

Iranian proxies in the Syrian conflict: Tehran's 'forward-defence' in action

Shahram Akbarzadeh, William Gourlay and Anoushiravan Ehteshami

Shahram Akbarzadeh is Professor of Middle East and Central Asian Politics and Convenor of Middle East Studies Forum at Alfred Deakin Institute, Deakin University, Australia. His latest publications include the Routledge *Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East* (2020) and (with M Pargoo) *Presidential Elections in Iran* (2021).

William Gourlay is a Research Associate at the Middle East Studies Forum at Alfred Deakin Institute, Deakin University, Australia. His research focuses on issues of ethnicity, minority and national identities, and conflict in the Middle East. His research has been published in journals including *Third World Quarterly*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* and *Ethnopolitics*. He is the author of *The Kurds in Erdoğan's Turkey* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

Anoushiravan Ehteshami is Professor of International Relations in the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University. He is also the Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Chair in International Relations and Director of the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme in International Relations, Regional Politics and Security. He is, further, Director of the Institute for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies (IMEIS) at Durham, one of the oldest and noted centres of excellence in Middle Eastern studies in Europe.

Iranian proxies in the Syrian conflict: Tehran's 'forward-defence' in action

Abstract:

Iran's increasing presence in the Middle East and its deployment of proxy forces to fight in regional conflicts are regarded by critics as an indication of hegemonic intent. The Iranian leadership advances an alternative account of Iran's regional posture as a defensive response to security threats, most notably from the US, Israel and more recently the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). According to this viewpoint, Iran is aiming to maximise its security rather than its power. This article examines Iran's actions as a 'forward-defence' strategy. It focuses on Iran's deployment of proxy forces in the Syrian conflict as an example of the strategy, that is, adopting a proactive stance outside its borders in order to forestall threats to its territory. We argue that Iran's 'forward-defence' strategy may offer some practical benefits, by shaping strategic realities on the ground, and performative benefits, allowing Tehran to propagate discourses that highlight Iranian military preparedness, the better to deter regional enemies. On balance, however, we argue that the strategy has fed suspicions of Iran's intentions and increased hostility towards the Iranian leadership. While Iran may have won short-term advantage in Syria, in the long run the 'forward-defence' model creates considerable antagonism against Iran and is likely to be counterproductive.

Key words: Iran, Syria, forward-defence, proxy forces, security dilemmas

Introduction

In October 2017, the Iranian press splashed images of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp's (IRGC) General Qassem Soleimani amongst soldiers of the Iran-backed Fatemiyoun Brigade, in Deir Ezzor, eastern Syria.¹ A proxy force made up principally of Shiite Afghans,

¹ 'Fatemiyoun Brigade Advancing against Da'esh in Syria', *Tehran Times*, 5 October 2017, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/417310/Fatemiyoun-Brigade-advancing-against-Daesh-in-Syria>

the Fatemiyoun Brigade was then involved in a campaign against ISIS, fighting in the name of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. For some observers, Iran's highly visible role in the Syrian conflict, and conflicts elsewhere, as exemplified by Soleimani's 'selfies' alongside Shiite militias,² revealed Tehran's hegemonic intent, a desire to maximise its power and assert its purportedly rightful position as regional leader.³ According to this logic, Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's elite Quds Force, was the architect, and the Shiite militias the workforce that would bring this idea to life.

An alternative viewpoint posits that in a tense regional environment, Iran's strategic posture is one of 'forward-defence'. That is, by building influence in neighbouring states and establishing a defensive network outside the homeland, Iran aims to maximise its security rather than its power.⁴ Indicative of this mindset, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani remarked after Soleimani's assassination by US missile strike in Iraq that he was 'Iran's border guard'.⁵ This characterisation stands in marked contrast to Soleimani's reputation as the 'mastermind' behind Iran's expansion.⁶

In this article we analyse Iran's involvement in Syria since 2011, in particular its deployment of proxies in defence and support of its ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Viewing these phenomena within Iran's geopolitical and strategic environment, we examine how the use of proxies fits within Iran's idea of 'forward-defence' and how effective it has been in bolstering

² Siobhan O'Grady, 'Iran's Selfie General Seems To Be in Syria Posing for Pics', *Foreign Policy*. 10 November 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/10/hes-back-irans-selfie-general-seems-to-be-in-syria-posing-for-pics/>

³ Michael Young, 'Is the United States Capable of Containing Iran's Influence in the Middle East?' Carnegie Middle East Center. 21 December 2017. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/75060>

⁴ Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century*, (Georgetown University Press, 2019); Ariane Tabatabai, 'Other Side of the Iranian Coin: Iran's Counterterrorism Apparatus', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41/1-2 (2018), 182

⁵ 'President at Cabinet Session: We Must Preserve Gen. Soleimani's Legacy', Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 January 2020, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/571386>

⁶ Hanna, Andrew, 'Soleimani: Mastermind of Iran's Expansion'. *The Iran Primer*. 14 October 2019. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/oct/14/soleimani-mastermind-iran%E2%80%99s-expansion>

Iran's national security. To do this we analyse statements from Iranian policy-makers and military figures, including interviews, speeches, newspaper columns and official statements. We incorporate perspectives from different figures and offices within Iran's political and military apparatus, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, then President Hassan Rouhani, the IRGC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, drawing on a range of regime- and IRGC-aligned media in Farsi, such as *Kayhan*, *Tasnim* and *Mehr*, and in English, such as *Tehran Times* and the *Islamic Republic News Agency* (IRNA).

In analysing official discourse on Syria, the Syrian conflict and the roles of proxies in the conflict, we argue that Iran's 'forward-defence' policy serves two purposes. First, from a practical perspective, it affects facts-on-the-ground. In Syria, it has resulted in the impairment and defeat of anti-Assad forces, the establishment of Iranian military bases in the Syrian countryside and the maintenance of the al-Assad regime. Second, from a performative perspective, highlighting these facts-on-the-ground allows Tehran to highlight the Axis of Resistance and trumpet Iranian fortitude and military preparedness. These discourses are directed at two audiences: international, to assert strength and to forestall encroachment from adversaries; and, domestic, as mechanisms to enhance national solidarity and support for the regime. Yet, as alternative perspectives of Soleimani – as either 'border guard', or "mastermind" of expansion – illuminate, Iran's activities and regional postures may be interpreted as defensive or offensive. Questions thus arise whether Tehran's posture of "forward-defence" in Syria enhances Iranian security or catalyses a security dilemma that unsettles Iran's adversaries, spurring them to actions that may undermine Iran's national security. On balance, we argue that the strategy has fed suspicions of and hostility towards Iran. So, while Iran may have won short-term advantage in Syria, in the long run the "forward-defence" model is likely to be counterproductive.

In examining Iran's "forward-defence" strategy, we divide this article into five sections. The first examines Iran's relationship with Syria and the role that it has played in the Syrian conflict since 2011. The second considers Iran's regional posture and the ways in which it is variously interpreted – as offensive or defensive – and how this relates to theoretical debates about power and security in the formulation of foreign policy. In light of this, the third section examines the context within which Iran's military doctrine has been formulated, focusing on the place of Syria within its regional calculus. The fourth section analyses the extent of Iran's involvement and deployment of proxy forces in Syria and the ways in which these afford Iran both practical and performative benefits. The final section examines the wider strategic implications of, and reactions to, Iran's "forward-defence" policy in Syria, before offering some concluding statements.

Background: Iran and the Syrian conflict

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Assad regime in Damascus enjoy a strong, long-standing relationship. Syria remains Iran's only ally in the Arab world, the alliance fuelled by shared animosity to the US and Israel. Through affinity and common strategic interests, Damascus and Tehran anointed themselves members of an 'Axis of Resistance'. This relationship became more critical as events unravelled in Syria from mid-2011, when Arab leaders admonished Assad and expelled Syria from the Arab League. Iran was the only Middle Eastern state that stood by Assad, although for some time Tehran was coy about its involvement. Defence Minister Ahmad Vahidi declared in mid-2013 that Iran had neither military forces in Syria nor plans to deploy any.⁷

Despite denying involvement, Tehran intervened to protect Assad. Iranian support extended from a line of credit and military hardware to surveillance equipment and, crucially, IRGC

⁷ 'Iran Denies Sending Troops to Syria', IRNA, 25 May 2013, <https://en.irna.ir/news/80671287/Iran-denies-sending-troops-to-Syria>

military trainers and advisers.⁸ From the outset, the IRGC, in particular the Quds Force that is charged with overseeing Iran's foreign military activities, assumed a central role. A Syrian opposition news service recorded former IRGC commander Hossein Kanani Moghadam stating 'the resistance had a joint operations room' in Syria, where Iranian agents, Hezbollah officers and others coordinated operations to support the Assad regime.⁹ Yet, even with such support, Assad's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) was soon forced into retreat, losing key cities to opposition forces. This spurred the IRGC to deploy elements of its proxy network, first Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and then several Shiite militias from Iraq. Finally, it began recruiting Shiites from Pakistan and Afghanistan into the Zaynabiyoun and Fatemiyoun brigades, respectively.¹⁰

Other regional powers – the Gulf states, Turkey, Russia and, eventually, the US – entered the conflict. As each cultivated their own proxy forces, the anti-Assad opposition fragmented, seeing a profusion of sub-state actors, many of increasingly hard-line-Sunni persuasion. Despite Iran's increasing deployment of (mostly Shiite) proxies, Assad remained in retreat. By mid-2015, Israeli military officials argued that Assad was confined to a 'rump state', estimating that rebels controlled three-quarters of the country.¹¹ However, the tide of war turned in favour of Assad. With the September 2015 intervention of the Russian air force Assad won control of the skies, giving him significant advantages over opposition forces. Meanwhile, on the ground, Iranian-backed proxies played critical roles as foot soldiers in

⁸ Shahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit, 'Charting a New Course? Testing Rouhani's Foreign Policy Agency in the Iran-Syria Relationship', In: Shahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit (eds) *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2016), 136.

⁹ 'Iran is the Kingdom of Evil', *Watan FM*, 14 April 2020, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_OP5AkYYtg&t=1s

¹⁰ Ansari, Ali and Anise Bassiri Tabrizi, 'The View from Tehran', In: A Tabrizi and R Pantucci (eds). *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*. (London: RUSI, 2016). 5.

¹¹ 'Israel Says Syria's Assad May Be Left with Rump State.' *Reuters*, 30 June 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel-idUSKCN0PA0UQ20150630>

campaigns that saw Assad reclaim territory and reassert control.¹² The recapture of Aleppo in late 2016 was a pivotal moment; the momentum has since been with the Assad regime, which has retaken most of the country south of the Euphrates.

Iran's security policy: maximising power or security?

Since 1979's Islamic revolution, Iran's activities and presumed intentions in the Middle East have been subject to intense scrutiny. US and Israeli officials and regional Sunni elites have variously portrayed Iran as fostering a 'Shiite crescent',¹³ as attempting to resuscitate the Safavid empire, and as a 'rogue state'.¹⁴ Such views stem from assumptions that Iran maintains an expansionary foreign policy and a revolutionary outlook seeking to establish an ideologically aligned bloc, asserting itself as the dominant regional player.¹⁵ These perceptions are exacerbated by periodic hyperbolic statements from Tehran. Realistic appraisals of Iran's security policy and military capacity, however, lie somewhere between Tehran's bombast and its adversaries' alarmed commentary.

It may be argued that states develop a security outlook based on three factors: material realities, such as the 'hard power' they command; information available about the strategic environment; and the motives or goals they pursue.¹⁶ Iran is not over-endowed with 'hard power', despite its sub-state proxies and extended regional presence. In conventional military terms, it is outspent by regional heavyweights Turkey and Israel, to say nothing of the US and Russia, and, due to sanctions, its aging military equipment is no match for the state-of-the-art

¹² 'Iran's Networks of Influence: Strategic Dossier for IISS' (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2020). 103-05.

¹³ Kayhan Barzegar, 'Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*. 15/1 (2008), 88.

¹⁴ 'Iranian Regime has Transformed Country into Rogue State: Pompeo', *Arab News*. 19 December 2019. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1601336/middle-east>

¹⁵ Itamar Rabinovich, 'How Iran's Regional Ambitions Have Developed Since 1979', Brookings Institution, 24 January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/how-irans-regional-ambitions-have-developed-since-1979/>; Barzegar, 'Iran and the Shiite Crescent'. 88.

¹⁶ Robert Jervis, 'Dilemmas About Security Dilemmas', *Security Studies*, 20/3 (2011), 418.

hardware of its adversaries.¹⁷ Moreover, the US's regional presence severely circumscribes Iran's ability to act. If power is defined as a state's aggregate capabilities,¹⁸ Iran is relatively weak and considerably outgunned, key material factors that inform its security outlook. Furthermore, Iran remains diplomatically isolated, its predicament described as one of 'strategic loneliness'.¹⁹ This 'loneliness' has been apparent since the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war, when the international community turned its back on Iran and only Syria stuck by its side. Tehran's shortage of steadfast allies is a material reality that further underlines its lack of 'hard power'.

Regarding its strategic environment, Tehran remains acutely conscious of its friendlessness and military shortcomings. Iran nurses a sense of grievance and mistrust towards the international community.²⁰ This stems from its experience of abandonment during the Iran–Iraq war and is fuelled by ongoing American antagonism. Iranian defence thinking and strategy formulation takes place in a highly securitised environment following the 2001 War on Terror, the US-led invasions of Iran's neighbours on both sides and amid threats of regime change. The Iranian leadership has felt vulnerable for a long time. Instability in the Middle East since the popular uprisings of 2011, particularly in Syria, has further heightened Tehran's apprehensions. Even after signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, the Islamic regime continued to harbour a deep sense of insecurity.²¹

¹⁷ Omar Lamrani, 'Iran's Conventional Military Capabilities', NewLines Institute. 9 July 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/iran/irans-conventional-military-capabilities/>

¹⁸ Davide Fiammenghi, 'The Security Curve and the Structure of International Politics: A Neorealist Synthesis', *International Security*, 35/4 (2011), 128.

¹⁹ Thomas Juneau, 'Iran under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World', *Middle East Policy*, 21/4 (2014), 92-104.

²⁰ Marzieh Esfahani, 'Political Realism and Iran: Geopolitics and Defensive Realism', In: R Schuett and M Hollingworth (eds). *The Edinburgh Companion to Political Realism*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 437-8.

²¹ Farideh Farhi, 'Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals'. Washington: Center for Strategic & International Studies, (2017). 1.

Charles Glaser posits either security, aimed at ‘preserving control of its territory’, or ‘greed’, the impulse to expand and extend territory for prestige, ideology or religion, as key motives for states.²² This highlights the nub of debates about Iran’s foreign policy goals: is it seeking to protect its territorial integrity or is it pursuing regional domination? Iran’s motives should be considered in light of its military inferiority, lack of state allies, encirclement by US bases, historical experience of abandonment and perception of a strategic environment characterised by threats. Rhetoric from various power centres in Tehran offers insights into the concerns of policy-making elites and reveal sensitivity to these circumstances. This rhetoric indicates an overwhelmingly defensive mindset and sense of threat. Even before the Syrian conflict, IRGC commander Major-General Yahya Rahim Safavi warned that Iran was ‘in an extremely complicated situation ... we should prepare ourselves for all scenarios’.²³ Amir Hatami, the Minister for Defence, has remarked on ‘... the depth of hostilities against Iran’.²⁴ The Supreme Leader often stresses the need for vigilance, counselling, ‘We must be careful to see what the enemy is doing and to predict [what] he wants to do’.²⁵ Such statements reveal a preoccupation with security, the need to defend against encroachment or attack. Parallel to this is the refrain that Iran has never initiated conflict. As Khamenei declares, ‘In no conflicts—not even against the United States or Saddam Hussein—did [Iran] ever shoot the first bullet and, in all cases, it defended itself, after the enemy's attack, ... vigorously’.²⁶ Rouhani echoes this, arguing ‘[Iran] has never prepared to invade another country... but has

²² Charles Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). 34-6.

²³ ‘Iran Should Be Prepared for Every Imaginable Scenario’, *Mehr News*, August 30 2010, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/41629/Iran-should-be-prepared-for-every-imaginable-scenario-general>

²⁴ ‘A Glance at Iran’s Military and Defence Doctrine in 2018’, [96 سال در ایران دفاعی و نظامی دکترین به نگاهی] *Iran Press*, 30 March 2018, <https://farsi.iranpress.com/iran-i126738>

²⁵ Ali Khamenei, ‘Statements in the Meeting of Young Scientific Elites’, [علمی جوان نخبگان دیدار در بیانات] October 18 2017, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37949>

²⁶ Ali Khamenei, ‘The Second Phase of the Revolution’, 11 February 2019, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/6415/The-Second-Phase-of-the-Revolution-Statement-addressed-to-the>

always prepared... to defend and deter aggressors'.²⁷ These claims, taken at face value, suggest that Iran's motive is not greed; the emphasis is on security, protecting against the offensive actions of others.

If Iran's posture is defensive, against whom is it defending? Regime figures highlight a list of adversaries, the most common of which are Iran's arch rivals, the US and Israel. 'The root of regional insecurity is the United States,' Khamenei stated, claiming it as 'the agent of... a dangerous, evil network... called International Zionism.'²⁸ Notably, during the war in Syria, Iranian figures identified new threats, sometimes described only in abstract terms: 'takfiris' (hard-line, Sunni militants who label other Muslims *kafir* – unbeliever), 'Wahhabis' (the dominant version of Islam in Saudi Arabia) or simply 'terrorists'. This reflects a shift in threat perception as non-state groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Islamic State (IS, also known by its Arabic acronym as Da'esh) emerged in Syria. Deputy commander of Iran's conventional military, Ahmad Pourdastan, declared that Iran was now threatened by 'hybrid warfare' as 'trans-regional enemies' adopted new tactics and instruments.²⁹ Of particular concern was IS, which Soleimani cast as a sectarian threat: 'While Da'esh claims that killing Shiites is imperative, there is no option but jihad'.³⁰ Pro-government daily *Kayhan* later hailed Iran's efforts at 'weeding out this deadly cancerous tumour', alleging it was the offspring of a 'Wahhabi-Zionist-Yankee triumvirate'.³¹ Rhetoric during the Syrian conflict also highlighted Iran's Sunni neighbours. Adviser to the supreme

²⁷ 'A Glance at Iran's Military and Defence Doctrine in 2018'. Iran Press.

²⁸ Khamenei, 'Statements in the meeting of young scientific elites',

²⁹ 'Amir Purdestan: We are Facing a Threat Called "Combined War"', [جنگ "نام به تهدید از ای چهره با: پوردستان امیر"], [هستیم روبرو "ترکیبی Tasnim, 20 September 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/06/20/1515412/>

³⁰ 'Daesh to End in Less Than 3 Months: General Soleimani', *IRNA*, 22 September 2017, <https://en.irna.ir/news/82672911/Daesh-to-end-in-less-than-3-months-General-Soleimani>

³¹ 'Nightmare Grips the Wahhabi-Zionist-Yankee Triumvirate', *Kayhan*, 22 November 2017, <http://kayhan.ir/en/news/46764/nightmare-grips-the-wahhabizionistyankee-triumvirate>

leader, Ali Akbar Velayati, warned of ‘certain Arab countries’ treason’ (IRNA, 2017b),³² while former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaie alleged that Turkey was ‘working in Syria for the benefit of America’.³³

Thus the Syrian conflict saw new adversaries arise, heightening the sense of threat with which Tehran views the strategic landscape.³⁴ Elevated threats brought greater urgency to the task of building defence mechanisms, such as the ‘forward-defence’ network of proxies. This, in turn, has alarmed Iran’s rivals. As we examine below, these factors create a textbook security dilemma, drawing Iran and its adversaries into a spiral of strategic initiatives and counter-initiatives.

Iran’s military doctrine and the ‘regional security theory’

Iran prepared its first formalised military doctrine in 1992.³⁵ The trauma of the Iran–Iraq war spurred this endeavour and lessons learned therein informed key elements within it, notably the need for military preparedness, self-reliance, versatility and asymmetric tactics when confronting better-equipped opponents.³⁶ The military doctrine was thus an attempt to take account of and address imbalances between its own military capabilities (and attendant resource limitations) and those of its opponents, and, in so doing, maximise security for the homeland.³⁷ A core notion was avoiding direct conflict with opponents boasting superior technology and firepower, or at least minimising direct engagement on the battlefield.³⁸ The strategic environment has shifted considerably since 1992, but Iran has proven capable of

³² ‘Iran Co-op with Regional Countries to Foil Enemies’ Plots’, *IRNA*, 8 November 2017,

<https://en.irna.ir/news/82723733/Iran-co-op-with-regional-countries-to-foil-enemies-plots-Iranian>

³³ Mohsen Rezaie, ‘Why Did the United States Not Invade Syria?’ [نکرد؟ حمله سوریه به آمریکا چرا] *Tabnak*. 31 December 2011, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/215437/>

³⁴ Akbarzadeh, Shahram, ‘Iran and Daesh: The case of a reluctant Shia power’, *Middle East Policy*. 22/3 (2015), 44-54

³⁵ ‘Iran’s Networks of Influence.’ 15.

³⁶ Chubin, Shahram, ‘Is Iran a Military Threat?’ *Survival* 56/2 (2014), 69, 77-8.

³⁷ Ward, Steven, ‘The Continuing Evolution of Iran’s Military Doctrine’, *Middle East Journal*, 59/4 (2005), 559–576.

³⁸ ‘Iran’s Networks of Influence.’ 15.

appraising changing dynamics, and adapting accordingly, while remaining cognisant of its own shortcomings. To this end, adopting a range of flexible, interlocking defensive measures remains key to Iran's regional posture. The central elements of its military doctrine are thus missile programmes, air defence systems, a capacity for cyber warfare and the development of special operations teams that can undertake asymmetric warfare against more powerful opponents.³⁹

A distinctive feature of Iran's military architecture is that the conventional force, the Artesh, is not atop the chain of command. Over time, the IRGC has assumed the dominant position. The Artesh is tasked with protection of the homeland but increasing emphasis on asymmetric warfare and on extending the defensive perimeter beyond the homeland elevated the IRGC's role – in particular that of the Quds Force – in determining military tactics and strategy.⁴⁰

Since the US-led War on Terror, the IRGC has placed yet more emphasis on building asymmetric capacity, including decentralised command structures, and highly mobile, self-sufficient fighting units that operate autonomously, utilising rapid-response guerrilla tactics.⁴¹

IRGC Major-General Ali Jafari explains Quds Force activities as, '... helping the resistance and stability of the oppressed... in... Lebanon, Syria and Iraq where people need help.'⁴²

Evocations of 'resistance' and those who are 'oppressed' further highlight the defensive mindset that prevails in Tehran. While Jafari outlines Iran's goal to help 'the oppressed' in these countries, he also underlines the presence of 'foreign threats.' Such threats are perceived to be aimed at Iran: they are the 'depth of hostilities' that the Minister of Defence

³⁹ Hadi Ajili & Masa Rouhi, 'Iran's Military Strategy', *Survival*, 61/6 (2019), 14; Gawdat Bahgat & Anoush Ehteshami, *Defending Iran: From Revolutionary Guards to Ballistic Missiles*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁴⁰ 'Iran's Networks of Influence.' 16-17.

⁴¹ Lindermann, Marc, 'Laboratory of Asymmetry: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Evolution of Iranian Ground Tactics', *Military Review*, 90/3 (2010) 110; Ostovar, Afshon, 'The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War', *Security Studies*. 28/1 (2019), 159–188.

⁴² 'The Mission of Quds Force is to Develop the Islamic Revolution Throughout the World', [قدس نیروی مأموریت] *Kayhan*, 2 October 2014, <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/24370>

refers to, and against which it was necessary to formulate a ‘long strategic vision...’ centred on ‘build[ing] defence capabilities’.⁴³ Given the evolving nature of threats, newly arising in Iraq since 2003 and Syria since 2011, the defence of the homeland needed to extend beyond Iran’s borders. General Safavi declared in 2014, ‘Our defensive perimeter is no longer Shalamcheh...the depth of our strategic defence has reached the Mediterranean’.⁴⁴

This strategic vision has been championed as a ‘regional security theory’, published on Ayatollah Khamenei’s website. The theory, which the supreme leader credits Soleimani with devising, warns of ‘The multi-facet[ed] project to create terrorist and *takfiri* groups, such as Al-Qaida and Da’esh, ... with the purpose of re-engineering the region.’ Notably, the security of the region, rather than just of Iran, is stressed here; the theory aims to ensure ‘West Asian security and counteract Western plots’.⁴⁵ The linking of ‘West Asian security’ to Iran’s strategic plan is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it reveals fears amongst policy-makers that regional confrontations – allegedly ‘Western’ orchestrated – are precursors to attacks on Iran itself. Secondly, it offers justification for Iran’s military presence in the neighbourhood. Iranian policy-makers feel that Iran is encircled; should conflict come to Iran itself it would be directly imperilled, given its relative military weakness. A key element of this defence strategy is to forestall encroachment on Iran proper, hence its efforts to establish a defence network beyond its borders. [Such an approach enhances security by holding threats at arm’s length from where they cannot strike Iran’s territory or population.](#)⁴⁶

The Supreme Leader applauded Soleimani for galvanising the Axis of Resistance, which is key to this strategy, and highlights that it incorporates multiple nationalities, not only Iranians

⁴³ ‘A Glance at Iran’s Military and Defence Doctrine in 2018.’

⁴⁴ Shalamcheh is in Iran’s Khuzestan province on the border with Iraq. It was the site of intense fighting during the Iran-Iraq war. ‘Iran’s Strategic Depth’, [ایران استراتژیک عمق] *Tasnim*, 3 May 2014, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1393/02/13/357643/>

⁴⁵ Ali Khamenei, ‘Hajj Qassem Soleimani and the regional security theory’, 28 December 2020. <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8217/Hajj-Qassem-Soleimani-and-the-regional-security-theory>

⁴⁶ Tabatabai, ‘Other Side of the Iranian Coin’, 203.

but also Syrians, Lebanese, Pakistanis, Afghans and Iraqis.⁴⁷ Khamenei also name-checks proxy forces containing Shiite elements from each, namely Hezbollah, Zaynabiyoun, Fatemiyoun, and Hashd al-Sha'bi. These are the foot soldiers of the 'forward-defence' network. They have all been active, to differing degrees, in Syria. It is amongst these fighters that Soleimani, the 'selfie general', has posed, making them a highly visible element of Iran's regional posture.

Iranian proxies in Syria: 'forward-defence' in action

The Iran–Syria alliance, and recognition of Syrian support for Iran during the Iran–Iraq war, were key factors in Tehran's decision to jump to Assad's aid in 2011. Reports in the conservative press noted 'Syria's steadfast support of Iran during the Iran–Iraq War',⁴⁸ while Soleimani stated, 'The main reason for our defence of Syria is that Syria supported us during the war... when all Arab countries were against us'.⁴⁹ A further compelling factor in Tehran's calculation is that Syria occupies a critical position in its defensive architecture, both as member of the Axis of Resistance and as an extra-territorial barrier.

When conflict erupted in Syria, Iranian officials accused foreign powers of provoking unrest with the specific aim of disrupting the Axis of Resistance.⁵⁰ Accordingly, Iranian elites have viewed, or at least portrayed, the Syrian conflict as threatening Iran's security interests. Soon after the outbreak of hostilities in Syria, Khamenei noted Syria as a 'line of resistance' that must be upheld.⁵¹ Khamenei was alarmed about unrest in Syria from the outset. IRGC

⁴⁷ Khamenei, 'Hajj Qassem Soleimani and the regional security theory'

⁴⁸ Mohammad Safari, 'Limits of Political Expression', [سیاسی اظهارنظر حدود و حد]. *Siasat-e Rooz*, 4 September 2013. <http://www.siasatrooz.ir/vdccc1q4.2bq1i8laa2.html>

⁴⁹ 'We Did Not Take Combatants to Syria', [ایم‌نبرده ای‌رزمنده سوریه به ما], *ISNA*, 5 October 2016. <https://www.isna.ir/news/95071409366>

⁵⁰ 'Jalili Departs Damascus for Tehran', *IRNA*, 8 August 2012. <https://en.irna.ir/news/80266665/Jalili-departs-Damascus-for-Tehran>

⁵¹ 'Iranian Leader Calls Syrian Movements a Deviant Move', [خواند انحرافی حرکت را سوریه اعتراضات ایران رهبر]. *BBC*, 10 March 2011. http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2011/07/110630_u01_syria-new.shtml

commander Hossein Hamedani, later killed in Syria, observed that the Supreme Leader was initially more concerned than Assad about escalating violence. Hamedani noted that Khamenei said, ‘Syria is like a patient who does not know he is sick, you have to tell him he is sick’.⁵²

Eventually Assad realised the gravity of the situation; by then, Iranian officials had been emphasising Syria’s crucial place in Iran’s defensive orbit for some time. Hamedani highlighted its strategic location, ‘connecting the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa’.⁵³ Underlining this position, one figure close to the regime even remarked that Syria was more important to Iran than its own province of Khuzestan, stating, ‘Take Khuzestan. The priority is for us to keep Syria... If we keep Syria, we can take back Khuzestan, but if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran’.⁵⁴ Ali Akbar Velayati, a key advisor to Khamenei, drew similar links between regional dynamics and Iran’s security, insisting that any attack on Syria was an attack on Iran.⁵⁵ Mohsen Rezaie, echoing Khamenei, called Syria Iran’s ‘red line’.⁵⁶ The Iranian leadership was convinced that foreign powers were meddling in Syria in order to strike at Iran. Given Syria’s place in the resistance network and the sense that Iran was ultimately threatened, Tehran sprang to Assad’s defence.

Building on a long history of using proxies and paramilitaries, and buoyed by the effectiveness of Hezbollah’s 2006 battle against Israel,⁵⁷ Iran pursued a similar course in Syria when it became apparent that the SAA could not hold ground. Tehran directly deployed some Iranian forces, including IRGC members acting as advisors, with one estimate claiming

⁵² ‘Sardar Hamedani’s Last Interview about Syria’, [سوریه مورد در همدانی سردار مصاحبه آخرین] *Otagh Khabar*, 7 April 2015. <https://www.otaghkhabar24.com/news/18722>

⁵³ ‘Sardar Hamedani’s Last Interview about Syria’.

⁵⁴ ‘Our Priority Is To Keep Syria Instead of Khuzestan’, [است خوزستان جای به سوریه نگهداری ما اولویت]. *BBC 14* February 2013. https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij

⁵⁵ ‘An Attack on Syria Is An Attack on Iran’, *Reuters*, 26 January 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/attack-on-syria-would-be-seen-as-attack-on-iran-tehran-idUSBRE90P05620130126>

⁵⁶ Rezaie, ‘Why Did the United States Not Invade Syria?’

⁵⁷ Shahram Chubin, ‘Iran’s Power in Context,’ *Survival*. 51/1 (2009), 172.

there were up to 9,200 IRGC personnel on the ground in Syria in 2016.⁵⁸ However, proxy forces became Iran's favoured instrument. Hezbollah appears to have been the first Iranian-backed force operating on the ground. Like Iran, Hezbollah was initially reluctant to admit its involvement, but Hezbollah officials were present in the 'joint operations room', allegedly at Assad's invitation,⁵⁹ and its fighters were involved early in the conflict. The Syrian war became the largest operation Hezbollah had ever undertaken; a disciplined and hardened force, it soon played a more important role than even the SAA.⁶⁰

With time, other Shiite militias deployed to Syria. By early 2013, brigades incorporating Lebanese and Iraqi Shiites, appeared on frontlines in Damascus, defending the Shiite shrine of Sayyida Zaynab from 'takfiri' forces.⁶¹ Purported threats to such sites became a tool for the Iranian regime to recruit fighters and legitimise its involvement. Tehran claims that two of its most important proxy forces, the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun brigades, made up of Afghan and Pakistani recruits, respectively, were formed exclusively to defend Shiite shrines in Syria. A *Kayhan* report extolled Fatemiyoun as a 'spontaneous group that left for Syria' upon hearing of 'takfiri aggression' against the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab.⁶² The reality is perhaps different. First-hand accounts of Afghan Hazara refugees who became Fatemiyoun fighters relate enlisting to earn respect and wages after years of marginalisation and poverty

⁵⁸ Ansari & Tabrizi, 'The View from Tehran'. 4-5

⁵⁹ 'Iran is the Kingdom of Evil'.

⁶⁰ Nicholas Blanford, *Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player*. (Washington: Middle East Institute, 2017). 7.

⁶¹ Mariam Karouny, 'Shi'ite Fighters Rally to Defend Damascus Shrine,' *Reuters*. 3 March 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-shiites-idUSBRE92202X20130303>

⁶² 'How Was the "Fatimid" Army Formed?' [گرفت؟ شکل چگونه «فاطمیون» لشکر], *Kayhan*, 30 May 2015b, <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/46030>

in Iran.⁶³ Cash and offers of Iranian citizenship seem to be greater incentives than Shiite sensibilities for many fighters.⁶⁴

The Fatemiyoun brigade, under the charge of the IRGC, quickly expanded in size and field of operations. One Iranian report estimated there were between 12,000 and 14,000 Fatemiyoun members deployed at any one time.⁶⁵ Former IRGC General Mohammad Ali Falaki stated that Fatemiyoun was Iran's 'vanguard', lauding its fighters for their 'self-sacrifice and bravery' under Iranian command.⁶⁶ One Fatemiyoun fighter remarked that initially they were ignored in Syria, but when their fighting abilities were recognised, Iran 'sent more and more [of] us'.⁶⁷ Iranian media reports also heralded Zaynabiyoun's Pakistani fighters as unflinching in battle.⁶⁸ These militias are now considered integral to Iran's war effort in Syria and to the fighting capability of the IRGC.⁶⁹ They have proven effective fighters and been widely deployed. Syrian government-aligned newspaper *Masdar* celebrated the efforts of a phalanx of Iran-backed Shiite proxies – Fatemiyoun, Hezbollah, Iraqis, and Pakistanis – engaged in the campaign to reclaim Aleppo.⁷⁰

Deploying proxies: practical impacts

Iran's use of proxy forces as a forward-defence mechanism in Syria has demonstrably transformed facts-on-the-ground. The Syrian conflict changed the dynamics of the Tehran–

⁶³ Lars Hauch, 'Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division: Life Through the Eyes of a Militia Member', *Middle East Institute*. 22 May 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-fatemiyoun-division-life-through-eyes-militia-member>

⁶⁴ Ahmad Shuja-Jamal, 'Mission Accomplished? What's Next for Iran's Afghan Fighters in Syria', *War on the Rocks*, 13 February 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/mission-accomplished-whats-next-irans-afghan-fighters-syria/>

⁶⁵ 'Fatimid Organization was Initially a House Delegation', [بود خانگی هیئت یک ابتدا فاطمیون فعلی تشکیلات]. *Tasnim*, 20 June 2016a. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/03/29/1107833/>

⁶⁶ 'The "Fatimids" Were the Vanguard of the Syrian War', [بودند سوریه نبرد قراول پیش «فاطمیون»]. *Bultan*, 20 August 2016. <https://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/385539/>

⁶⁷ Cited in Hauch, 'Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division'

⁶⁸ Nadimi, Farzin, 'Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?' The Washington Institute. 22 August 2016.

⁶⁹ 'Iran's Networks of Influence.' 103.

⁷⁰ 'Over 1,500 Iraqi and Pakistani Shia Join Hezbollah and the Syrian Army', *Al Masdar*, 16 October 2015. <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/over-1500-iraqi-and-pakistani-shia-join-hezbollah-and-the-syrian-army-for-massive-aleppo-offensive/>

Damascus relationship, allowing Iran to entrench a military presence on Syrian soil. Iranian-backed proxies have been central to the defeat of rebel forces, which potentially posed a threat to Iranian interests. Indicative of the importance of Iranian proxies in the war effort, some observers called the retaking of Aleppo in 2016 a victory for Soleimani.⁷¹ And as territory has been secured for the Assad regime, Iran has established bases and installations across the Syrian countryside,⁷² from the so-called Alawi heartland near Damascus to the Imam Ali base near the Iraqi border.⁷³

Iran has also sharpened its military capabilities through lessons learned in Syria. Military effectiveness, namely the ways a state best employs its military resources, can be gauged – and impacted – by a range of measures, from level of integration, responsiveness, skill, and quality of hardware to strategic assessment, procurement of hardware and command control.⁷⁴ By most of these measures, Iran’s military has been extremely effective in Syria. It has responded to and defeated a range of rebel militias. It has deftly balanced integrating proxy forces, allowing them operational autonomy that enhances their lethality. Reports indicate that after swift training programmes, some provided by Hezbollah, the IRGC encourages proxies such as Fatemiyoun to operate autonomously.⁷⁵ One Fatemiyoun member recounted that, aside from being managed and funded by Iran, his militia worked strategically with Hezbollah forces.⁷⁶ This is just one indication of the levels of integration and effective coordination of different branches of Iranian armed forces under IRGC supervision. The

⁷¹ Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 86.

⁷² Saban, Navvar, 'Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria', *Atlantic Council*. 5 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>

⁷³ Al-Khair, Waleed, 'IRGC Building a New Base on Iraq-Syria border', *Diyaruna*. 5 September 2019. https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2019/09/05/feature-02

⁷⁴ Brooks, Risa, 'Introduction: The Impact of Culture, Society, Institutions, and International Forces on Military Effectiveness', In: Risa Brooks and E Stanley (eds) *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2-19.

⁷⁵ Nadimi, 'Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies.'

⁷⁶ Hauch, 'Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division.'

deployment of a range of units in such an agile fashion is the very hallmark of asymmetrical warfare to which Iran aspires. Tehran's effective use of resources at hand has allowed it to seize opportunities to further its reach and interests, often in the wake of blunders by its adversaries.⁷⁷ Buoyed by Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict in September 2015, and its aerial support, Iran has achieved considerable strategic advances in Syria and altered the course of the conflict.

The experience that various forces have gained in Syria is an important aspect of 'forward-defence'. It is conceivable that battle-hardened proxy fighters will be called upon in future and deployed elsewhere.⁷⁸ Soleimani, visiting the family of a Fatemiyoun martyr in Iran, remarked that the 'victory' of such 'resistance forces' was that they could defend Islam the world over.⁷⁹ A further advantage of the model is its diversity. While proxy-sponsor relationships are sometimes difficult, Iran, in sponsoring such a wide array of proxies, has given itself a considerable flexibility and strategic adaptability.⁸⁰ IRGC commander Hamedani remarked that the fighting machinery that Iran assembled in Syria is a 'cheap and profitable force'.⁸¹ Whether Hamedani meant that such militias are expendable or merely easy to assemble is unclear, but their military effectiveness is apparent. In Syria's complicated theatre of conflict, marked by a profusion of contesting non-state actors, Iran's proxies have proven cohesive, adaptable and resilient. No other party to the war has been able to match or counter their influence.⁸² Iran's proxy network, having gained operational and tactical experience in Syria, gives it a competitive advantage over its regional adversaries.

⁷⁷ Farhi, *Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals*. 4.

⁷⁸ Nadimi, 'Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies.'

⁷⁹ 'Fatimids Wiped the Land of Oppression from the Face of the Afghans', [افغانستانی چهره از مظلومیت خاک فاطمیون], *Tasnim*, 12 August 2016b. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/05/12/1146477/>

⁸⁰ Araiane Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy*, (London: Hurst, 2021), 289.

⁸¹ 'Sardar Hamedani's Last Interview about Syria.'

⁸² Chipman, John, 'Opening Speech'. In: *IISS Manama Dialogue: 15th Regional Security Summit*. 22 November 2019. <https://www.iiss.org/events/manama-dialogue/manama-dialogue-2019>

As the Syrian conflict has dragged on, some actors, in particular the Gulf states, with whom Iran competes, have withdrawn due to the battlefield's complex nature. Iran, in contrast, has expanded and honed its asymmetric warfare strategy.⁸³ The conflict initially drew in multiple actors who sought to remove Assad. Yet Iran's effective response, deploying its proxy forces, and its dogged support of Assad, has seen its adversaries weary of the conflict. Thus, despite emerging threats of hard-line Sunni militias and Tehran's conviction that uprisings in Syria were orchestrated by its long-standing enemies, Iran shifted the ground in its favour. Deepening relations between Iran and Syria has also brought economic benefits for both, offsetting the impacts of international sanctions.⁸⁴

Ultimately, Iran has achieved its immediate strategic goals in the Syrian conflict.⁸⁵ First, Assad remains ensconced in Damascus. A long-standing ally, Assad represents stability for Iranian military commanders. In Tehran's estimation, as long as he remains in place, Iran is more secure than if he had been replaced by a Western-aligned regime, or one of a strongly Sunni persuasion. Second, the Syrian opposition has been fragmented, dispersed and largely nullified. This particularly applies to hard-line Sunni militias, such as IS and al-Nusra, which have been effectively defeated on the battlefield and pose little real threat to Assad. While this does not amount to the reestablishment of the pre-2011 status quo, Assad is in place, remaining part of the Axis of Resistance, and Iran's defensive perimeter is intact.

Performative advantages

Iran's security is enhanced as Assad is cemented in power and Iranian military installations sprout across the Syrian countryside. These strategic developments also provide intangible 'performative' benefits that flow into Iran's security situation. Ahsan Butt outlines the idea of

⁸³ Emile Hokayem, 'Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War', *Survival* 56/6 (2014), 59–60.

⁸⁴ Geoffrey Aronson, 'The Unlikely Marriage Between Damascus and Tehran', 21 March 2019, *Middle East Institute*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/unlikely-marriage-between-damascus-and-tehran>

⁸⁵ Ansari & Tabrizi, 'The View from Tehran', 6-9.

‘performative war’, whereby actors through their determined actions and/or victories are able to enhance or reaffirm their status, reputation and position within a specific regional order.⁸⁶

Butt examines America’s 2003 invasion of Iraq as a mechanism for the US to reaffirm its position as global hegemon after the 9/11 attacks, which had undermined its prestige and reputation as a super power.

A similar analysis may be applied to Iran and its forward-defence strategy in Syria. The circumstances of Iran’s war in Syria are different – it was not responding to an attack on its soil, nor is it a global hegemon – yet the role it has played in protecting the Assad regime has considerable demonstrative potential. Initially coy about its involvement in Syria, Iran now enthusiastically highlights the role(s) its proxy forces and IRGC operatives play in various theatres. This has occurred at key junctures: as Iran-backed operatives launched new campaigns; as they achieved victories; as they defeated feared adversaries. Here Soleimani, the ‘selfie general’, was deployed to great effect, drawing the attention of international and Iranian audiences to the presence and advances of Iran-backed forces.

Broadcasting the triumphs of the ‘forward-defence’ network allows the Iranian military to address regional actors it sees as competitors, rivals and adversaries. Doing so is a means to warn adversaries, both state and non-state, against attacking Iran, or its strategic interests, while also offering an opportunity for Iranian policy-makers, famously suspicious and sensitive to threats, to thumb their noses at an international community they do not trust. An array of voices within the Iranian power structure regularly convey messages of this nature. Pro-government Iranian daily *Kayhan* boldly stated that there had been no battle in Syria where Hezbollah had not achieved victory.⁸⁷ Foreign Ministry official Ali Asghar Khaji

⁸⁶ Ahsan Butt, ‘Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?’ *Security Studies*, 28/2 (2019), 250-285.

⁸⁷ ‘Hezbollah, Syrian Army Remain Undefeated From Qusayr to Aleppo’, *Kayhan*, 18 December 2015, <http://kayhan.ir/en/news/21680/hezbollah-syrian-army-remain-undefeated-from-qusayr-to-aleppo>

taunted Israel, boasting of the prowess of Iranian proxies who were fighting IS and who would deal a bloodied nose to any ‘Zionists’ who dared to enter Syria.⁸⁸ These statements serve as warnings that Iran is not to be trifled with because its defensive network is robust and anyone provoking it or encroaching on its domain – even outside Iran’s borders – can expect resolute defence and, ultimately, defeat. Parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani put a regional perspective on Syrian events, stating that Iran’s enemies might continue to hatch plots to undermine it, but such attempts were doomed to fail due to the might of the ‘Resistance Front’.⁸⁹ Larijani’s comments reveal a degree of resignation – the perennial concern that Iran be vigilant against unrelenting enmity – yet, his message is defiant, denoting Iran’s assembled forward-defence mechanisms as impermeable. The forward-defence network thus enhances Iran’s status and reputation, and underlines its military effectiveness, even beyond its own territorial boundaries. [The communication of such messages has considerable deterrent impact on Iran’s enemies.](#)⁹⁰

There is also strategic value in boasting of the size and extent of the ‘Resistance Front’. General Yahya Rahim Safavi, military adviser to the Supreme Leader, claimed that Soleimani had established 82 fighting brigades between Syria and Iraq.⁹¹ Safavi explained that the strategic logic of the ‘Soleimani school’ was to establish a phalanx of militias in its near-abroad. Here, the pragmatic aspects of Iran’s proxy network overlaps with the performative. Such a figure appears inflated, but is difficult to confirm or refute. Iran’s network is complicated, and figures that muddy the waters serve Iran by causing its adversaries to think

⁸⁸ ‘Zionists Will Face ‘Toughest Response’ If They Cross Red Lines in Syria’, *Pars Today*, 14 February 2021, https://parstoday.com/en/news/iran-i134480-zionists_will_face_toughest_response%E2%80%99_if_they_cross_red_lines_in_syria_iranian_diplomat

⁸⁹ ‘Enemies Continue to Hatch Plots, But Fail’, *IRNA*, 29 October 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83534027/Enemies-continue-to-hatch-plots-but-fail>

⁹⁰ Alex Wilner, ‘The Dark Side of Extended Deterrence: Thinking through the State Sponsorship of Terrorism’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41/3 (2018), 410-437

⁹¹ ‘Soleimani Established 82 Brigades in Syria, Iraq’, *Asharq Al Awsat*, 12 January 2021. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2736631/khamenei-senior-advisor-soleimani-established-82-brigades-syria-iraq>

twice about entering the field. This adds deterrence to the other benefits of the forward-defence networks' performative value.

The forward-defence model is highlighted to domestic audiences. The Axis of Resistance narrative acts as a rallying point within Iran, even though who is being resisted may vary or be ill-defined: the West, Zionists or '*takfiris*.' Early in the Syrian conflict, Iranian officials highlighted – or alleged – that Shiite holy sites were under threat from anti-Assad forces. Propagating this discourse at once provided legitimization for Iranian involvement, spurred enlistment for militias within Iran – those travelling to Syria were hailed as defenders of the shrine – and reinforced the message that Shiites could fall prey to a range of enemies across the region, in particular hard-line Sunni groups more active and belligerent since the Arab Spring. Highlighting military victories and 'martyrdoms' of those rallying to the cause also serves as vindication of the regime's responses to the turbulence that afflicts the region, as well as bolstering the morale of the population. Speaking with families of Fatemiyoun brigade martyrs in 2019, commending the fortitude of the fallen, Khamenei remarked, '... the United States has been defeated in the West Asia region, including Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, through the efforts and struggle of your young children'.⁹² Once the tide of the war turned in favour of Assad, the Iranian media was able to publicise the victories of the proxy network, meaning that Tehran could underscore the lengths it goes to protect Iranian citizens from external enemies. After the recapture of Aleppo, Velayati warned that the 'West, [the] Zionist regime and their agents' had intended to hold the city 'so they could maintain their control over the rest of the region', yet, as he asserted, the forces of resistance had prevented this outcome, in so doing protecting the broader Iranian populace.⁹³

⁹² 'Khamenei Praises Afghan Martyrs', *Mehr News*, 29 March 2019, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/143674/Ayatollah-Khamenei-praises-Afghan-martyrs-in-Syria-war>

⁹³ 'Aleppo Liberation Hard Blow on Arrogant Powers', *IRNA*, 27 December 2016, <https://en.irna.ir/news/82363100/Aleppo-liberation-hard-blow-on-arrogant-powers-says-Velayati>

Iran's proxy network, the backbone of its forward-defence structure, provides practical and performative benefits that flow into Iran's broader security framework. This, however, is not without repercussions.

Wider implications of forward-defence in Syria

'Forward-defence' as a strategic posture was originally conceived by NATO, premised on defending against the Soviet Union. Even within NATO, different interpretations of the doctrine rose. One analysis from German officials posited that NATO's stance was not to seek military superiority, but was a purely defensive mechanism.⁹⁴ An alternative, US perspective framed it as a means of power projection and a reflection of the US's global responsibilities in the face of the Soviet threat.⁹⁵ There are clear differences in the geostrategic context within which Iran's forward-defence posture is formulated. Iranian officials' statements indicate that this posture is adopted to defend against several, sometimes-nebulous, opponents – the West, Zionism, *takfiris*, state and sub-state – rather than against a unitary bloc like the Soviet Union. And Iran, despite its sometimes-bloated rhetoric, cannot be construed as a super power as the US was. Yet, Iran's forward-defence posture is similarly subject to alternative interpretations.

As explained earlier, from Tehran's perspective, deploying proxy forces in regional conflicts is a central element of its forward-defence network, a means to defend the homeland by asserting a presence (or, indeed, engaging in combat) outside that very homeland. Syria is central to this idea, both due to its place in Iran's strategic calculus and the complexity of the conflict. Forward-defence in Syria has afforded Iran both practical and performative benefits that have enhanced its security position. But herein a security dilemma arises. In Syria, Iran

⁹⁴ Gerd Von Loew, 'Forward Defense in Central Europe: An Operational View', U.S. Army War College: Pennsylvania. 7 April 1986.

⁹⁵ Krisinger, Christopher, 'Power Projection Strategy: New Directions for Forward Defense', Naval War College: Rhode Island. 11 February 1991.

has elevated its military effectiveness and operational capacity, and has expanded its military footprint, in the size of forces at its command and in its territorial reach. These combine to disconcert Iran's rivals and opponents, adding fuel to a widely shared narrative that Iran has an expansionary foreign policy and is intent on establishing hegemony over the Middle East. Iran may see measures taken in Syria as necessary to enhance its security, but its opponents and rivals see their own security undermined by Iran's very actions. In other words, Iran's highly visible and expanding regional presence is a 'double-edged sword'.⁹⁶ Even as it takes action to defend against regional threats, its opponents themselves feel threatened, and thus devise their own strategies to counteract Iran.

The quicksand of the Syrian war drew in a range of regional actors. As more combatants entered the theatre of conflict, threat perceptions grew and multiplied for all concerned. With that, the geostrategic stakes rose and new points of contestation emerged. While building its forward-defence network, Iran instinctively gravitated to Shiite communities, rallying, training and sending them into the field, while evoking Shiite sensibilities, such as enjoining fighters to protect Shiite shrines. In doing so, Iran, perhaps unintentionally, exacerbated sectarian divides and inflamed Sunni–Shiite animosities. This has undone Iran's earlier PR successes, wherein Hezbollah, and by extension Iran as its most important sponsor, had previously won pan-Arab kudos for its 'victory' over Israel in 2006. Hezbollah has now lost popularity for its defence of Assad, who is widely reviled on the Arab street.⁹⁷ This is just one example where the activities of Iran's proxy network have generated antipathy against Iran among regional (majority-Sunni) Arab populations. Compounding this, a significant portion of the Syrian population opposes Assad. Thus, in protecting Assad, Iran is acting against the wishes of this constituency and undermining its own narrative of providing a

⁹⁶ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 175.

⁹⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Iran: Stuck in Transition*. (London: Routledge, 2017), 235.

model of liberty for the region.⁹⁸ Some Syrian opposition activists have argued that Iran is an ‘occupying force’,⁹⁹ an allegation that surely exacerbates widespread anti-Iran feeling among the broader Arab public. Considerable potential for blowback against Iran exists, particularly given that the conflict in Syria has been so coloured by sectarian tensions.

Moreover, Iran expends significant resources to maintain its forward-defence structure, but as long as the Syrian conflict continues it is unable to expand its network, or to pursue broader strategic goals. Russia’s impact in Syria must also be considered. Qassem Soleimani and other Iranian policy-makers reportedly played a central role in mobilising Russia to support Assad,¹⁰⁰ suggesting that Iran knew it could not defeat the Syrian opposition alone. This raises the question of how successful the ‘forward-defence’ network would be had Russia not intervened and done some of the heavy lifting in Syria. Ultimately, some argue that Iran has had a Pyrrhic victory in Syria – the costs of maintaining Assad in position will ultimately outweigh the benefits.¹⁰¹ Many Iranians are angry at the support offered to Assad when they are suffering economic privations themselves,¹⁰² and displeasure is compounded by allegations of human rights violations against the Assad regime.¹⁰³

The possibility of domestic repercussions are real, particularly when inflation and corruption are biting the average Iranian. Blowback is a risk and could unpick not only the regime’s narrative but also its institutions. At home, the regime could be exposed to further protest and deepening popular discontent and the regime’s monopoly on ‘the truth’ about Syria could be

⁹⁸ Ehteshami, *Iran: Stuck in Transition*, 242.

⁹⁹ ‘Iran in Syria: From an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force’, *Naame Shaam*, 2016, <http://www.naameshaam.org/iran-in-syria-2016/index.html>

¹⁰⁰ Michel Duclos, ‘Russia and Iran in Syria: Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?’ *Atlantic Council*, June 2019. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Russia_and_Iran_in_Syria_a_Random_Partnership_or_an_Enduring_Alliance.pdf

¹⁰¹ Juneau, Thomas, ‘Iran’s Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 25/1 (2020), 26-44.

¹⁰² Fathollah-Nejad, Ali, ‘Iranians Respond to the Regime: ‘Leave Syria Alone!’ *Al Jazeera*, 2 May 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/5/2/iranians-respond-to-the-regime-leave-syria-alone>

¹⁰³ Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*, 278.

challenged, damaging any remnants of confidence in the regime. The record-low voter turnout in the 2021 presidential election was a reminder that the regime's ability to inspire and mobilise the public is facing serious limitations. In other words, 'forward-defence' could undermine Iranian defence strategists and, ironically, catalyse a domestic threat to the regime as it looks over the horizon to counter external threats.

Nonetheless, the prospect of a long war in Syria has dissuaded major powers (particularly the US) from meaningful direct involvement.¹⁰⁴ This is partially due to the resurgence of pro-Assad forces, in which Iran has played a major hand. Iran's involvement has been effective in maintaining Assad – a key ally – in place and in dissuading the US and other Western states from deploying large contingents of troops in Syria. Iran's forward-defence posture has been a deterrent: *its adversaries perceive the cost of involvement as too high, so they have demurred.*¹⁰⁵ 'The West' chose to intervene and take the side of the opposition in Libya in 2011. Yet, despite a similar civilian-led uprising against an authoritarian leader, in Syria it has not done so. This can be attributed to the complexity and multi-sided nature of the conflict, but also fears of inflaming a broader war. Here, it can be understood that Iran's presence and posture has entered Western military planners' calculus and created enough uncertainty to scuttle plans to intervene. In this regard, the forward-defence network has performed admirably, both in winning contemporary battles and foreclosing those that might arise.

Furthermore, deploying its forward defence network to keep Assad in power maintains Tehran's narrative that Iran and its allies are forestalling the advance of the US and 'Zionists'. Had Assad fallen, there would have been greater uncertainty in Iran's 'backyard', whether a newly installed regime were US-backed or hard-line Sunni. This would have

¹⁰⁴ Ajili & Rouhi, 'Iran's Military Strategy', 149.

¹⁰⁵ Wilner, 'The Dark Side of Extended Deterrence'

greatly complicated Iran's ability to maintain Hezbollah as a client. In other words, although Iran has invested blood and treasure to keep Assad there, his ouster would have created great unknowns – and, potentially, considerable strategic threats. It is unlikely that whoever replaced Assad would have forged the same sort of relationship with Iran, or would have been as amenable to Iran's goals. Thus, Assad's remaining in power in Damascus is a strategic victory for Iran. Moreover, Tehran, for its purposes, does not need Assad to be in control of all of Syria. As long as Assad is relatively secure, he remains a useful asset, perhaps more so if he remains dependent upon Tehran.

Yet, increasing disquiet on the part of Iran's adversaries may provoke more than just criticism of Iran's behaviour. This may prompt regional actors to take action to stem Iran's reach or try to roll back its purportedly expansionist behaviour. Security dilemmas by their very nature increase tensions and these, at intervals, spill over into military action. Indeed, Israel has periodically hit Iranian targets in Syria, including new installations such as the Imam Ali base. The ongoing presence of Iran's forward-defence network in Syria leaves Tehran exposed to Israeli intelligence, surveillance, and direct military pressure. Furthermore, the successful mission to assassinate Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 underscore US concerns over his influence and the network that he created, proof positive that Iran's actions are unsettling its opponents and that they are prepared to strike.

Conclusion

Iran has considerably extended its reach in the Middle East. This is particularly visible in its forward-defence network of proxy forces, which arises out of its military doctrine centred on self-reliance and asymmetric tactics. Syria takes pride of place within the forward-defence network. Firstly, because the conflict afforded an opportunity for Iran to expand and deploy its proxy instruments, from seasoned Hezbollah units to recently recruited Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun fighters mobilised to protect Shiite holy sites. And secondly, because Tehran

views Syria as of critical importance in its defensive architecture, a ‘line of resistance’ that must be maintained.

Iran’s forward-defence network in Syria has been outwardly successful. It has provided practical benefits, maintaining the Assad regime’s power and defeating a range of adversaries. It has also had performative benefits, as Iranian policy-makers trumpeted the fortitude and success of their amassed forces over opposition elements in Syria. Just how unassailable these forces really are remains in question, given the complementary role that Russia has played in combatting the Syrian opposition. Yet a security dilemma arises from Iran’s posture and posturing as its adversaries see an expanded Iranian footprint and Arab populations view it as an ‘occupying power’. Iran must weigh the benefits of its actions. Israeli strikes on military installations, and the US assassination of Soleimani, demonstrate Iran’s adversaries’ ability and willingness to target its forward-defence network. Yet this adds weight to the Iranian discourse that Western powers are intent on attacking and undermining Iran, in turn spurring further measures from Tehran to bolster its security. The security dilemma continues to snowball. On balance, it may be argued that Iran’s forward-defence strategy is unlikely to bolster its security in the long run.

References

- Ajili, Hadi & Masa Rouhi, ‘Iran’s Military Strategy’, *Survival*, 61/6 (2019), 139-152.
- Akbarzadeh, Shahram & Dara Conduit, ‘Charting a New Course? Testing Rouhani’s Foreign Policy Agency in the Iran–Syria Relationship’, In: Shahram Akbarzadeh & Dara Conduit (eds) *Iran in the World: President Rouhani’s Foreign Policy*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2016), 133-154.
- Akbarzadeh, Shahram, ‘Iran and Daesh: The case of a reluctant Shia power’, *Middle East Policy* 22/3 (2015), 44-54
- Al-Khair, Waleed, ‘IRGC Building a New Base on Iraq-Syria Border’, *Diyaruna*. 5 September 2019. https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2019/09/05/feature-02
- Ansari, Ali and Anise Bassiri Tabrizi, ‘The View from Tehran’, In: A Tabrizi and R Pantucci (eds) *Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict*. (London: RUSI, 2016), 3-10.
- Aronson, Geoffrey, ‘The Unlikely Marriage between Damascus and Tehran’, 21 March 2019, *Middle East Institute*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/unlikely-marriage-between-damascus-and-tehran>

- Bahgat, Gawdat & Anoush Ehteshami, *Defending Iran: From Revolutionary Guards to Ballistic Missiles*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)
- Barzegar, Kayhan, 'Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*. 15/1 (2008), 87-99.
- Blanford, Nicholas, *Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player*. (Washington: Middle East Institute, 2017).
- Brooks, Risa, 'Introduction: The Impact of Culture, Society, Institutions, and International Forces on Military Effectiveness', In: Risa Brooks and E Stanley (eds) *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) pp 1-26.
- Butt, Ahsan, 'Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003?' *Security Studies*, 28/2 (2019), 250-285.
- Chipman, John, 'Opening Speech'. In: *IISS Manama Dialogue: 15th Regional Security Summit*. 22 November 2019. <https://www.iiss.org/events/manama-dialogue/manama-dialogue-2019>
- Chubin, Shahram, 'Iran's Power in Context,' *Survival* 51/1 (2009), 165–190.
- Chubin, Shahram, 'Is Iran a Military Threat?' *Survival* 56/2 (2014), 65-88.
- Duclos, Michel, 'Russia and Iran in Syria: Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?' *Atlantic Council*, June 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Russia-and-Iran-in-Syria-a-Random-Partnership-or-an-Enduring-Alliance.pdf>
- Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, *Iran: Stuck in Transition*. (London: Routledge, 2017)
- Esfahani, Marzieh, 'Political Realism and Iran: Geopolitics and Defensive Realism', In: R Schuett and M Hollingworth (eds). *The Edinburgh Companion to Political Realism*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 431-444.
- Farhi, Farideh, *Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals*. (Washington: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017).
- Fathollah-Nejad, Ali, 'Iranians Respond to the Regime: 'Leave Syria Alone!' *Al Jazeera*, 2 May 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/5/2/iranians-respond-to-the-regime-leave-syria-alone>
- Fiammenghi, Davide, 'The Security Curve and the Structure of International Politics: A Neorealist Synthesis', *International Security*, 35/4 (2011), pp. 126–154.
- Glaser, Charles, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)
- Hanna, Andrew, 'Soleimani: Mastermind of Iran's Expansion'. *The Iran Primer*. 14 October 2019. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/oct/14/soleimani-mastermind-iran%E2%80%99s-expansion>
- Hauch, Lars, 'Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division: Life Through the Eyes of a Militia Member', *Middle East Institute*. 22 May 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-fatemiyoun-division-life-through-eyes-militia-member>
- Hokayem, Emile, 'Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War', *Survival* 56/6 (2014), 59–86.
- Jervis, Robert, 'Dilemmas About Security Dilemmas', *Security Studies*, 20/3 (2011), 416-423.
- Juneau, Thomas, 'Iran under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World', *Middle East Policy*, 21/4 (2014), 92-104.
- Juneau, Thomas, 'Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory', *Mediterranean Politics*, 25/1 (2020), 26-44.
- Karouny, Mariam, 'Shi'ite Fighters Rally to Defend Damascus Shrine,' *Reuters*. 3 March 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-shiites-idUSBRE92202X20130303>

- Khamenei, Ali, 'Hajj Qassem Soleimani and the Regional Security Theory', 28 December 2020, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8217/Hajj-Qassem-Soleimani-and-the-regional-security-theory>
- Khamenei, Ali, 'Statements in the Meeting of Young Scientific Elites', [علمی جوان نخبگان دیدار در بیانات], October 18 2017, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37949>
- Khamenei, Ali, 'The Second Phase of the Revolution', 11 February 2019, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/6415/The-Second-Phase-of-the-Revolution-Statement-addressed-to-the>
- Krieg, Andreas and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century*, (Georgetown University Press, 2019)
- Krisinger, Christopher, 'Power Projection Strategy: New Directions for Forward Defense', Naval War College: Rhode Island. 11 February 1991.
- Lamrani, Omar, 'Iran's Conventional Military Capabilities', *NewLines Institute*. 9 July 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/iran/irans-conventional-military-capabilities/>
- Lindermann, Marc, 'Laboratory of Asymmetry: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Evolution of Iranian Ground Tactics', *Military Review*, 90/3 (2010), pp. 105–116.
- Nadimi, Farzin, 'Policy brief 2677: Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?' The Washington Institute. 22 August 2016.
- O'Grady, Siobhan, 'Iran's Selfie General Seems To Be in Syria Posing for Pics', *Foreign Policy*. 10 November 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/10/hes-back-irans-selfie-general-seems-to-be-in-syria-posing-for-pics/>
- Ostovar, Afshon, 'The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War', *Security Studies*. 28/1 (2019), 159–188.
- Ostovar, Afshon, *Vanguard of the Imam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
- Peterson, Scott, 'How Iran is Expanding its Footprint Across the Middle East', *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 December 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/1217/How-Iran-the-Mideast-s-new-superpower-is-expanding-its-footprint-across-the-region-and-what-it-means>
- Rabinovich, Itamar, 'How Iran's Regional Ambitions Have Developed Since 1979', *Brookings Institution*, 24 January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/how-irans-regional-ambitions-have-developed-since-1979/>
- Rezaie, Mohsen, 'Why Did the United States not Invade Syria?' [نکرد؟ حمله سوریه به آمریکا چرا] *Tabnak*. 31 December 2011, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/215437/>
- Saban, Navvar, 'Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria', *Atlantic Council*. 5 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>
- Safari, Mohammad, 'Limits of Political Expression', [سیاسی اظهار نظر حدود و حد]. *Siasat-e Rooz*, 4 September 2013, <http://www.siasatrooz.ir/vdcccmlq4.2bq1i8laa2.html>
- Shuja Jamal, Ahmad, 'Mission Accomplished? What's Next for Iran's Afghan Fighters in Syria', *War on the Rocks*, 13 February 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/mission-accomplished-whats-next-irans-afghan-fighters-syria/>
- Tabatabai, Ariane, 'Other Side of the Iranian Coin: Iran's Counterterrorism Apparatus', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41/1-2 (2018), 181-207
- Tabatabai, Ariane, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy*, (London: Hurst, 2021)
- Uskowi, N, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018)

Von Loew, Gerd, 'Forward Defense in Central Europe: an Operational View', U.S. Army War College: Pennsylvania. 7 April 1986.

Ward, Steven, 'The Continuing Evolution of Iran's Military Doctrine', *Middle East Journal*, 59/4 (2005), 559–576.

Wilner, Alex, 'The Dark Side of Extended Deterrence: Thinking through the State Sponsorship of Terrorism', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41/3 (2018), 410-437

Young, Michael, 'Is the United States Capable of Containing Iran's Influence in the Middle East?' *Carnegie Middle East Center*. 21 December 2017. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/75060>