary-general since 1992. His authority and reputation grew with the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon in May 2000 and Hezbollah's self-assertion in the 2006 war. Due to these successes and Nasrallah's substantial charisma (he is an inspirational speaker), he became one of the most popular politicians in the Arab world. However, the Hezbollah intervention in Syria since 2011 has damaged his standing since it showed that Hezbollah is not only dedicated to "resisting" Israel (as it continues to claim to this day): it is also prepared to fight its (and Iran's) opponents in Lebanon, Syria and beyond, and thus transform itself into an instrument of Iran's hegemonic ambitions.<sup>22</sup>

Hezbollah's extraordinary loyalty to Iran is based on ideology, but also quite simply on Tehran's financial support. In June 2016 Hassan Nasrallah confirmed just how strongly Hezbollah depends on Iran by stating in public, "Hezbollah's budget, livelihood, expenses, food, drink, arms and rockets come from the Islamic Republic of Iran. [...] For as long as Iran has money [*the speaker laughs, author's remark*], we'll

22 "Hassan Nasrallah: libanesischer Politiker; Generalsekretär der Hezbollah", *Munzinger Online/Personen – Internationales Biographisches Archiv*, <https://www.munzinger.de/search/go/document.jsp?id=00000025756> (accessed 19 May 2021).

have money.”<sup>23</sup> According to estimates, before 2006 the financial transfers generally amounted to around US\$100 million per annum. In the immediate aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, Iran’s payments supposedly rose to as much as US\$1 billion, so as to enable Hezbollah to reorganise and rebuild the destroyed south of the country.<sup>24</sup> Shortly before the outbreak of war in Syria, however, most calculations only cited a sum of US\$200 million a year paid by Iran. Added to this were other benefits, such as arms deliveries, training, logistical and intelligence support.<sup>25</sup> Some sources mention additional help from Syria.<sup>26</sup> However, this is unlikely to have continued after the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011. Instead Iran increased its subsidies to around US\$700 million during the height of the war in Syria, according to US figures.<sup>27</sup>

Despite Iran’s generosity, there have been repeated reports of financial shortages in the past. These are largely due to the fact that Hezbollah extended its political and social/charitable activities in the 2000s so as to consolidate its power base in Lebanon. Additionally as of 2011 the cost of the military intervention in Syria that was not completely covered by Iran was reflected in the budget. How dependent Hezbollah was and still is became clear when Iran apparently reduced its payments due to the pressure of the new US sanctions that began in 2018, and to the worsening economic situation. Throughout 2019 there were increasing reports that Hezbollah had to markedly cut back on its activities in Lebanon.<sup>28</sup> However, all military operations that Hezbollah and

Tehran consider necessary from a security point of view have continued, even during that crisis.

As of 2006, the significantly increased budget enabled Hezbollah to augment its combatant numbers as well. In the early 2000s it only had a few thousand men under arms.<sup>29</sup> After 2006 their numbers grew quickly, and even more so after 2011, when Hezbollah began deploying personnel to Syria in greater quantities. Today the organisation probably has 20,000 to 30,000 fully trained and active combatants under arms. It also has another 20,000 to 25,000 “reservists” and auxiliary troops, which it also frequently deploys in Syria.<sup>30</sup> Losses in Syria were so high that Hezbollah had to intensify its recruitment drive. According to some reports, it lowered the (traditionally high) religious-ideological and physical requirements it places on its new combatants.

### **From 2011 Hezbollah became increasingly important for Iran as a go-between with the Arabs.**

Hezbollah did not only deploy its members into the neighbouring country so as to fight alongside the Assad regime, and establish and lead Syrian militias. From 2011 it also increasingly sent personnel into Iraq and Yemen, thus becoming an ever more important go-between for Iran and the Arabs. Their common language and culture made it easier for Hezbollah to militarily and ideologically train and advise Iraqis, Syrians, Yemenis and other Arabs on behalf of the Revolutionary Guards, and even to go into battle alongside them. This became clear early on during the conflict in Iraq, where, as of 2003, the Quds Corps ordered Shi’ite groups into the fight against US occupation forces — and where there is evidence of Hezbollah commanders.<sup>31</sup> In the 2010s there were also frequent signs of a Lebanese presence in Iraq. There

23 “Nasrallah on the Forty-Day Commemoration for Badreddine. Our Money and our Rockets Come to Us from Iran” (Arabic), *Youtube* (24 June 2016), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9ITEu10Obc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9ITEu10Obc) (accessed 9 June 2021).

24 IISS (ed.), *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London, November 2019), 66.

25 U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearing on “Hezbollah’s Growing Threat against US National Security Interests in the Middle East”* (Washington, D.C., 22 March 2016), 17.

26 Jo Becker, “Beirut Bank Seen as a Hub of Hezbollah’s Financing”, *The New York Times*, 14 December 2011.

27 Ali Soufan, “Qassem Suleimani and Iran’s Unique Regional Strategy”, *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 10 (November 2018): 1 – 12 (6).

28 See, e.g., Chloe Cornish, Asser Khattab and Nahmeh Bozorgmehr, “Hizbollah Feels Pain of Iran’s Struggles for Cash”, *Financial Times*, 5 June 2019.

29 Prashant Rao, *Hezbollah a Force to be Reckoned with* (London: IISS, 18 July 2006), <https://bit.ly/369ocbz> (accessed 19 May 2021).

30 See, e.g., Ben Hubbard, “Hezbollah Wields Rising Power as Iran’s Enforcer”, *The New York Times*, 28 August 2017. The IISS estimates the figure for the 2010s to be 25 – 30,000, see *Iran’s Networks of Influence* (see note 24), 62. However, this is unlikely to take into account reservists and auxiliary troops.

31 The most important case was that of Ali Daqduq, see Michael A. Gordon, “U.S. Ties Iran to Deadly Iraq Attack”, *The New York Times*, 2 July 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/02/world/middleeast/02cnd-iran.html> (accessed 19 May 2021).



have allegedly been Lebanese among the instructors in the Quds Corps training camps for a long time.<sup>32</sup> However, Hezbollah's emissaries gained particular importance in Yemen. As of 2015 they were assumed to be advising Houthi rebels and assisting them in the use of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones supplied by Iran.

For some years these activities distracted attention from the conflict with Israel, which nevertheless remains constitutive for Hezbollah. During the summer war of 2006 – which only lasted 34 days in July and August – the organisation primarily deployed its missiles, partly supplied by Iran; it fired thousands of them into Israeli territory. It suffered high casualties, and the destruction in Lebanon was substantial, but the Israeli armed forces were unable to eliminate Hezbollah. From this conflict onwards, Hezbollah became Israel's greatest immediate threat; the Quds Corps began arming it systematically. The most important weaponry was missiles of various makes, of which Hezbollah allegedly had 13,000 to 14,000 in 2006. Without exception, they are pointed towards Israel. In the years that followed, Iran supplied tens of thousands of new models, whose reach and yield far exceeded previous missiles. Shortly after the 2006 war, Hezbollah was able to threaten Tel Aviv and Jerusalem (and thus Israel's largest population centres) and a few years later even the south of the country (and thus the nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev Desert). Some of the new models are powered by solid fuel and can thus be fired much more quickly than their predecessors. Most estimates now put the number of rockets in Hezbollah's arsenal at around 130,000.<sup>33</sup>

Most of the rockets continue to be simple traditional models, but since at least 2018 Iran and Hezbollah have been working on the target accuracy of the arsenal. The Revolutionary Guards have not only been sending new products from Iran, they have also established production facilities in Syria where new missiles are built or assembled and older ones are equipped with target sights. Since early 2018 the Israeli air force has flown hundreds of sorties against these rocket workshops and the transports to and

from them. In response, the Quds Corps and its allies have moved at least some of the production facilities into populated areas in Lebanon.<sup>34</sup> This became clear in August 2019, for example, when Israeli drones attacked a building in the southern suburbs of Beirut where, according to Israel, components for Hezbollah's precision-guided rockets were stored.<sup>35</sup> It is highly likely that Iran and Hezbollah have managed to modernise some of the missiles: in September and October 2020 the Israeli army and government revealed the sites of secret Hezbollah workshops in the southern suburbs of the Lebanese capital so as to turn locals against the organisation.<sup>36</sup> Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah confirmed the existence of these arms most recently in a January 2021 interview with the Mayadeen TV, which is close to Hezbollah. He said his organisation now had twice as many precision-guided missiles as a year ago, and added that Hezbollah could reach any part of Israel.<sup>37</sup>

The knowledge that Iran and Hezbollah have been partially successful with this weapons technology was particularly disquieting to Israel because its two opponents were simultaneously attempting to open up a "second front" along the Golan border in Syria – along which a part of the new rockets were to be stationed. Such a second front would have the advantage for Hezbollah and Iran of being able to further raise the number of launching platforms and missiles pointed at Israel, which would substantially increase the threat to the Jewish state. Furthermore, Hezbollah had battle drones, which it put to the test in the Syrian civil war. Since Lebanese staff trains Yemen's Houthis in the use of drones, it is logical to assume that the organisation has broad experience in the

<sup>32</sup> Thus, for example, Qais al-Khazali after his arrest in 2007, see *The Qayis Al-Khazali Papers* (see note 10).

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed overview, see Shaan Shaikh, "Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah", *Missile Threat* (online), 27 September 2019, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/hezbollahs-rocket-arsenal/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>34</sup> "Israel Says Hezbollah Plans Advanced Missile Plant in Lebanon's Bekaa", *Reuters*, 3 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-security-lebanon-israel/israel-says-hezbollah-plans-advanced-missile-plant-in-lebanons-bekaa-idUSKCN1VO207> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Judah Ari Gross, "Beirut UAV Raid, Blamed on Israel, Said to Hit Hezbollah Precision Missile Parts", *The Times of Israel*, 27 August 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/beirut-uav-raid-blamed-on-israel-said-to-hit-hezbollah-precision-missile-parts/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Israel Defense Forces, *Exposed: Three Hezbollah Missile Sites in Beirut*, updated 5 October 2020, <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/hezbollah/exposed-three-hezbollah-missile-sites-in-beirut/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Hussein Dakroub, "Iran Threat to Use Hezbollah Missiles against Israel Raises Tensions", *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 4 January 2021.

deployment of these weapons.<sup>38</sup> From 2019 onwards, numerous rocket, cruise missile and drone attacks by the Houthis (as well as the Iranians) on targets in Saudi Arabia showed the Israeli leadership how dangerous Hezbollah could become with its new weaponry.

Until 2018/2019 it seemed that Hezbollah was at the height of its influence in the region. In October 2019, however, protests beginning in Lebanon showed that the war in Syria and its economic consequences had gravely damaged the organisation's reputation in its home country. Since the 1980s Hezbollah had evolved from an initially purely military-terrorist group to a social movement and political party as well – whose most important function is to protect the organisation from its Lebanese opponents using non-military means. It even managed to enshrine a veto against decisions by the Lebanese government in the Doha Agreement of November 2008.<sup>39</sup> In the years that followed, Hezbollah repeatedly provided individual ministers in Lebanon's national unity governments – to this day no cabinet can be formed without Hezbollah's agreement – and used its control over the ministries mainly to supply its own supporters in south Beirut, southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley with, for instance, free healthcare and jobs.

Beyond this, however, Hezbollah took no responsibility for the state overall, which in the 2010s increasingly suffered from rampant corruption and mismanagement by the political elite. These problems culminated for the first time in the second half of 2019, when the Lebanese economy collapsed. The government responded to the crisis by announcing tax rises, triggering protests in all parts of the country. The demonstrators protested against corruption and mismanagement and called for an end to confessionalism. Initially their resentment was only

directed at Hezbollah's allies, such as the President of Parliament Nabih Berri or the Free Patriotic Movement led by Gebran Bassil, but they increasingly targeted Nasrallah as well. Due to this fact and that the protests resonated with the country's Shi'ites, Hezbollah considered the rallies a threat. Hezbollah's leader blamed the events on a foreign plot – an argument that was convincing for many Shi'ites partly because protests simultaneously broke out in Iraq (October) and Iran (November).<sup>40</sup> Nasrallah initially called on his supporters to stay away from the demonstrations. Groups of Hezbollah thugs then threatened people who had taken to the streets in Beirut and Nabatiya, disrupted protest rallies, tore down tents, and insulted the demonstrators as traitors paid by foreign embassies.<sup>41</sup>

While the protests subsided due to the Covid pandemic that began in spring 2020, the economic problems worsened. Within a year, the Lebanese pound lost about 80 percent of its value against the US dollar, living costs rose sharply, and tens of thousands lost their jobs. More and more Lebanese slipped into poverty: about 50 percent of the population by late 2020.<sup>42</sup> In August 2020 the demonstrations flared up again following a massive explosion in the port of Beirut – probably due to failures by the authorities – which destroyed part of the city, killed 200 people, and injured thousands more. These protests targeted Hezbollah more directly than in October 2019, but by then the parties in Lebanon had the situation under control again.

### **Hezbollah's nervous response to the protests was a clear indication that Iran's expansion in Lebanon was hitting a wall.**

That Hezbollah nonetheless felt threatened became clear in February 2021 when its critic Lokman Slim

<sup>38</sup> For a short overview of Hezbollah's drones, see Nicholas Blanford and Assaf Orion, *Counting the Cost. Avoiding Another War between Israel and Hezbollah* (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council, Mai 2020), 9, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Counting-the-Cost-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>39</sup> For the text, see *Doha Agreement 'On the Results of the Lebanese National Dialogue Conference'* (21 May 2008), [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Lebanon\\_DohaAgreement2008\\_Engl.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Lebanon_DohaAgreement2008_Engl.pdf) (accessed 19 May 2021). The right to veto is hidden in the clause specifying that the Hezbollah alliance will be allotted 11 ministerial posts in the national unity government to be formed, and thus have a blocking minority.

<sup>40</sup> Vivian Yee and Hwaida Saad, "For Lebanon's Shi'ites, a Dilemma: Stay Loyal to Hezbollah or Keep Protesting?" *The New York Times*, 4 February 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/02/04/world/middleeast/lebanon-protests-Shi'ites-hezbollah.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/04/world/middleeast/lebanon-protests-Shi'ites-hezbollah.html) (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>41</sup> Anchal Vohra, "The Increasingly Violent Conflict between Shi'ites and Iran's Proxies", *Foreign Policy*, 18 February 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/18/the-increasingly-violent-conflict-between-Shi'ites-and-irans-proxies/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>42</sup> Bassem Mroue, "Amid Crisis, Hezbollah 'Bank' a Lifeline for Some Lebanese", *Associated Press*, 27 January 2021.

was murdered near Nabatiya, a stronghold of the organisation. The perpetrators were not caught; however, hardly anyone doubted that Hezbollah or its supporters were responsible. The Shi'ite Slim was one of the organisation's most prominent opponents. He not only took part in the protests of 2019 and 2020, but he also claimed in January 2021 that the chemicals that had exploded in August had been brought to Beirut with the help of Hezbollah and that they were destined for the Syrian government's notorious barrel bombs.<sup>43</sup> In early 2021 many Lebanese feared that Hezbollah might resume its policy of targeted murders, with which it had blanketed the country from 2005. Hezbollah's nervousness was a clear indication that the Iranian expansion in Lebanon was hitting a wall, although Tehran's influence had not noticeably lessened.

43 Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, "Prominent Lebanese Critic of Hezbollah Is Killed", *The New York Times*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/world/middleeast/lokman-slim-killed-hezbollah.html> (accessed 19 May 2021).

# Syria: The Quds Corps and its Shi'ite Militia Army

The war in Syria was the most important deployment of the Quds Corps in recent years and perhaps the unit's greatest success: through its intervention, Iran and allies decisively contributed to the Assad regime's victory in the civil war against the Sunni insurgents. For the leadership in Tehran, this was of the utmost importance since it believes in a sort of domino theory in the Middle East, according to which losing Syria could have meant the collapse of the entire axis of resistance and the end of the Islamic Republic.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in Syria the Quds Corps operated at the head of a militia army for the first time, which placed far greater demands on it than any other previous deployment – if only because the force grew steadily from 2011 to 2017. The Iran-led alliance in Syria continues to consist of Hezbollah, several Iraqi militias, and Afghan and Pakistani volunteer troops. However, its success in Syria is diminished by the fact that, as in Lebanon, the economic situation has worsened catastrophically since 2019 and a lasting stabilisation of the country is inconceivable for the time being, especially since Iran's own financial problems significantly limit its leeway. Moreover, Israeli air attacks are seriously hampering the Quds Corps and its allies. However, despite high losses of both people and materiel, there are no convincing clues that Iran has abandoned its objective of constructing a land bridge and opening a second front.

**In Syria the Quds Corps could rely on an infrastructure that has been used to channel support to Hezbollah since the 1980s.**

For the government in Tehran, the revolt against Bashar al-Assad's regime was an existential threat. Since 1980 Syria has been Iran's only state ally. After the first larger demonstrations in spring 2011, Quds Corps Commander Soleimani travelled to Damascus to agree on a procedure with the Syrians in case the protest movement spread. The commander of the Iranian expedition corps was Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani, a prominent member of the Revolutionary Guards, who was not only responsible for the bloody suppression of the "Green Movement" in Tehran in 2009, but was also seen as a specialist in the cooperation between regular military and militias.<sup>45</sup> The Quds Corps was able to rely on an infrastructure which had been used to channel support to Hezbollah since the 1980s. They now expanded this presence. From an initial contingent of a few hundred men, by 2015 the corps had grown to about 1,000 to 2,000 men, mostly commanders, military advisors, and instructors. According to some sources, at its height in 2016/2017 the number of Iranian military personnel in Syria was 3,000.<sup>46</sup>

In the early phases, the Iranians acted in an advisory capacity concerning how to suppress the protests.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., the statements by the former commander of the Basij militias, Mehdi Taeb, in 2013, "Leader of the Ammar Command Post: Our Priority is to Hold Syria rather than Khuzestan" (Pers.), *BBC*, 14 February 2013, [www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/02/130214\\_nm\\_tayeb\\_syria\\_basij.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml) (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Marie Donovan, *Iran Loses a Key Player in Its Syria Strategy*, AEI Blog Post (Washington, D.C.: AEI, 9 October 2015), <http://www.aei.org/publication/iran-loses-a-key-player-in-its-syria-strategy/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>46</sup> On the lower estimates, see Jones, *War by Proxy* (see note 12). The higher estimates most likely include Iranian military contingents that were deployed to Syria for special tasks, see Walter Posch, "Sicherheitsdenken und Machtprojektion. Iran im Nahen Osten", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 70, no. 21–22 (2020): 14, <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/309942/iran-im-nahen-osten> (accessed 19 May 2021).

Via an air bridge, they supplied weapons, technical equipment and money to the Assad regime. From 2011 to 2020 Iran is said to have supported Syria to the amount of \$20 to \$30 billion in total (including military and civilian aid).<sup>47</sup> These large sums did not prevent the regime troops from shrinking to only slightly more than 100,000 men in 2012 (from a nominal 300,000 in early 2011), since a majority of the Sunni soldiers deserted. As a result, the regime in cooperation with the Quds Corps established militias. Local civil defence groups known as “people’s committees” (*al-Lijan ash-Sha’biya*), which had been founded in 2011 to protect towns, districts or neighbourhoods, were expanded into paramilitary units. The largest alliance called itself the National Defence Forces (Arabic: *Quwwat ad-Difa’ al-Watani*) from mid-2012 onwards; in the years that followed it grew to as many as 100,000 men.<sup>48</sup> The Revolutionary Guards were decisive in founding, training and leading these units.

The objective of the Quds Corps seems to have been to establish militias that would become its long-term loyal allies, like Hezbollah. This became clear in May 2014 when Hossein Hamadani boasted that Iran had created a “second Hezbollah in Syria” with these armed units.<sup>49</sup> However, the objective was too ambitious: Shi’ites only make up one to two percent of the Syrian population, which means that religious-ideological ties as close as those with Hezbollah can only develop in a few cases. Besides, the Syrian regime and Russian military, which intervened on Assad’s side in summer 2015, worked towards integrating the mili-

tias into the Syrian forces; in many areas the Russians tried to contain Iran’s influence. The Quds Corps was thus only partially and temporarily able to bring the “National Defence Forces” under its control. The many combat units in the country were divided in those loyal to the Syrian regime, to the Russians, and to Iran. The Quds Corps therefore relied primarily on militias from the axis of resistance brought in from abroad.

During the war in Syria, Hezbollah once more proved itself to be the Quds Corps’ most important ally. Exactly like Iran, the organisation was greatly interested in maintaining the Assad regime since almost its entire supply of weapons and materiel is delivered via Syrian ports and airports and, since 2018, also overland to Lebanon. Hezbollah was also concerned that if Assad fell, a government led by Arab-Sunni insurgents would come to power and subsequently turn against the Shi’ite organisation in Lebanon. It therefore sent instructors and other personnel as early as 2011. In the years that followed Hezbollah greatly expanded its presence in Syria. The focus of its activities was Damascus and the areas near the Lebanese border, where the rebels threatened its supply lines. To begin with the organisation concealed its activities; in spring 2013, however, it abandoned its reticence. In July it took the town of Qusair alongside Syrian troops; simultaneously Hassan Nasrallah publicly acknowledged Hezbollah’s involvement in the war in Syria for the first time. The organisation’s Secretary-General said the Middle East was facing “dark times” if Assad fell; held the USA and Israel responsible for the insurgency; and described all rebels as terrorists. He also warned that after a victory by this “axis” Lebanon would be threatened as well, and announced that the fight against the insurgents would continue.<sup>50</sup>

Over the following years Hezbollah units were engaged alongside the Quds Corps in most of the larger combat missions in the country. From 2013 to 2018 the Lebanese organisation stationed between 7,000 and 10,000 men in Syria at all times.<sup>51</sup> It only reduced its presence, which was very substantial for

47 These figures come from Iranian sources. For details on Iran’s aid, see “Factsheet: Syria-Iran Economic Relations”, *The Syria Report*, June 2020. On the number of 30 billion, see also Borzou Daragahi, “Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever”, *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/01/iran-wants-to-stay-in-syria-forever/> (accessed 19 May 2021).

48 Sam Dagher, “Syria’s Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad: National Defense Force Helped Regain Territory from Rebels”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-alawite-force-turned-tide-for-assad-1377568628?tesla=y> (accessed 20 May 2021). For a slightly lower estimate of 50,000 – 70,000, see *Iran’s Networks of Influence* (see note 24), 22 and 89.

49 Arash Karami, “Former IRGC Commander’s Comments on Syria Censored”, *Al Monitor*, 6 May 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/former-irgc-commander-syria-comments-censored.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

50 “Hezbollah Admits to Fighting against the Revolution in Syria for the First Time” (Arab.), *Al Arabiya*, 25 May 2013, <https://bit.ly/3gaw5Ds> (accessed 20 May 2021).

51 Seth G. Jones and Maxwell G. Markusen, *The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria*, CSIS Briefs (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 20 June 2018), 4. The lower figure of 7,000 is mentioned in: *Iran’s Networks of Influence* (see note 24), 111.

a militia of about 50,000 men, after 2018. It also experienced high losses: from 2011 on it had significantly more than 2,000 dead and 5,000 wounded.<sup>52</sup> Hezbollah nevertheless came out of the war stronger since it had not only road-tested joint combat with the Quds Corps, several militias, the Syrian army and the Russian military, but it had also stationed units on the Syrian side of the Lebanese-Syrian border around the town of Qusair, in the Qalamoun mountains, in several towns west of Damascus and near the Golan border, and thus ruled a larger territory than ever before.<sup>53</sup>

Since Hezbollah was also only able to send a relatively small contingent (compared to the need), which did not make up for the lack of troops in the Syrian army and its auxiliary forces, the Quds Corps additionally brought in Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani Shi'ite militias. The Iraqis were mainly members of armed groups such as the Hezbollah Battalions (Kata'ib Hezbollah), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and the Badr Organisation. The first definitely foreign-dominated militia in Syria called itself Brigade (Liwa) Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and admitted Iraqi and Syrian combatants. It argued that its primary purpose was to protect Shi'ite holy sites – especially the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab, south of Damascus, which is famous among Shi'ites – against Sunni terrorists.<sup>54</sup> In actual fact, the Brigade operated above all in and around Damascus, and it trained volunteers. Using the protection of holy sites from destruction as their justification, militias were able to steadily gain new recruits for the civil war in Syria from 2012 on.

52 IISS cites casualty figures of between 1,500 and 2,200 dead and almost 6,000 wounded, see *Iran's Networks of Influence* (see note 24), 111.

53 A very clear map of the Hezbollah presence in Syria in 2020 can be found in Navvar Sabban, *Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria* (Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020), [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/) (accessed 20 May 2021).

54 Philipp Smyth, *The Shi'ite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, Policy Focus 138 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015), 21–22, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/2538>. Hezbollah used the same justification, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hizballah, the Jihad in Syria, and Commemorations in Lebanon", *MERIA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2015): 8–36, [http://www.aymennjawad.org/17571/hizballah-the-jihad-in-syria-and-commemorations#\\_edn1](http://www.aymennjawad.org/17571/hizballah-the-jihad-in-syria-and-commemorations#_edn1) (both accessed 20 May 2021).

## The overarching strategic objective of Iran and its allies was the protection of the Assad regime.

The spread of the battle area to large swathes of Syria in the following years made clear that the protection of the Assad regime was the overarching strategic objective pursued by Iran and its allies. While the Abu-al-Fadl-al-Abbas Brigade quickly lost importance, other Iraqi Shi'ite militias gained power and influence as of 2013. Though only founded in 2013, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Movement of the Party of God's Nobles), led by Akram al-Kaabi, was particularly powerful. It had previously been part of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, and in the course of the fighting developed into the most visible Iraqi militia in Syria by far, as well as the one most feared by opponents. The paramilitaries of the Badr Organisation and the Hezbollah Battalions were also strongly represented. From 2013 onwards, Iraqi militias always provided about 5,000 combatants, thus balancing out to some extent Hezbollah's lack of personnel.<sup>55</sup> The main reason behind Syria's eastern neighbour not sending even more militia men was that, in 2014, Shi'ite groups were withdrawn to fight IS in Iraq. Many returned as early as 2015, but the Iraqis were not able to solve Syria's personnel problems either.

As of late 2012, the Revolutionary Guards therefore also recruited Shi'ite Afghans and Pakistanis. The Afghans were called the Fatimid Brigade (Liwa al-Fatimiyyin) or Fatimids for short (Fatimiyyoun), after the Prophet's daughter Fatima, who is particularly revered among Shi'ites. The Pakistanis were named "Followers of Zainab" (Zainabiyyoun), after the Prophet's granddaughter Zainab Bint Ali. Both militias were formed especially for the war in Syria and answered directly to the Revolutionary Guards. Many of the Afghan volunteers came from the three-million-strong Afghan diaspora in Iran. Afghans and Pakistanis became an important component of the Iranian militia army in Syria mainly due to their sheer numbers. At the height of the deployment from 2015 to 2017, the Afghan contingent with its 10,000 men must have been the largest among the Shi'ite combatants, who numbered around 30,000 in total. There were about

55 Saud Al Sarhan, "From Qusair to Yabrud: Shi'ite Foreign Fighters in Syria", *Al Monitor*, 6 March 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/qusair-yabroud-Shi'ite-foreign-fighters-syria.html#ixzz6BCftUkxy> (accessed 20 May 2021).

1,000 Pakistanis.<sup>56</sup> Losses among the Afghans were reportedly especially high since they were not as well-trained or as experienced in battle as their Arab brothers-in-arms. For years, the Fatimiyoun took part in all major military actions in Syria, alongside Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias; they continue to have a large contingent in the country.<sup>57</sup>

This militia army was decisive in helping the Assad regime to turn the tables as of summer 2015. This was particularly obvious in December 2016, when regime forces and Iran-controlled militias with Russian air support were able to take the eastern part of Aleppo, which had been in rebel hands since summer 2012. The regime's victory in the civil war seemed imminent. In 2017 the Shi'ite militias — Hezbollah, Hezbollah an-Nujaba, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and Fatimiyoun — were also involved in the offensive against IS, which moved through the Syrian desert to Deir ez-Zor and subsequently along the Euphrates towards the Iraqi border. The Iran-led militias were particularly strongly represented here since they wanted to create a secure military link to Iraq — and thus the first section of the “land bridge” between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Whether or not the Iranian leadership had already worked towards a land link before 2017 is disputed. However, when the opportunity arose, the Quds Corps proceeded with a purpose.<sup>58</sup> After taking the Syrian border town of Abu Kamal in November 2017, Tehran gained control over a direct route from Iran via the Iraqi governorates of Diyala, Salah al-Din and Anbar along the Euphrates to al-Qaim. On the Syrian side,

the connection led from Abu Kamal to Deir ez-Zor and from there via Palmyra to western Syria and Lebanon or to the Syrian-Israeli border on the Golan Heights.<sup>59</sup> In subsequent years, the Iranians and Shi'ite militias built bases and warehouses and stationed units on both the Syrian and Iraqi side. The best known is the Imam Ali Base near Abu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border, which is believed to be currently the largest and most important installation. Some of its facilities have been moved underground, suggesting that the base is intended for long-term use.<sup>60</sup>

Along with supplying Hezbollah, the land bridge primarily served to open the second front in southern Syria. This project became possible in mid-2018 when the insurrection against the Assad regime collapsed in the area south of Damascus following a large-scale offensive by regime forces and their Russian allies (Iran and its militia alliance having only a weak presence during the operation). Israel's leaders pressed Russia to ensure that the Iranians stayed at least 80 km from the border, to which Moscow reportedly agreed. Hezbollah was active in parts of that zone regardless and even recruited former rebels for the fight against Israel — inter alia, with the aim of keeping its own presence to a minimum and/or concealing it better. Nevertheless, the Russian military ensured that there were few Iranians and Lebanese in the border areas and that they were unable to build large bases.<sup>61</sup> Overall, the Quds Corps and its allies kept their distance from the Golan border and instead mostly set up position wherever Syrian government forces with close ties to Iran were in control, for example in the Druze areas east of the Syrian part of the Golan Heights.

**56** IISS estimates the Fatimiyoun to be 4,000–8,000 strong, the Zainabiyoun to be 1,000, see *Iran's Networks of Influence* (see note 24), 105. For slightly higher estimates for the Fatimiyoun, see Jones, *War by Proxy* (see note 12).

**57** For details on the Afghan and Pakistani combatants, see Nils Wörmer, “Assads afghanische Söldner: Der Einsatz der Fatemiyoun in Syrien”, *Die Politische Meinung* 63, no. 553 (November/December 2018): 32–37.

**58** For the claim that a plan for the land bridge had been worked out before 2017, see Martin Chulov, “Amid Syrian Chaos, Iran's Game Plan Emerges: A Path to the Mediterranean”, *The Guardian*, 8 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/08/iran-iraq-syria-isis-land-corridor>. For mentions of the concept by Iranian politicians and military, see David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu, *Burning Bridge. The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Military and Political Power, 18 June 2019), 13–16, [www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/](http://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/) (both accessed 20 May 2021).

**59** Iran seems to be aiming for three routes, of which so far only one — the central link along the Euphrates — is open. A map can be found in: *Iran's Networks of Influence* (see note 24), 101.

**60** Frantzman, *The Fatemiyoun, Imam Ali Base and Recent Moves* (see note 15).

**61** Armenak Tokmajyan, *How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed into a Regional Powder Keg* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Middle East Center, July 2020), 8, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Tokmajyan\\_Syria2.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Tokmajyan_Syria2.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2021).

**The Israeli government viewed the activities surrounding the opening of the second front as so threatening that it markedly increased its air attacks in Syria from late 2017 onwards.**

Israel viewed the activities surrounding the opening of the second front, added to the efforts to improve the target accuracy of Hezbollah's missiles, as so threatening that from late 2017 it markedly increased its air attacks in Syria, which had previously been sporadic and mainly directed at arms supplies to Hezbollah or individual prominent terrorists. This intensification of sorties coincided with Iran's successes in eastern Syria, which liberated a land link to Iraq for the first time. The air attacks are likely to have been an immediate response to the events in the east, even though it was an event in the Golan Heights that triggered the first substantial escalation. In February 2018 the Revolutionary Guards sent a drone into Israeli airspace, where it was quickly shot down. In reply, the Israeli air force attacked the drone base at the military airport of Tiyas (also known as "T4") between Homs and Palmyra in February and April, killing several members of the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>62</sup> This was the first time that Israel had deliberately targeted the Iranian military in Syria, and it was about more than just drones: the Israeli armed forces subsequently took aim at Iran's entire military infrastructure in southern and central Syria, which had been expanded quickly after the victory in Aleppo and the offensive in eastern Syria.

Israel's main thrust became clear on 10 May 2018 when its air force began a major attack on Quds Corps infrastructure. Israel's largest military action in Syria since 1973 destroyed Iranian command centres, logistics hubs and arms depots.<sup>63</sup> With this and further strikes, Israel managed to force the Iranians to move part of their infrastructure further north and east. In June 2018 it flew its first sortie against the Hezbollah Battalions' militiamen near Abu Kamal, far to the

<sup>62</sup> Gil Murciano, *Preventing a Spillover of the Iran-Israel Conflict in Syria*, SWP Comment 27/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2018), 3.

<sup>63</sup> Isabel Kershner and David M. Halbfinger, "Israel and Iran, Newly Emboldened, Exchange Blows in Syria Face-Off", *The New York Times*, 10 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/world/middleeast/israel-iran-syria-military.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

east, near the Iraqi border.<sup>64</sup> Israel's strategy became even more obvious throughout 2019 when the air force again intensified its campaign. As before, it struck at Iranian positions in southern and central Syria, but in the summer it broadened its attacks to include bases of militias loyal to Iran in eastern Syria and Iraq as well.<sup>65</sup>

In spring 2020 Israeli media published reports claiming that Iran was withdrawing from Syria due to the sorties. Some sources said financial problems were the reason. However, it quickly became clear that the statements were vastly exaggerated. While the Quds Corps and its allies did indeed reduce their troop numbers in Syria and closed some bases, for instance in Maadan west of Deir ez-Zor, this was more of a relocation within Syria, since the militia presence in the country remained strong in the following months.<sup>66</sup> Militias responded to the sustained Israeli air attacks inter alia by increasing their recruitment drive for auxiliary troops among local Sunni Arabs.<sup>67</sup> Locally recruited combatants are noticeably cheaper than the Shi'ite militias; nevertheless, even this mobilisation strategy must have reached its limits due to the obvious financial shortages.

Regardless of the reports of an alleged Iranian withdrawal, the Israelis continued their attacks in the Syrian-Iraqi border region – an indication that they continued to identify a growing threat there. Events

<sup>64</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen and Felicia Schwartz, "Israel Broadens Fight against Iran", *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 July 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-broadens-fight-against-iran-1531684841> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>65</sup> On Syria, see Kheder Khaddour and Harith Hasan, *The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Middle East Center, X-Border Local Research Network, March 2020), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Hasan\\_Khaddour\\_Iraq-Syria\\_Border1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Hasan_Khaddour_Iraq-Syria_Border1.pdf). On Iraq, see Alissa J. Rubin and Ronen Bergman, "Israeli Airstrike Hits Weapons Depot in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 22 August 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/22/world/middleeast/israel-iraq-iran-airstrike.html> (both accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>66</sup> Nick Grinstead, *As Iran Redeploys amid Covid-19, Russia Is Filling the Vacuum in Eastern Syria* (Washington, D.C.: MEI, 5 June 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-redeploys-amid-covid-19-russia-filling-vacuum-eastern-syria> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>67</sup> Khaled al-Khateb, "Iranian Forces Form New Groups to Boost Influence in East Syria", *Al Monitor*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/02/iran-groups-east-syria-presence-influence-recruitment.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).



escalated again around 13 January 2021, when Israel attacked more than 30 military bases manned by Iran and its allies in the east of Deir ez-Zor governorate. As in previous cases, the Iranian forces responded by moving their infrastructure into or close to residential areas, and building tunnels and underground bunkers.<sup>68</sup> Evidently the Quds Corps and its allies were not going to abandon their objectives despite financial problems and Israel's fierce retaliation. The initial dynamics of Iran's expansion in Syria has been disrupted, but Tehran has held its positions.

**68** Khaled al-Khateb, "Iranian Forces in East Syria Redeploy after Airstrikes", *Al Monitor*, 15 January 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/syria-israel-airstrikes-iran-forces-redeployment-weapons.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

# Iraq: Newfound Strength of the Shi'ite Militias Loyal to Iran

In Iraq, Iran has been pursuing a dual strategy for years. One, it supports allied organisations, parties and figures in Iraqi politics. Two, it controls militant groups that, until 2011, were fighting the US forces in the country. When IS conquered large parts of the country in 2014, Baghdad once again called on the US for help. The Quds Corps, however, simultaneously brought the militias loyal to Iran into action that it had already supported before 2011. They participated in the campaign against IS, took over control of the Iraqi sections of the land bridge in 2017, and again opposed the Americans. However, the Iraqi protests of October 2019 opened a new phase, in which Iran and its local allies came under pressure and had to accept the appointment of the fairly pro-American Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Yet the latter was unable to curtail the power of the militias loyal to Iran; the conflict between the Hezbollah Battalions and the USA continues.

## **The fairly pro-American Prime Minister Kadhimi was unable to curtail the power of the militias loyal to Iran.**

From the early 1980s, the Revolutionary Guards sought allies among the Shi'ite opponents of Saddam Hussein's regime. Following the US invasion of 2003, these opponents returned to their home country and played an important role in the country's politics. Today the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (al-Majlis al-A'la al-Islami al-Iraqi) and the Badr Organisation (Munazzamat Badr) are particularly loyal partners for Tehran. Iran also built links to other political actors in Baghdad, for instance to the Daawa Party (also Shi'ite), which supplied Iraq's prime ministers from 2005 to 2018. The many coalitions made the Islamic Republic the most important foreign actor in Iraq, along with the US, as early as 2005/2006. Just how far its influence reached was highlighted in 2010, when Quds Corps Commander Soleimani imposed Prime

Minister Nouri al-Maliki (in office 2006 to 2014) for a second mandate.<sup>69</sup> In subsequent years, it remained unthinkable for anyone to accede to this post without Iran's approval. Before 2011, Iraqi politicians had already described the Quds Corps commander as "the most powerful man in Iraq".<sup>70</sup>

In parallel, from 2003 onwards the Quds Corps established armed groups that took up the fight against the US and British troops. Initially the most important recipient of Iranian aid was the Mahdi Army of the populist preacher Muqtada as-Sadr, but as of 2004 the Corps relied on smaller groups that were easier to control. The US military called them "special groups". These were financed, equipped and, alongside Lebanese Hezbollah, trained in Iran and Lebanon by the elite Corps. The most important armed groups were Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (The League of the Righteous) under the command of Qais al-Khazali, and the Hezbollah Battalions led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. These militias carried out hundreds of attacks on the occupation forces, killing over 600 and wounding thousands.<sup>71</sup> The US military never got the special groups under control since they could always escape to Iran. The Quds Corps was thus decisive in obtaining a US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Terry Gross, *Leaked Intelligence Reports Reveal the Vast Power Iran Wields in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: National Public Radio [NPR], 16 January 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/16/796978484/leaked-intelligence-reports-reveal-the-vast-power-iran-wields-in-iraq> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Martin Chulov, "Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian General 'Secretly Running' Iraq", *The Guardian*, 28 July 2011, [www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>71</sup> On the figures, see, e.g., Kyle Rempfer, "Iran Killed More US Troops in Iraq Than Previously Known, Pentagon Says", *Military Times*, 4.4.2019, [www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/04/iran-killed-more-us-troops-in-iraq-than-previously-known-pentagon-says/](http://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/04/iran-killed-more-us-troops-in-iraq-than-previously-known-pentagon-says/) (accessed 20 May 2021).

With the withdrawal of the Americans, the Quds Corps had attained an important objective of Iran's security policy, but without US help the Iraqi state was not in a position to control Sunni terrorists. In only three years, IS was able to bring large areas of western and northern Iraq under its control. The fall of Mosul to IS on 10 June 2014 highlighted all the weaknesses of the Iraqi army and security forces. Only a day later Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki called for the formation of a "reserve army". On 13 June the country's leading Shi'ite scholar, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, issued a fatwa calling for holy war (*jihad*) against the Sunni jihadists.<sup>72</sup> The response was enormous: tens of thousands of young Shi'ite men volunteered. However, while Sistani — an opponent of the Islamic Republic of Iran — intended to encourage the recruits to serve in the army or police force, it was Shi'ite militias that primarily profited from the recruitment campaign.<sup>73</sup> In the period that followed, an alliance of around 50 irregular units evolved that called itself Popular Mobilisation or Popular Mobilisation Units (Arabic: *Quwwat al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*) and over time grew to probably more than 100,000 men.<sup>74</sup>

The new alliance was dominated from the outset by the militias loyal to Iran that had been founded in the 1980s or after 2003. The Badr Organisation was particularly strong, having emerged from an Iraqi exile unit within the Revolutionary Guards to become the most important instrument of the Quds Corps in Iraq today. From April 2005 onwards, several Badr officials were appointed interior minister in Baghdad, enabling the organisation to integrate thousands of its members into the police and other security authorities. In these cases, the Iraqi state pays militiamen who, in the event of conflict, would be loyal not to

the government in Baghdad but to Tehran. In 2014 the Badr Organisation itself stated that it had over 10,000 men under arms — leaving it unclear whether that figure includes Badr personnel in the police.<sup>75</sup> In the following months and years, Badr recruited thousands of young men as part of Popular Mobilisation. Independent sources usually cite 20,000 to 25,000 members by 2015, the organisation itself claims 50,000.<sup>76</sup> The longstanding Badr chief, Hadi al-Amiri (b. 1954), resigned from office as transport minister in September 2014 and instead took over command of the Badr Organisation's militias. Amiri is viewed as Popular Mobilisation's most important political leader and as loyal to Iran. He has repeatedly stated that he considers Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei to be the decisive religious and political authority.<sup>77</sup>

The Hezbollah Battalions are at least as important as Badr. They were founded after 2003 as a Badr splinter group in order to take part — unlike their parent organisation — in the underground fight against the US forces. How close their ties were to Badr is shown by the fact that their leader is Jamal al-Ibrahimi (a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, b. 1953), who had commanded the Badr Corps in Iranian exile in the 1990s. Like Badr, the Hezbollah Battalions were an instrument of Iran. The relationship between Muhandis and Soleimani was very close and built on trust. The Hezbollah Battalions were not demobbed after the US withdrawal in 2011 and found their new purpose in 2014 in the fight against IS. They too grew rapidly. In 2018 their combatants probably numbered just under 20,000.<sup>78</sup> By 2021 the Hezbollah Battalions had be-

72 Sistani let his deputy, Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i, read the text. Key passages can be found on Sistani's website: <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24918/> (accessed 20 May 2021).

73 Kirk H. Sowell, "The Rise of Iraq's Militia State", *Sada* (online), 23.4.2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/fa=59888> (accessed 20 May 2021).

74 For a high estimate of over 150,000 men, see Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, *Honored, Not Contained. The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2020), 21, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4125?disposition=inline](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4125?disposition=inline) (accessed 20 May 2021). The actual figure could be lower than that. For an estimate of 100,000 to 122,000 (based on figures from the Iraqi budget) see IISS, *Iran's Networks of Influence* (see note 24), 122–39.

75 Susannah George, "Breaking Badr", *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/> (accessed 20 May 2021). Both figures could be true as long as they make the distinction between the lower number of combatants and the higher number of political staff.

76 Jonathan Spyer, "Shia's Dawn: Rise of Shia Militias Shapes the Future of Iraq", *Jane's Intelligence Review* 27, no. 8 (August 2015): 40–45 (42).

77 Ned Parker, Babak Dehghanpisheh and Isabel Coles, "Special Report: How Iran's Military Chiefs Operate in Iraq", *Reuters*, 24 February 2015.

78 Inna Rudolf, *From Battlefield to Ballot Box. Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units* (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation [ICSR], 2018), 20, <https://bit.ly/363Qk00> (accessed 20 May 2021). One source cited up to 30,000 combatants in 2015, see Spyer, "Shia's Dawn" (see note 76), 43.

come the most visible, and possibly also the strongest, militia unit in Popular Mobilisation.

The third important group under Iranian control is Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, which emerged after 2003 as a militant splinter group of the Sadr movement. Its leader is Qais al-Khazali, who was initially a confidant of Sadr's before breaking with him by 2005. The Asa'ib became notorious when, on 20 January 2007, they carried out the most spectacular attack of all special groups: Khazali's militiamen forced their way onto a base near Kerbela and kidnapped five US soldiers, whom they subsequently murdered.<sup>79</sup> The US military managed to arrest Khazali shortly afterwards, but in 2011 he was released from prison in Iraq. His militia endured, and was deployed in Syria in the following years. Within Popular Mobilisation, the organisation gained a reputation for mixing politics and ideology with criminal motives, and for being particularly violent. It is believed to be responsible for numerous crimes against Sunni civilians. In 2018 it had around 15,000 active combatants.<sup>80</sup>

Overall the Asa'ib-Ahl-al-Haqq militia turned out to be less easy to control for Iran than Badr or the Hezbollah Battalions, despite its avowed loyalty to the Islamic Republic. One reason is that, while Asa'ib acknowledges the religious-political leadership of Ali Khamenei like the other two groups, it also follows the teachings of Muhammad Sadiq as-Sadr (1943–1999), who developed an Iraqi-nationalist ideology of Shi'ite Islamism during his lifetime. Since 2003 this ideology has been primarily championed by his son Muqtada. The Muqtada as-Sadr movement had its own militia called Saraya as-Salam, which also operated as part of Popular Mobilisation – but made sure to keep a distance from Iran. There were also several units in the armed alliance that acknowledged the religious leadership of Sistani, the Iran critic. However, these opponents of Iran were unable to gain decisive influence over the main thrust of the militia coalition, whose actual leaders were the particularly loyal friends of Iran, Amiri, Muhandis and Khazali. They coordinated closely with Soleimani and his people in situ.<sup>81</sup> Muhandis was officially made deputy commander of the alliance.

<sup>79</sup> Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq. Politics and "Other Means"*, Occasional Paper Series (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 13 October 2008), 50.

<sup>80</sup> Rudolf, *From Battlefield to Ballot Box* (see note 78), 19.

<sup>81</sup> Muhandis himself confirmed the close ties to Iran, see Jonathan Spyer, "Iraq Falls Apart along Sectarian Lines as

### By funding the Popular Mobilisation Units, the Iraqi state paid billions to actors that undermined its sovereignty.

Since the foundation of Popular Mobilisation, the Iraqi government has attempted to extend its influence over it. In June 2014 it created a Popular Mobilisation Committee (Hai'at al-Hashd al-Sha'bi) that directly answered to the National Security Council (and thus the prime minister); it was chaired by the National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyad.<sup>82</sup> Fayyad was thus theoretically the head of Popular Mobilisation, but his influence remained limited. In February 2016 the government decreed that the militias would henceforth function as an independent part of the Iraqi armed forces and answer directly to the prime minister as supreme commander. On 26 November 2016 the Iraqi parliament passed a bill to that effect.<sup>83</sup> From July 2019 the militias were transferred into military units, which were numbered, thus giving the impression of being regular troops. Simultaneously the government tried to bring the militias under control through financial support. The budget dedicated to them grew from about US\$1 billion in 2015 to US\$2.6 billion in 2020.<sup>84</sup> However, there is no indication that the associated objective was attained since the militias loyal to Iran continued to operate as instruments of Iranian foreign policy. In other words, the Iraqi state paid billions to actors that undermined its sovereignty.

Militarily the militias were successful. From 2014 to 2017 they took part in the campaign against IS, which was largely concluded with the re-conquest of Mosul in October 2017. The militias loyal to Iran were simultaneously acting in Tehran's interests by concentrating their energies on controlling areas and roads that were intended to become sections of the Iranian land bridge. The Hezbollah Battalions, for

Iran-backed Forces Keep Islamic State at Bay", *The Australian*, 4 July 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Renad Mansour, *Networks of Power. The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq* (London: Chatham House, 25 February 2021), 4, [www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Rudolf, *From Battlefield to Ballot Box* (see note 78), 12.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew England and Chloe Cornish, "Iraqi Militias Frustrate US Peace Hopes", *Financial Times*, 1 March 2021. For the individual budget items, see Mansour, *Networks of Power* (see note 82), 27.

instance, have since 2017 been present in the Iraqi governorate of al-Anbar as well as across the border in Syria. In the Salah al-Din and Diyala governorates further east, the Badr Organisation and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq are particularly strongly represented. The Hezbollah Battalions and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq have also progressively taken control of Baghdad airport.<sup>85</sup> The militias loyal to Iran were able to expand their positions during the parliamentary elections of May 2018. The Fath [Conquest] candidate list fielded by Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq became the second most powerful force after the Sadrist.<sup>86</sup>

**The axis-of-resistance militias undermine the state in which they operate by using their influence only in the service of Iran as well as their own particular interests.**

Despite these successes, Iran and its Iraqi allies came under pressure from 2019 onwards. The same phenomenon occurred in Iraq as in Lebanon and Syria: the axis-of-resistance militias are strong militarily speaking, but they undermine the respective state in which they operate by using their political influence exclusively in the service of Iran and their own particular interests. In Iraq it is the interior ministry which is the main arena of this shift of loyalty: the police has become an instrument of the Badr Organisation. Overall the Iraqi political system is characterised by rampant corruption, nepotism and mismanagement which have ensured – along with the constant conflicts and rapid population growth (about an additional million every year) – that the country is in a permanent economic crisis despite its wealth of oil and gas deposits.

From October 2019 to February 2020 this led to vehement protests against corruption and unemployment. The discontent had built up over a long time but had never before been discharged to this extent due to the bad security situation. Demonstrations occurred primarily in the majority-Shi'ite areas in the country's centre and south, as well as in the capital

<sup>85</sup> Robert F. Worth, "Inside the Iraqi Kleptocracy", *New York Times Magazine*, 29 July 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/magazine/iraq-corruption.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/magazine/iraq-corruption.html) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>86</sup> Margret Coker, "Iraqi Election Front-Runner Moktada al-Sadr Courts Partners to Govern", *The New York Times*, 15 May 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/world/middle-east/iraqi-election-moktada-al-sadr-government.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/world/middle-east/iraqi-election-moktada-al-sadr-government.html) (accessed 20 May 2021).

Baghdad. Demonstrators contested Iraq's entire political elite and criticised Iran's influence and the strong position of the militias loyal to it.<sup>87</sup> The Iraqi leadership reacted nervously and violently, leaving over 600 dead and thousands wounded by February. Alongside the official security forces, masked individuals were also involved in putting down the protests; many Iraqis believed that they were Shi'ite militiamen.<sup>88</sup> In November 2019 Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned. The extent to which the events put pressure on Iran and its allies was shown during the subsequent negotiations for a new government. In March 2020 Tehran had to mobilise all its influence to prevent the appointment as prime minister of Adnan al-Zurfi, who was seen as too pro-American.<sup>89</sup>

In May 2020 Mustafa al-Kadhimi was instead elected prime minister as a compromise candidate. The former chief of intelligence had the support of the USA. The fact that Iran and its Iraqi allies also accepted the proposal was a sign of weakness – although it could also have been a gamble by the leadership in Tehran that a fairly pro-American politician would be able to achieve more in the talks planned for 2020 about a US withdrawal than a head of government who was close to Iran.<sup>90</sup> Kadhimi did attempt to curtail the influence of the militias loyal to Iran. For instance, on 26 June 2020 Iraqi elite forces charged into a Hezbollah Battalion base in

<sup>87</sup> Alissa J. Rubin and Farnaz Fassihi, "A Shi'ite Holiday Turns into a Test of Iranian Power in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 22 October 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/world/middleeast/iraq-iran-pilgrimage-Shi'ite.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/world/middleeast/iraq-iran-pilgrimage-Shi'ite.html) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>88</sup> For a detailed overview, see United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the Context of Demonstrations in Iraq October 2019 to April 2020* (Baghdad, August 2020), [https://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=164&Itemid=650&lang=en](https://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=164&Itemid=650&lang=en) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>89</sup> Raz Zimmt, *Iran Faces Growing Challenges in Iraq but Is Determined to Further Its Vital Interests* (Ramat Hasharon: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 14 July 2020), 8–9, 15, [www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2020/07/E\\_172\\_20.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2020/07/E_172_20.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>90</sup> Alissa J. Rubin, "Iraq Forms Government and Picks U.S.-Backed Leader", *The New York Times*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/world/middleeast/iraq-prime-minister-mustafa-khadimi.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

southern Baghdad and arrested 14 militiamen.<sup>91</sup> However, the real balance of power became obvious a few days later when the men were released. The murder of the terrorism researcher and Iran critic Hisham al-Hashimi on 6 July 2020 is likely to have been a direct militia response to the event in southern Baghdad: Hashimi was close to the prime minister and had publicly supported the raid.<sup>92</sup> August saw further assassination attempts of activists in the protest movement who were critical of Iran. Evidently the Hezbollah Battalions were reacting like Hezbollah in Lebanon to the growing pressure since 2019: by murdering domestic political opponents.

One reason for the nervousness of the militias loyal to Iran was their conflict with the USA, which had accompanied the Israeli attacks on positions in western Iraq, and which had been escalating since late 2019. It had been triggered by missile attacks on US bases for which the US government primarily held the Hezbollah Battalions responsible. On 27 December 2019 a US military contractor was killed and several American soldiers were injured in one such attack, on K1 Base near Kirkuk. In response, US fighter jets attacked positions of the Hezbollah Battalions in eastern Syria and western Iraq. Demonstrators from the militia's periphery then marched on the US Embassy in Baghdad and set fire to a guard building. This in turn was the occasion for the targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani on 3 January 2020. Alongside him died Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the commander of the Hezbollah Battalions and de facto leader of Popular Mobilisation.

**From late 2019 onwards, Tehran had to accept a loss of influence over the government in Baghdad as well as military setbacks.**

No commander was able to adequately replace Muhandis. His successor as chief of the Hezbollah Battalions, Abdalaziz al-Muhammadawi (a.k.a. Abu Fadak), also inherited the position of Chief of Staff (the official title since September 2019) and thus the

de-facto leadership of the Popular Mobilisation. However, Muhammadawi's appointment as the new man at the head of the militia coalition was controversial since he was only one of a whole series of commanders who were becoming more known.<sup>93</sup> Yet Muhandis' death did not impact on the Hezbollah Battalions' ability to act. The unit continued its attacks on US bases, but over the years it also operated as smaller groups under new names so that the parent organisation (and thus also the Quds Corps) could plausibly deny any responsibility.<sup>94</sup> The objective was to avenge the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis and to force the US troops to withdraw from Iraq again. In the second half of 2020 the attacks became less frequent – presumably the Iranian leadership did not want to give the Trump administration a pretext for escalation and waited for the US elections instead. But after an attack on 15 February 2021, the situation took a turn for the worse again. During a missile attack on a US base near Erbil, a US military contractor was killed and several Americans injured. The attack was claimed by a new group called Saraya Auliya' ad-Dam (in English, the Companies of the Avengers of Blood), which had only entered public consciousness in August 2020. US intelligence services, however, held the Hezbollah Battalions responsible, and President Biden ordered air attacks on the organisation in eastern Syria.<sup>95</sup> Tehran had not only hit the limits of its power in Iraq, but also had to accept a loss of influence on the government in Baghdad, as well as military setbacks.

<sup>91</sup> Idem, "Iraq Raids Iranian-Backed Militia Accused of Attacking U.S. Forces", *The New York Times*, 26 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/world/middleeast/iraq-militia-iran-hezbollah.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>92</sup> Idem, "Killing of Security Analyst Seen as Message to Iraqi Government", *The New York Times*, 7 July 2020, updated 10 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/world/middleeast/iraq-hashimi-killing.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>93</sup> "US Sanctions Key Leader of Iraqi PMF, Hezbollah Brigades", *The Arab Weekly*, 14 January 2021, <https://the arab weekly.com/us-sanctions-key-leader-iraqi-pmf-hezbollah-brigades> (accessed 20 May 2021). For a list of other commanders, see Mansour, *Networks of Power* (see note 82), 7.

<sup>94</sup> On the Iranian concept of "plausible deniability", see the quotation by Michael Knights in: England/Cornish, "Iraqi Militias Frustrate US Peace Hopes" (see note 84). A list of the most important new groups can be found in Mansour, *Networks of Power* (see note 82), 12.

<sup>95</sup> Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Airstrikes in Syria Target Iran-backed Militias That Rocketed American Troops in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 25 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/25/us/politics/biden-syria-airstrike-iran.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

# Yemen: The Houthi Victory against Saudi Arabia

The Houthis in Yemen are a recent ally of Tehran's, but they have made a decisive contribution to the success of Iran's expansion since 2015. Not only have the rebels asserted themselves in the Yemeni civil war, which has been ongoing since 2014, they are now threatening Saudi Arabia with missiles, cruise missiles and drones. In 2019 they also admitted being behind attacks on Saudi Arabia which had actually originated in Iran. The manoeuvre allowed the Islamic Republic to plausibly deny its responsibility, which substantially expanded Tehran's room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis the Arab Gulf States. Despite these successes, the relationship between Iran and the Houthis is not yet as close as that between Iran and its allies in Lebanon or Iraq. Moreover, even in the event of a definitive victory, the Houthis would be taking control over a completely ruined state, which cannot survive without massive foreign aid. That would overextend Tehran.

The (pre)history of the alliance between the Houthis and Iran is rooted in the 1980s when representatives of the Zaydi minority in Yemen began to protest against Salafists proselytising in the country, who were supported by Saudi Arabia. Zaydis made up around 30 to 40 percent of Yemen's population and lived primarily in the northern highlands. They are Shi'ites, but are traditionally much closer to Sunnism than the Twelver Shia that dominate in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. From the ninth century to 1962, the leading Zaydi families – who claim descent from Prophet Muhammad and therefore call themselves "sada" (sing. sayyid) – formed the small circle from which north Yemen's rulers, called imams, stemmed. However, they lost their power in the 1962 – 1970 civil war.

The rulers of the Republic of Yemen considered the Zaydis a potential threat, which led to their political influence in Sanaa being greatly restricted, and their strongholds in the north of the country being financially neglected. Under the leadership of Husain al-

Houthi (1959 – 2004), the scion of a notable Zaydi family, a Zaydi reform movement emerged that called itself "The Believing Youth" (al-Shabab al-Mu'min). As of the late 1990s, it developed into a political movement with its own militia forces. The regime of President Ali Abdallah Saleh (in office 1978 – 2012) aggressively clamped down on the new rebel group; from 2004 to 2010 it tried in six armed encounters to regain control over the northern province of Saada and surrounding areas. But the Houthis had built up an effective guerrilla force of 5,000 to 8,000 men, which was able to hold its own against the numerically superior and better armed government troops. It demonstrated its potential especially in November 2009 when Saudi Arabian armed forces intervened on the side of the regime, but were beaten back by the Houthis.<sup>96</sup>

By the time the Arab Spring protests reached Yemen in spring 2011, the far north had largely been laid waste. As a result of the riots, in 2012 President Saleh had to cede to pressure by the Saudis and the Gulf Cooperation Council and make room for a transitional government under his then-deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. While the National Dialogue conference in the capital debated the future of the country and the government failed to get a grip on the situation in many parts of the country, the Houthis expanded their positions in Saada province and the surrounding areas. In summer 2014 they went on the offensive, marched into Sanaa in September and brought the capital under their control. Their success was facilitated by a spectacular change of sides by the deposed President Saleh, who hoped to regain power with the assistance of the Houthis; he henceforth worked with them, and turned on Hadi.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Horton, "Borderline Crisis: Saudi Arabia Intervenes in Yemen", *Jane's Intelligence Review* 22, no. 1 (January 2010): 12 – 17.

That was a momentous step since Saleh still controlled some particularly powerful parts of the army.

At this point, the Houthis were already receiving support from Iran. The professionalism with which they managed their guerrilla war from 2004 to 2010 had already led to conjecture that they were trained by Lebanese Hezbollah – who served as a model for the rebels – and by the Quds Corps. However, the Iranian leadership does not seem to have recognised the Houthis' potential until 2009 at the earliest, and increased its support in 2011 – albeit initially at a low level.<sup>97</sup> In 2013 and 2014 several ships were captured that were transporting Iranian arms to Yemen. The USA also found evidence of the presence of Iranian and Lebanese instructors working with the Houthis.<sup>98</sup> Iran increased its aid for the Zaydi militia especially after it had taken Sanaa in September 2014.<sup>99</sup> Even more heavy weaponry, money and instructors now found their way to the rebels.<sup>100</sup> Even though Tehran officially denied the assistance, Quds Corps officials repeatedly hinted at the opposite in 2014/2015, for example Khamenei's representative with the unit, Ali Shirazi, who described the Houthis as the Yemeni equivalent of Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>101</sup> For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the intensification of the relationship between the Houthis and Tehran was an important motive for intervening in the civil war in March 2015.

### Since the Houthis had no other state allies, they developed a strong dependency on Iran and Iranian arms supplies.

In 2004 Yemen's President Saleh had already described the Houthis as terrorists and – in a reference to their "Shi'ite" identity – as agents of Iran. Although this was greatly exaggerated, Riyadh accepted the assessment from Sanaa. When the Houthis expanded their influence in 2014, politicians in Saudi Arabia and the UAE pointed out more and more frequently that Iran was encircling them. Indignantly and repeatedly, they quoted the Iranian parliamentarian Alireza Zakani's boastful comment that, following the Houthi conquest of Sanaa, the Islamic Republic now controlled its fourth Arab capital after Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut.<sup>102</sup> They called the rebels a "Yemeni Hezbollah" threatening their countries just as much as Lebanese Hezbollah threatened Israel.<sup>103</sup> This equation was greatly exaggerated since Iran's relations with the Houthis are not nearly as close as with the Lebanese organisation. Ideology is one foundation of cooperation, and the Houthis are linked to the Islamic Republic primarily by their enmity towards the USA, Israel and – in first place for the Yemeni militia – Saudi Arabia. By contrast, Khomeinism and the doctrine of the rule of the religious jurist play no part in their worldview. The rebels see Iran above all as their only supporter. Since the Houthis have no other state ally, they have developed a strong dependency on Tehran and especially on Iranian arms supplies.

The relationship between the Houthis and Iran became even closer from 2015 onwards. This was partly due to the rebels' successes in the fight against Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their Yemeni allies. First the Houthis got rid of their ally Ali Abdallah Saleh, whom they murdered in December 2017 (because he had indicated his desire to change sides to Saudi Arabia), which finally secured their rule over Sanaa. Militarily they asserted themselves in the northern highlands, where they were never seriously challenged from 2015 to 2021, and where they rearranged the administration of the area they controlled in the

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment", *International Affairs* (Oxford) 92, no. 3 (Mai 2016): 647–63 (656).

<sup>98</sup> Gerald Feierstein, "Iran's Role in Yemen and Prospects for Peace", *The Iran Primer*, 5 December 2018, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2018/dec/05/iran%E2%80%99s-role-yemen-and-prospects-peace> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>99</sup> Sam Jones and Simeon Kerr, "Mystery Deepens over Iranian Cargo Ships en Route to Yemen", *Financial Times*, 22 May 2015.

<sup>100</sup> Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Iranian Support Seen Crucial for Yemen's Houthis", *Reuters*, 15 December 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-houthis-iran-insight-idUSKBN0JT17A20141215> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>101</sup> Nima Adalkah, "Iranian Perspectives on Yemen's Houthis", *Terrorism Monitor* 13, no. 13 (26 June 2015): 4–5 (4), [https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/TerrorismMonitorVol13Issue13\\_01.pdf](https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/TerrorismMonitorVol13Issue13_01.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>102</sup> Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Role in the Yemen Crisis", in *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen*, ed. Stephen W. Day and Noel Brehony (Cham et al., 2020), 149–64 (154).

<sup>103</sup> See, e.g., Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, "The War in Yemen", *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016): 157–86 (163f.).



way that best suited them – inter alia, by restoring and cementing the dominant role of the leading Zaydi “Sayyid” families, and establishing a de-facto imamate under Abd al-Malik al-Houthi.<sup>104</sup> They also reacted to Saudi Arabian attacks, which came almost exclusively from the air, by penetrating into the neighbouring country’s territory and firing ballistic missiles and later cruise missiles and battle drones at it. At the start of the war, the Houthis were still using rockets from the Yemeni army arsenal. More and more frequently, however, these were replaced by Iranian models with a markedly greater range. Once the Saudi Arabian air defence systems had adjusted to the bombardment, and increasingly managed to shoot down their missiles, from 2018 onwards the Houthis changed to cruise missiles and drones. In June 2019, for example, the rebels repeatedly attacked the civilian airport at Abha in south-western Saudi Arabia.<sup>105</sup> While the missiles caused no great damage, they demonstrated to the Kingdom’s leadership and population how vulnerable the country was.

It was an advantage for the government in Tehran that the Houthis’ new capabilities enabled Iran to deny responsibility for its own missile attacks. This became clear for the first time in May 2019 when drones damaged the pumping station near Afif of a pipeline that leads right across Saudi Arabia from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. The Houthis claimed the attack, but US intelligence services quickly came to the conclusion that the missiles had been fired from Iraq.<sup>106</sup> Even more dramatic was an assault on 14 September 2019, during which the Saudi Arabian oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais were struck by cruise missiles and drones. Once again the Houthis assumed responsibility, and Tehran insisted that it had nothing to do with the attack – but it quickly became obvious that the missiles had been launched from Iran.<sup>107</sup>

**104** Abd al-Malik is a younger brother of Husain al-Houthi and succeeded the latter as the movement’s leader. Their father, the religious scholar Badr al-Din (1926 – 2010), acted as religious leader.

**105** Vivian Yee, “Houthis Strike Saudi Airport, Escalating Yemen Conflict”, *The New York Times*, 12 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/12/world/middleeast/saudi-airport-attack.html> (accessed 20 May 2021).

**106** Isabel Coles and Dion Nissenbaum, “U.S.: Saudi Pipeline Attacks Originated from Iraq”, *The Wall Street Journal Online*, 28 June 2019.

**107** A UN report identified the drones and ballistic missiles used in the attacks on Afif, Abha, Khurais and Abqaiq as being of Iranian provenance, see Michelle Nichols, “Arms

These events, and the PR that accompanied them, show that the relationship between Iranians and Houthis was already markedly closer in 2019 than in 2014: the rebels were taking great risks on behalf of their allies. The attack on Abqaiq and Khurais had hit the hub of the world’s petroleum supply, and for around a fortnight removed five percent of the world’s production from the markets. While there was ultimately no military reaction from the US, it could have been directed against the Houthis as well. The impression was growing both in the region and beyond that the rebels were acting ever more blatantly as Iran’s client. News reports of the strict Islamic regime run by the Houthis domestically also strengthened concerns that their rapprochement with Iran might also have a religious-ideological aspect.<sup>108</sup>

During this phase, the war in Yemen developed in a way that favoured the Houthis. Under US pressure, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had stopped their attack on the important port city of Hudaida on the Red Sea in December 2018. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had probably hoped to force the Houthis to agree to negotiations and far-reaching concessions once they had been driven out of the strategically important city. Refraining from this offensive pushed any hope of victory into the remote future, and the UAE largely withdrew from the conflict. Saudi Arabia could thus no longer win the war for two reasons: the weakness of its army and the intense quarrels within the domestic Yemeni alliance. The most significant line of conflict ran between the camp of the internationally recognised President Hadi, supported by Saudi Arabia, and the south Yemeni separatists under the leadership of Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, who could rely on the UAE’s help. Since 2017 there have been several violent encounters in the port city of Aden between forces from the two sides. Despite a peace agreement signed by Hadi and al-Zoubaidi in Riyadh in November 2019, they could not agree on a joint approach. This led to a situation in 2020/2021 where the Hadi government mainly held onto areas near the Saudi Arabian border, such as the province and town of Marib, and in northern Hadramaut. The south Yemeni separatists

Seized by U.S., Missiles Used to Attack Saudi Arabia ‘of Iranian Origin’: U.N.”, *Reuters*, 12 June 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-un-idUSKBN23J08C> (accessed 20 May 2021).

**108** For these reports, see, e.g., “Yemen and Iran: The Houthi Model of Government”, *The Economist*, 8 February 2020.

were in a position of strength in Aden and its adjacent provinces and along the south coast.<sup>109</sup>

**If Saudi Arabia continues the conflict, it would mean prolonged high costs and risks without any prospect of victory.**

The change in US presidents further weakened the Saudi Arabian position. President Obama had supported the Kingdom's approach to Yemen so as to make clear that the nuclear agreement signed with Iran in 2015 did not signal any rejection of the existing alliance with Riyadh. The Trump administration even increased military and diplomatic help for the Kingdom and — one day before President Biden took power on 20 January 2021 — put the Houthis on the US terrorism list. The new US government reversed this decision, announced that military support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen would cease, and held indirect talks with the Houthis in Oman.<sup>110</sup> The Houthis seem to have interpreted these advances as an encouragement to hold to their aim of expansion in Yemen and in the conflict with Saudi Arabia, at least in the short term. In Yemen they continued the large-scale offensive that they had begun in the first half of 2020. At the time, they had advanced against Hadi government troops in al-Jauf and Marib provinces, and taken the town of al-Hazm, the capital of al-Jauf, on 1 March.<sup>111</sup> In early February 2021 they began a new attack on the town of Marib, formerly a provincial town of 400,000 inhabitants, but now swollen to 2.7 million due to the conflict, and the unofficial capital of the Hadi government (Hadi himself mostly stayed in Riyadh).<sup>112</sup> The assault showed that the Houthis were dominated by hardliners, who wanted to exploit the weakness of their Yemeni oppo-

nents for a possibly decisive strike.<sup>113</sup> Victory in Marib would bring the Houthis very close to their overriding goal of gaining complete control over former North Yemen.

However, the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia were more revealing of their relationship with Iran. They claimed responsibility for the attacks on the important oil storage yard at Ras Tanura in the Persian Gulf and on further targets in the southwest of the Kingdom on 8 March 2021. These were carried out at about the same time as assaults by Iraqi militias loyal to Iran on the US base in Iraqi Kurdish Erbil on 15 February 2021, as well as two similar attacks in Iraq in early March.<sup>114</sup> The coincidence suggests that these acts were coordinated, which would in turn attest to sustained and close cooperation between Iran, the Houthis and the Iraqi militias. Similarly, the particularly important and experienced commander of the Quds Corps, General Abdul Reza Shahlai (a.k.a. Hajji Yusuf), allegedly acted as Iranian representative in Sanaa, at least in 2019 and 2020.<sup>115</sup> For the Corps, the alliance has been a clear success. Saudi Arabia's Yemen policy has been faced with a dilemma since 2019: if the Kingdom ends the war as it currently stands, it would amount to a defeat since it can no longer compel the Houthis by military force to make concessions. Continuing the conflict, however, means prolonged high costs and the risk of further Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia's towns and critical infrastructure, without Riyadh having any prospect of victory.

**If the war ever ends, sooner or later, the Houthis will rule a country entirely in ruins.**

The military successes of the Islamic Republic in Yemen nevertheless conceal longer term problems which substantially diminish the significance of Iran's gain in influence. Yemen is the poorest country

<sup>109</sup> Noel Brehony, "War in Yemen: No End in Sight as the State Disintegrates", *Asian Affairs* 51, no. 3 (2020): 510–27 (517–19).

<sup>110</sup> Sarah Dadouch, "Houthis Claim Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities", *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2021.

<sup>111</sup> Nadwa Al-Dawsari, *Running around in Circles: How Saudi Arabia Is Losing Its War in Yemen to Iran* (Washington, D.C.: MEI, 3 March 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/running-around-circles-how-saudi-arabia-losing-its-war-yemen-iran> (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>112</sup> Bethan McKernan, "Yemen War: Mass Displacement Fears as Fighting Intensifies in Marib", *The Guardian*, 12 March 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Raiman al-Hamdani and Helen Lackner, *Talking to the Houthis: How Europeans Can Promote Peace in Yemen* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations [ECFR], October 2020), 14 f., [https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/talking\\_to\\_the\\_houthis\\_how\\_europeans\\_can\\_promote\\_peace\\_in\\_yemen.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/talking_to_the_houthis_how_europeans_can_promote_peace_in_yemen.pdf) (accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>114</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "Who Bombed the Saudi Oil Storage Yard at Ras Tanura?" *Jerusalem Post*, 11 March 2021.

<sup>115</sup> John Hudson, Missy Ryan and Josh Dawsey, "On the Day U.S. Forces Killed Suleimani, They Targeted a Senior Iranian Official in Yemen", *The Washington Post*, 10 January 2020, <https://wapo.st/3qCDkrv> (accessed 20 May 2021).

in the Arab world, and its economy was already in a bad state even before the outbreak of war in 2014. In 2020 and 2021, the situation dramatically worsened.<sup>116</sup> In 2018 a famine could only be averted with foreign help. Millions of Yemenis have not had enough to eat for years; two-thirds of the population depend on food aid. Diseases such as cholera and diphtheria are widespread, and large parts of the infrastructure are destroyed. If the war ever ends, sooner or later, the Houthis will rule a country entirely in ruins that struggles greatly to cover even the basic needs of its population. Even if the rebels prevail in northern Yemen, they will be an extremely weak ally, requiring not just military but also humanitarian aid and aid for reconstruction over years and decades to come.

**116** Brehony, “War in Yemen” (see note 109), 515.

# Recommendations

If it were not for Israel's continued resistance, and the ongoing US presence in Iraq, Syria and the Arab Gulf States, the Middle East would be on the verge of Iranian hegemony. However, the military strength of the axis of resistance is accompanied by immense political and economic weaknesses, which have become increasingly apparent since 2018. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is nervous because the anti-government protests demonstrate how dissatisfied the people are with the dominance of the Shi'ite party and its corrupt allies in Beirut – although the demonstrators did not actually have the power to weaken Hezbollah's position. In Syria, the Iranians and Shi'ite militias are under Israeli military pressure, with the result that Iran's expansion has become far less dynamic there, even if Tehran has been able to hold its positions so far. However, the Assad regime is so weak economically and financially that Iran will have to prop it up for years to come to prevent its collapse. In Iraq, Tehran not only had to give up part of its influence over the government in Baghdad, but also accept military setbacks in the fight against the USA. Here, as in Lebanon, demonstrators have fought back against the predominant role of Iran and its allies, and the mismanagement and corruption that partly result from it. In Yemen, Iran's prospects for a victory by its allies, the Houthi rebels, are good, but such a victory could lead to a division of the country into two, three or more parts. Moreover, the economic situation is so disastrous that Yemen is likely to remain a failed state for years.

This context leaves Western policymakers little leeway for counter-measures. Germany's and the EU's options for actions primarily depend on whether the ongoing negotiations over the nuclear agreement between the USA and Iran lead to success. However, even though that is precisely what the Biden government has called for, it is highly unlikely that Iran will even be willing to discuss its territorial gains of the past years. Its "forward defence" in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen is an integral part of its military strategy. This is why answers must be found to Iran's expansion independently of the outcome of the nuclear

negotiations. Germany and Europe need to create guidelines for their approach to the axis of resistance, which could develop in one of three key directions:

One, the Europeans could accept Iran's hegemony. The military strength of the country and of its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen favours this policy. However, quite apart from the issue of whether this would encourage Tehran to engage in further expansion against the strategically much more important Arab Gulf States, the Iranians have not managed in any of the above-mentioned countries to translate their military successes into political stabilisation. On the contrary, Tehran's approach in the region promotes state failure since corruption, mismanagement and the consequences of the recent wars have not only provoked protests (which in Lebanon and Iraq were primarily ended by the Covid-19 pandemic), but have also displaced millions of these countries' inhabitants so far. If the Quds Corps and its allies continue to reign, more people in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen will probably decide against remaining in their home countries and start the journey towards Europe. Additionally, their military successes are not comprehensive due to a lack of political measures. The reasons underpinning the rise in Sunni terror groups – i.e. above all the suppression of Sunni Arab populations – have not changed in Syria and Iraq. Islamic State (IS) is currently regaining in strength underground. Iranian hegemony would probably increase the risk of attacks by terror groups hostile to Iran and, in the longer term, lead to further destabilisation.

The second, diametrically opposed option would be to broadly push back Iran's expansion, by combining measures up to and including military attacks. On the positive side, it would be easy to persuade important EU (and US) allies for such an approach; in fact, they have already taken corresponding steps without prior consultation with their Western partners. Saudi Arabia and the UAE tried this approach with their intervention in Yemen in 2015, but failed. Since 2017 Israel has used attacks on Syria and Iraq in an attempt to contain Iran's expansion there. On the negative side, the experiences of US troops in Iraq after 2003,

Israel's war against Hezbollah, and the Houthis' successes in Yemen demonstrate the difficulties modern armies have in fighting irregular forces, as well as the substantial strength of the Quds Corps and its allies. Moreover, Iran's attacks in Saudi Arabia in September 2019 proved that it can seriously disrupt the Gulf States' oil supply to the world economy. The result of such a strategy would therefore also be lasting instability and perhaps even a defeat.

That leaves the third and (by far) best option of a containment strategy, whose long-term goal is an end to Iran's expansion in the above-mentioned four countries, but which is based in the short term on a clear understanding of the position of strength occupied by Iran and its allies. Opponents of the Islamic Republic would adopt a two-pronged approach. One of the components would be to impose the most far-reaching isolation and sanctions possible against Iran's armed partners. As a first step, this would mean adding Lebanese Hezbollah, the Hezbollah Battalions, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, and other militias loyal to Iran including their leaders to all relevant terrorism lists from which they are currently absent. The USA have been much clearer in this respect than the Europeans, which have so far not even been able to agree on adding Hezbollah as a whole — despite the organisation carrying out an attack on Israeli tourists in the EU member state of Bulgaria on 18 July 2012, killing seven people. Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias are integrated organisations that cannot be subdivided into independent "good" and "evil" segments, as the listing of a Hezbollah "military wing" by the EU in 2013 seems to suggest.

Such a strategy would greatly depend on the outcome of the negotiations on the nuclear agreement. If an agreement is reached and the USA withdraws sanctions, there is a risk that Iran might use the freed-up money to continue its policy of expansion and further increase support for its allies in the axis of resistance. Such a development would not change the need to confront Iran in the Middle East. However, if there is no new agreement about Iran's nuclear programme, there would be no alternative to a resolute containment policy including the Islamic Republic itself. In that scenario, Germany and the EU must also consider whether Iranian institutions and actors — above all the Quds Corps — should also be listed. The latter's close ties to unequivocally terrorist organisations such as Lebanese Hezbollah recommend this step in any case.

As part of a containment strategy, Europe and the USA should jointly support Iran's opponents in

Lebanon, Syria and Iraq so as to pre-empt a further gain in power by Tehran. What this might entail was shown by NATO in February 2020, when it announced that it would augment its training and advisory mission for the military in Iraq to 4,000 men. Officially this decision is about training the Iraqi armed forces for the fight against IS, but a further, undeclared objective is to strengthen an institution over which Iran's influence is weak. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi is no friend of Tehran's and its allies in Iraq; his requests for aid for reconstructing the country should therefore be met.

A similar approach would suggest itself in Lebanon, where the army keeps an eye on Hezbollah from a distance, though it was forced to cooperate with it in the fight against IS, sometimes closely. Any aid for the reconstruction of Lebanon must not benefit Hezbollah or its allies. In Syria the leeway for Europeans is smaller. It would nevertheless be advisable for Europe to share the burden of fighting IS with the Americans, who still have some 900 personnel in the east of the country — both to combat IS and to prevent a further expansion of the Iranian land bridge. If the Americans decide to stay, Germany and Europe should also offer to deploy forces. Moreover, they should work towards relieving tensions between the Kurdish People's Defence Units (effectively the Syrian PKK), which are backed by the USA, and Turkey. Maintaining the sanctions against the Assad regime would also be a vital element of such a strategy. However, it would not do to facilitate reconstruction in Syria since such a commitment would remove a great burden from Iran.

Only Yemen would be a special case. Tehran's influence over the Houthis is still weaker than over Hezbollah and other groups loyal to Iran. Initially the key objective would be to sound out whether it is possible to persuade the Houthis to withdraw from the Iranian camp. For this, Europe (and the USA) would need to accept that the Houthis have won the war and thus gained control over northern Yemen, and offer aid for reconstruction. However, if the Houthis opt for the axis of resistance in the long term, then a containment strategy similar to the one in Iraq and Lebanon should be applied. Listing the Houthis as terrorists would be a first step. Whether there will be a partner for such a strategy within the country mainly depends on future developments in the war. Currently, the most likely scenario is a division of Yemen into at least two states, or else a disintegration into several smaller entities.

## Abbreviations

AEI	American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
IISS	The International Institute for Strategic Studies (London)
MEI	Middle East Institute (Washington, D.C.)
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
UAE	United Arab Emirates

