



The Proxy Dilemma

Capability and Resolve in US–Iranian Competition



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Abstract

The destruction of Iraq in 2003 left the Middle East an unbalanced system. In a region previously marked by peer competition between Iraq and Iran, many Sunni Arab states have since relied on the United States to fill the void as a bulwark against Iranian influence. Although the United States has overwhelming military and economic capability to do so, it is not clear if it has the necessary resolve. On the contrary, Iran’s willingness to incur costs and sustain casualties, in Iraq and Syria especially, shows that it has the resolve to use its relatively meager material capabilities when compared to the United States and its allies. This imbalance of resolve reduces the competition between Iran and the United States to irregular forces and proxies. Within this realm, Iran is often more willing to expose its own soldiers to direct combat than the United States, which buys Iran greater influence and legitimacy with its proxies and regional partners. With Iranian influential and military power on the rise, a failure on the part of the United States to counter Iran will compel Sunni Arab states, in particular Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, to balance on their own. At the very least, this balancing will include support to fundamentalist Sunni militants in Syria and unwieldy intervention like the air campaign in Yemen. At worst, the escalation inherent to this balancing behavior devolves to general war. Either way, an unbalanced Middle East allows extremist organizations to flourish, refugees to languish, and regional powers to focus on security competition rather than cooperative free trade. These outcomes are not in the best interest of the United States.

Introduction

By all traditional measures of military power, the United States, in conjunction with its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies, has created a security construct of regional hegemony in the Middle East, against which no state, or countervailing coalition of states, could attempt to balance. Assessing that this bloc is unwilling to use the full complement of its military capabilities, however, Iran uses a suite of conventional, unconventional, and proxy forces to deter potential aggressors, compete with regional peers, and influence states it considers vital to its national security. Along these lines, Iran attempts to circumvent US military strengths against which the Iranian military would lose, in favor of asymmetric concepts, including its ballistic missile program; anti-access, area-denial tactics; and support to proxy groups.¹ These three methods involve the willingness of Iran and its adversaries to incur the costs of conflict. The first two methods affect the cost calculation of potential adversaries, and the third displays Iran's willingness to assume more risk than its opponents toward achieving its political ends abroad.

Beyond merely acting as a spoiler to US and GCC objectives in the Middle East, Iran has embarked on a sustained effort to build parallel security structures in countries with a sizable Shia population. Often described as a mix of the US Central Intelligence Agency and special operations forces, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force is the primary tool that Iran uses to support Shia militants across the Middle East, most aggressively in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.² Despite a degree of friction between the IRGC and the government of President Hassan Rouhani regarding the nuclear deal with Iran, also called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and economic policy writ large, the recent boon to the IRGC budget, including its ballistic missile forces and Quds Force, indicates that Iran will continue to use these elements as its primary means of achieving foreign policy objectives.³ This includes countering US regional presence, expanding Iranian influence, and developing proxy actors and paramilitary groups across the Middle East.

Using Lebanese Hezbollah as a model, the IRGC has trained, advised, assisted, and accompanied Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq, pro-Assad forces in Syria, and Houthi rebels in Yemen, none of which Iran seems particularly keen on demobilizing, regardless of the outcome of these conflicts.⁴ Perhaps due to a degree of weariness following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has been reticent to intervene decisively in any of these conflicts, preferring to use its own state and non-state proxies, especially through its

¹ Olson, "Iran's Path Dependent Military Doctrine," 69.

² Cragin, "Semi-Proxy Wars and US Counterterrorism Strategy," 318.

³ Karami, "Iran's Parliament Seeks to Increase the Military Budget for the IRGC in Response to the New Policies of the Trump Administration."

⁴ Cordesman, "Modern Warfare," 21.

regional allies, in a reactionary manner to Iranian activities.⁵ With this competition in place, the balance of power between the United States and Iran in the Middle East becomes far more complex. It is not apparent, however, that either side has a material advantage, simply that the means and methods both use to employ proxy forces have strengths and weaknesses. However, as long as the United States is unwilling to assume the risk required to leverage its vast conventional superiority or to display the necessary resolve to direct and influence proxy groups, it must use cost-imposing strategies that exploit the weaknesses of Iran’s power projection model, especially its ideological component and means of logistical support.⁶ In this way, the United States can use its own special operations and conventional forces to limit both physical and political costs, while leveraging the advantages of the American version of proxy warfare toward altering Iran’s cost-benefit analysis in its attempt to challenge US interests in the Middle East.

Background on the Competition between the United States and Iran

The competition between the United States and Iran has been continuous since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, and both sides have suffered casualties in this long, unconventional war. For Iran, its historical fear of foreign intervention, sense of encirclement by the United States, and aspiration as a regional power drive the external operations for which the IRGC Quds Force is responsible.⁷ For the United States, its fear of terrorist threats against its territory and citizens, the persistent possibility of nuclear proliferation by state or non-state actors, and the desire to maintain stable global energy markets drive its operations in the Middle East. As the United States and Iran continue to operate in the same battle space, tactical tensions between the two sides remain high, with respective proxies often in direct conflict. Iran’s ongoing attempt to establish a Shia crescent from Tehran to Beirut by way of Iraq and Syria, while leveraging Shia populations to destabilize Gulf states, have put it at odds with American attempts to support its Arab allies and conduct counterterrorism. Even as the international community hopes for a degree of rapprochement between the two sides with the signing of the JCPOA, the fundamental divergence of national foreign policy goals will put the United States and Iran in direct competition over influence in the Middle East.

According to the 2017 National Security Strategy, the United States “seeks a Middle East that is not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to a stable global energy market.”⁸ While the gradual liberalization and democratization of the Middle East remains an ideological goal of the United States, experiences with the sudden upheaval of

⁵ Brown, “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy,” 243.

⁶ Cordesman and Toukan, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance*; Bucala, *Iran’s New Way of War in Syria*, 2.

⁷ Perthes, “Ambition and Fear.”

⁸ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Syria have tempered the willingness of the United States to intervene militarily unless for direct national security concerns such as counterterrorism or energy security. The United States uses military, informational, diplomatic, and economic means by which to accomplish these goals, but it relies increasingly on its unconventional capability to compete with Iranian efforts to undermine US strategic goals.

Whereas the United States views Iran as a potential revisionist state seeking to disrupt the Middle East, Iran views its behavior as strategically defensive against would-be aggressors.⁹ Accordingly, Iran’s objectives in the Middle East are to exhaust the United States and its allies, resulting in an American withdrawal from the region;¹⁰ deter aggression from both the United States and regional adversaries;¹¹ defeat Sunni terrorist groups;¹² and gain influence with Arab states by supporting regimes amiable to the Islamic Republic.¹³ Iran relies primarily on the IRGC Quds Force to accomplish many of these goals by maintaining proxy groups within the borders of Arab states. These efforts are often at the non-state level, since the governments of Iraq and Syria have become increasingly weak military partners and since other regimes in the Middle East oppose Iranian influence. For Iran, the IRGC’s goal of exporting the ideals of the Islamic Revolution to other states underwrites much of the activities that put Iran at odds with the United States. However, as much as the United States is not necessarily confined by its ideological goal of spreading liberal democratic values to the Middle East, Iran does not limit itself to ideological struggles when it comes to its foreign policy objectives as seen in its support for the largely secular regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Iran tends to utilize its unconventional capability, led by the IRGC, in the pursuit of its goals, whereas the United States skews toward traditional state-to-state alliance structures, through special operations and conventional forces from the US Special Operations Command and US Central Command respectively. However, Iran also uses state partners in Iraq and Syria toward its counter–Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (*Da’esh*) goals, and the United States uses non-state actors such as the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units and Syrian Arab groups under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces toward its counterterrorism objectives. That said, the trend in both the United States and Iran has been toward leveraging their respective special operations forces to pursue their separate foreign policy goals by developing, maintaining, and relying on relationships with both state and non-state actors in the region.

This unconventional competition between the United States and Iran has existed since the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut attributed to a burgeoning IRGC-sponsored terrorist organization,

⁹ Farhi, “Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals,” 1.

¹⁰ Doran, “Heirs of Nasser,” 348.

¹¹ Farhi, “Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals,” 2.

¹² Cordesman, *Iran’s Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*, 22.

¹³ El-Bar, “Proxies and Politics.”

Hezbollah. Since then, IRGC operations with and through proxy groups and irregular forces have targeted American soldiers, citizens, interests, and regional allies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and the Gulf states.¹⁴ The major asymmetry in this competition has been the traditionally conventional response by the United States to unconventional aggression by Iran. However, the increased development of irregular forces and surrogate groups by the United States—as authorized in Title 12 of the National Defense Authorization Act and through Title 10 and Title 50 of the US Code delineating military operations, intelligence activities, and covert action—has created multiple potential conflict areas where groups aligned with the United States and Iran compete regionally.¹⁵ Currently, this competition puts US and Iranian forces, allies, and proxies on opposite sides of the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars. Conversely, the United States and Iran share a counter-Da’esh objective in both Iraq and Syria, but they disagree on both the means by which to defeat Da’esh and the very nature of the regimes that should rule the Iraqi and Syrian people.

While the United States views the balance with Iran as one of a series of global challenges, Iran views this balance and the associated competition as its primary national security concern. By Iran’s assessment, the United States has undermined its sovereignty since the 1953 coup d’état against Mohammed Musadiq, and the countries have been at war since 1980, when the United States supported the regime of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. The conflict between the United States and Iran has varied in intensity over the past few decades and has included direct contact between militaries and irregular forces. The Tanker War of 1983–88 resulted in the destruction of Iranian oil infrastructure, the sinking of three Iranian warships, and the perceived intentional murder of 290 people when the USS *Vincennes* shot down Iran Air Flight 655.¹⁶

By Iranian accounts, the United States has since then promoted a policy of encirclement and containment of the Islamic Republic by positioning thousands of troops in the Middle East and by conducting offensive military operations and supporting anti-Iranian regimes and irregular forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain.

Brief Theoretical Overview of Balance of Power

The vast literature on balance of power theory in international politics rests on the premise that seemingly dissimilar states act in a similar manner toward self-preservation at least and domination at most, based on the power differential between them.¹⁷ This distribution of power manifests itself in terms of polarity and balance,

¹⁴ Sofaer and Shultz, *Taking On Iran*, 27.

¹⁵ Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, 113th Cong., Pub. L. No. 291 (December 19, 2014); Wall, “Demystifying the Title 10-Title 50 Debate,” 101.

¹⁶ Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, 37–41.

¹⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 71.

such that the number of powerful states in the international system and the distribution of power between them has either an ameliorating or detrimental effect on the likelihood of conflict.¹⁸ Regardless of the number of powerful states within the system, a balanced distribution of power promotes stability, since the potential costs of failed aggression outweigh the hypothetical benefits of success. On the other hand, an imbalance of power incentivizes relatively weaker states to restore equilibrium and thus maintain their relative security in the face of more-powerful potential adversaries. This balancing takes the form of internal efforts to increase economic and military strength domestically and external efforts to build security alliances and weaken opposing ones.¹⁹ Since states can never be sure about the intentions of others, this balancing behavior leads to the familiar security dilemma, where the actions of a state to increase its own security, in turn, causes other states to feel less secure.²⁰

Beyond calculations of relative power, balancing behavior depends how states assess the intentions and resolve of other states to use their material capabilities.²¹ As such, states consider the likely response when they take actions to improve their relative security. In this way, material capabilities alone are not enough to deter other states or to influence their behavior. As Thomas Schelling notes, the threat of violence has the highest likelihood of success if the aggressor state displays not only the capability to carry out the threat but the resolve to do so.²² If states with superior military capabilities do not display the necessary resolve to use those capabilities, then second-tier states are better able to use their relatively inferior capabilities toward achieving a foreign policy objective.

In the Middle East, neither the United States nor Iran is willing to use the entirety of its static capabilities to achieve their respective goals; therefore, this reduces the competition to variables that are more difficult to measure, like resolve, unconventional forces, and proxy groups. In fact, both states tend to rely on proxies that reduce the exposure of their own soldiers due to the audience cost associated with interventionism in places like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Yet proxies tend to be unwieldy and difficult to manage without the presence of sponsors at the tactical level. This leads to a proxy dilemma wherein actions that increase the efficacy of proxies tend to exacerbate the domestic issues that led a state to use proxies in the first place. Based on this dynamic between the United States and Iran in the Middle East, the focus must be on unconventional forces, rather than the sum of their respective static capabilities.

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 335.

¹⁹ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 71.

²⁰ Waltz, “Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” 619.

²¹ Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” 9.

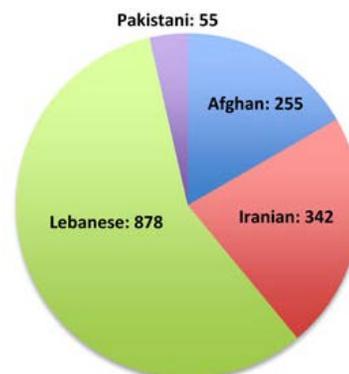
²² Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 12-13.

Measuring the Unconventional Balance between the United States and Iran

Willingness to Assume Risk. While the budgetary commitments, forces available, and projection models of the United States and Iran offer various strengths and weaknesses, there is a difference between static capabilities and both the willingness to use them and the effectiveness in doing so. The latter involves incurring costs toward achieving a foreign policy outcome and thus illuminates the resolve of a state. There are two useful ways to measure resolve when it comes to the United States and Iran in the Middle East: battle deaths of citizens and domestic public opinion. Pursuing a foreign policy outcome despite increasing battle deaths and degrading public opinion regarding that policy displays a state’s willingness to assume risk. In addition, risk-tolerant states will use means toward achieving their goals that have a high likelihood of either increasing battle deaths or decreasing domestic popularity. Finally, states will be more risk-tolerant in pursuit of objectives they assess as vital to national security. So observing areas in which states are willing to incur costs despite domestic backlash provides insight regarding a rank ordering of national security objectives. Doing so also provides potential vectors through which to apply pressure on a state to change its foreign policy or face domestic political consequences.

Iran’s model for applying force in the Middle East plays to its asymmetrical strengths, while exploiting the perceived weaknesses of the United States and its allies, which Iran regards as risk averse, sensitive to casualties, and reliant on technological superiority and regional bases from which to project power.²³ Iran has displayed not only a willingness to assume risk by deploying IRGC operatives to contested and denied areas but has also been sustaining casualties in its campaigns in Iraq and Syria. The following charts depict Iranian combat fatalities in Syria from 2012 to 2016, the percentage of fatalities by branch of service, and trend lines in the number of fatalities by nationality over time.²⁴ These figures, as a metric for Iran’s willingness to assume risk, indicate that Iran sends its operatives to areas where they engage in direct combat with opposition forces—whether Syrian rebels, Da’esh fighters, or the litany of other militant groups sponsored to some degree by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

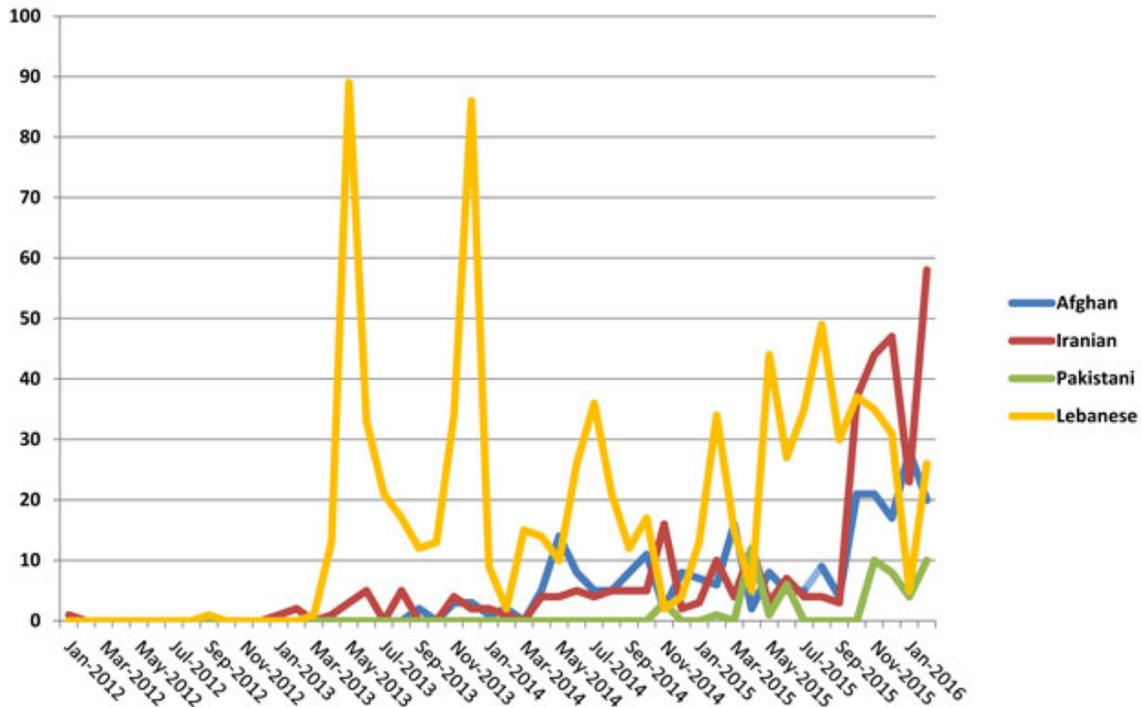
Shiite Combat Fatalities in Syria, Jan 2012-Feb 2016



²³ Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine,” 1.

²⁴ Alfoneh and Eisenstadt, “Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention.”

Burials for Shiite Combatants Killed in Syria, Jan 2012–Feb 2016



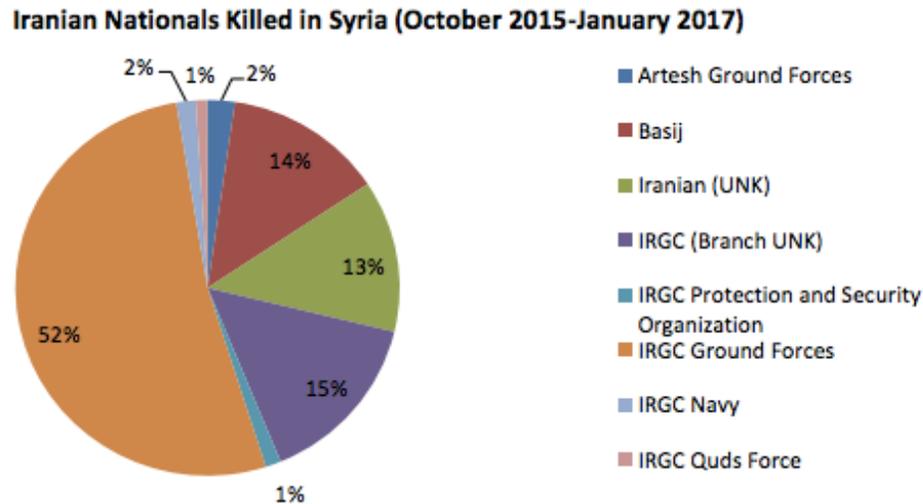
At the beginning of Iranian intervention in Syria from 2012–13, the bulk of those killed fighting in support of the Assad regime were Lebanese and Afghan. This is due to the persistent deployments of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters beginning in April 2012 and the heavy IRGC recruitment of Shia Afghans to fight in Syria under the Liwa Fatemiyoun banner.²⁵ Iranian casualties at this time included a disproportionate number of high-ranking IRGC Quds Force commanders but not rank-and-file operatives, indicating that these officials were not commanding their own units but rather training, advising, and assisting Syrian army, Lebanese Hezbollah fighters, and other foreign Shia elements.²⁶ However, as foreign fighters have been unable to sustain the high operational tempo of the Syrian Civil War, Iran was forced to commit its own forces in 2015, which corresponded with a spike in Iranian fatalities, including lower-ranking soldiers from IRGC Ground Forces units like the 2nd Imam Majtaba Brigade, the 7th Vali Asr Division, and the 2nd Imam Sajjad Brigade.²⁷ This indicates a shift in Iranian strategy from advisory operations to both unilateral offensive operations and directly

²⁵ Cragin, "Semi-Proxy Wars and US Counterterrorism Strategy," 311–12.

²⁶ Bucala, *Iran's New Way of War in Syria*, 5.

²⁷ Bucala, *Iran's New Way of War in Syria*, 8.

accompanying local Syrian and proxy forces. As a result, Iranian fatalities have skyrocketed over the past year, with an Iranian official admitting that Iran has lost one thousand soldiers in the conflict as of the end of 2016.²⁸



Given that Iranian proxies often share an ideological connection with Iran and view the conflicts in which they are engaged as existential, the willingness of Iran to have IRGC operatives die supporting proxies further increases Iran’s influence over these groups. In contrast, the United States has sustained few fatalities as part of its fight against Da’esh, most notably the death of a US special operations soldier during a raid against a Da’esh prison in the Iraqi town of Hawijah.²⁹ Given that most US surrogates do not necessarily share an ideological connection, the perceived lack of willingness by the United States to share in the risks inherent to operations in Iraq and Syria may prevent the United States from exercising significant influence over its proxies and partners.

While the United States has proven over the past fifteen years that it is willing to sustain thousands of casualties in its military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is unclear if the United States is willing to sustain similar casualties in a more unconventional war. This potential US aversion to risk has tactical and operational repercussions for US partners, who would benefit from the forward positioning of US combat controllers to direct airstrikes more effectively, the inclusion of US helicopter attack aviation during offensives, and the integration of US special operations and conventional forces within their military formations. In addition to these tangible benefits, there is a certain degree of legitimacy as a sponsor of irregular forces and proxies that comes with shared risk and vulnerability. In Iraq and Syria, especially, the United States has largely demanded

²⁸ Sharafedin, “Death Toll among Iran’s Forces in Syrian War Passes 1,000.”

²⁹ Gordon and Schmitt, “US Soldier Dies in Raid to Free Prisoners of ISIS in Iraq.”

that its Arab and Kurdish proxies assume the vast majority of the tactical risk, which negatively affects the perception of US resolve to accomplish its stated objectives. Iran has similarly relied on a disproportionate number of proxies versus its own soldiers. However, the way by which Iran deploys its soldiers to areas where they engage in direct combat stands in contrast to the US model of higher numbers but less exposure.

While it is clear from casualty figures that Iran is willing to apply force in places like Iraq and Syria, Iran is reticent to do so elsewhere. For example, Iran has deployed both IRGC and Hezbollah operatives to support Shia Houthis in Yemen since the beginning of 2015, but it has only sustained forty-four fatalities over the past two years of mostly higher-ranking officers leading local Houthi troops.³⁰ This casualty pattern indicates an advise-and-assist model similar to the beginning of the intervention in Syria rather than the direct application of Iranian military formations. Whereas Iran frames its intervention in Syria around the concept of protecting Shia holy sites and its intervention in Iraq as preventing the growth of Da'esh, Yemen lacks a similar cause around which to rally popular support. In fact, when asked about general support to the Houthi cause, only a narrow plurality of Iranians agreed with the statement “Iran should help the Houthis defeat their opponents.”³¹ Recognizing the tenuous nature of this support, the Iranian government discouraged the Houthis from attempting to overthrow the Yemeni government, preferring narrower objectives that the Houthis promptly ignored.³² In addition, Iranian state media has reported neither the deployment nor the loss of IRGC operatives in Yemen, which is in stark contrast to the open reporting of casualties in Syria and Iraq.³³ As Iran seems less willing to accept the human and political costs for its policies in Yemen, it may cede ground to states more willing to do so, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.³⁴

Public opinion on the conduct of military operations abroad can serve as an indication of the willingness of both the United States and Iran to sustain such operations. Although not as responsive to public opinion as the United States, the green movement of June 2009 protesting the contested reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad showed that Iran cannot simply ignore public opinion and revealed a true power struggle between the government and the opposition.³⁵ Whether or not the green movement framed future Iranian government views of public opinion is unclear, but polling leading up to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 indicated vast public support in Iran for a deal, often in contrast with the public statements of Ayatollah Khamenei against it.³⁶ In addition, the protests of late-2017 and early-2018 demonstrate that Iranians

³⁰ Koontz, “Iran’s Growing Casualty Count in Yemen.”

³¹ Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland and Iran Poll, *Iranian Public Opinion after the Protests*

³² Riedel, “Who Are the Houthis, and Why Are We at War with Them?”

³³ Koontz, “Iran’s Growing Casualty Count in Yemen”; *Fars*, “URGENT.”

³⁴ Harris, “Saudis Tout Humanitarian Record in Yemen amid Washington Backlash.”

³⁵ Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics*, 181.

³⁶ Welsh, “Iranian Public Opinion Clashes with Supreme Leader on Nuclear Deal.”

expect a general improvement to domestic economic conditions as a result of the nuclear deal. The fact that 74 percent of Iranians believe that people’s living conditions have not improved due to sanctions relief is problematic for a regime whose governing mandate from recent parliamentary and presidential elections includes reducing inflation and unemployment.³⁷ As Iran continues to increase military spending, rather than focus on domestic economic reform in the wake of the nuclear deal, with increases of 15 percent and 25 percent to the budgets of the IRGC and the Iranian army, respectively, potentially expensive interventionist policies across the Middle East may become less palatable for the Iranian people.³⁸

American public opinion over the past fifteen years has tended to support military operations abroad. In every case of military intervention over the past twenty-five years, public approval for such operations increases after the United States commits its military forces. Equally interesting, however, is that US public opinion tends to wane for military operations as time goes on. Using the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as an example, polling data indicates a general downward trend in support for the intervention leading up to the US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011.³⁹ As unconventional conflicts tend to be long-term commitments of resources and manpower, often with ambiguous outcomes and costs, this trend of decreasing public support for military operations over time is problematic for US decision makers. In fact, support for the ongoing campaign in Syria has reached historic lows when compared to other conflicts over the past thirty-five years.⁴⁰

Views on Proposed U.S. Military Actions Before Commencement of Such Actions

Country/Region	Polling dates	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
		%	%	%
Syria	Sep 3-4, 2013	36	51	13
Iraq	Mar 14-15, 2003	64	33	3
Afghanistan	Oct 5-6, 2001	82	14	4
Kosovo/The Balkans	Feb 19-21, 1999	43	45	12
Iraq/Persian Gulf	Jan 11-13, 1991	55	38	4

GALLUP

³⁷ Mohseni, Gallagher, and Ramsay, *Iranian Public Opinion, One Year after the Nuclear Deal.*”

³⁸ Donovan and Saidi, “Iran News Round Up.”

³⁹ See Dugan, “US Support for Action in Syria Is Low vs. Past Conflicts.”

⁴⁰ Newport, “US Support for Syria Strikes Rates Low in Historical Context.”

Approval/Disapproval for U.S. Military Actions After They Began

Country/Region	Polling dates	% Approve	% Disapprove
Iraq and Syria	2014 Sept 20-21	60	31
Libya	2011 Mar 21	47	37
Iraq	2003 Mar 20	76	20
Afghanistan	2001 Oct 7	90	5
Kosovo/The Balkans	1999 Apr 30- May 2	51	45
Afghanistan and Sudan	1998 Aug 20	66	19
Somalia	1993 Jun 18-21	65	23
Iraq	1993 Jan 13	83	9
Persian Gulf	1991 Jan 16	79	15
Libya	1986 Apr 17-18	71	21
Grenada	1983 Oct 26-27	53	34

Wording of 2014 question: “Next, we have a question about the military action the United States is taking in Iraq and Syria against Islamic militants, commonly known as ISIS. Do you approve or disapprove of this U.S. military action?”

The public polling of Iranians regarding military intervention in Syria indicates a similar trend line regarding waning support to military operations. While Gallup polls show a drop from 41 percent support in 2012 to 37 percent support in 2013, follow-on polling suggests that the level of support dramatically increases among those individuals who claim to be following events in Syria closely.⁴¹ Public statements from Iranian government officials and IRGC leaders regarding operations in Syria and state news agency reports of combat casualties seem to indicate that the Iranian government wants its population mentally engaged in the Syrian conflict. Based on polling data, this could be a good strategy to increase public support for Iranian intervention in Syria, especially as the economic and human costs of maintaining these operations continues to rise. It is unclear, however, whether a more engaged Iranian population will eventually withdraw support for operations in Syria and demand change, much as was the case in the United States with its operations in Iraq from 2003–11.

Unconventional Forces Available includes best estimates on special operations forces deployed or able to deploy to the Middle East and the regional proxy groups supported by the United States and Iran. This analysis

⁴¹ See Loschky, “Iranians’ Support for Syria Softens.”

also includes an assessment of the effectiveness, dedication, and quality of these proxy groups, utilizing the presence of US or Iranian operators at the tactical level, level of threat against the proxy groups, and the ideological identification of proxy groups as metrics. The unconventional competition between the United States and Iran relies on how well IRGC and US special operations forces can recruit, train, and employ irregular forces and proxies toward accomplishing national foreign policy goals.

Using Iraq and Syria as case studies for the unconventional competition between the United States and Iran, merely counting the number of US and Iranian servicemen and the fighters in various proxy groups is not informative to the unconventional balance. The ability of the United States and Iran to control these fighters, utilize them in support of strategic objectives, and potentially rely on them in a direct conflict with the other side is essential and difficult to measure. In addition, the quality of these fighters and their commitment to their sponsor is equally difficult to quantify. However, the presence of either IRGC or US special operations forces at the tactical level in the recruitment, training, and employment of proxy groups can serve as an indicator of both the quality of these forces and the ability of the sponsor to task them directly. On the psychological level, a stated adherence to a common ideology and the presence of an existential threat serve as equally good indicators of the commitment of these groups and their willingness to fight.

In Iraq, despite the various Shia Popular Mobilization Units that number anywhere from 60,000 to 140,000 fighters according to the Carnegie Middle East Center and that ostensibly fall under the Iraqi security forces joint command, the IRGC Quds Force focuses its efforts on training and equipping Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, respectively.⁴² These organizations serve as Iran's primary proxies through which to conduct operations against Da'esh; to act as a separate security force outside the control of the Iraqi central government; to recruit and train Shia militiamen; and potentially to target US units. Both Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq are reliable unconventional partners due to their adherence to the same *velayat al-faqih* ideology of the guardianship of the Islamic jurist at the core of the Iranian state, which places the Ayatollah Khamenei in a position of both religious and political authority. In addition, many of the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq share this same ideology and view the threat of Da'esh as existential.

On the other side, despite a commitment to train a large number of Iraqi security forces and maintain a robust conventional-force presence in the country, the United States cannot necessarily rely on these forces in a conflict with Iran. Rather, the Kurdish Peshmerga Special Forces and Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service units, with which US special operations forces directly partner and which fall outside the command structure of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, form the core of US unconventional capability in Iraq.⁴³ The Iraqi Kurds are reliable partners to the United States, as they view the conflict with Da'esh as existential and hold an ethnonationalist ideology that rejects that of the Shia *velayat al-faqih*. The Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service is

⁴² Mansour and Jabar, "Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

⁴³ Witty, *Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 3.

similarly reliable since the United States played a formative role in the development of its operational and command structure as largely nonsectarian and loyal to the concept of Iraq as a state, rather than to separate sects or tribes.⁴⁴

Much as the United States cannot rely on the conventional Iraqi army during an unconventional conflict, Iran cannot do so for the conventional Syrian army. Rather, the IRGC focuses its efforts on elite units within Syrian Special Forces divisions and imports highly trained fighters from regional proxy groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah and an assortment of Shia militia groups from Iraq under the umbrella of Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas.⁴⁵ Although Syrian Special Forces units do not share the same *velayat al-faqih* ideology as their Iranian sponsors, they do view the outcome of the Syrian Civil War as existential. Most of the soldiers in these units are from Bashar al-Assad’s Alawite sect and have maintained the Assad regime often at the expense of the Syrian people. Therefore, both the threat of victory by the Syrian opposition and the continued presence of Da’esh in Syria represent dire threats to these units. On the other hand, Iran relies on shared ideology to recruit and employ proxy forces in Syria, largely based on the defense of Shia shrines throughout the country. What began as a call to protect the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in Damascus has grown into an obligation for Shia fighters to ensure the integrity of all Shia holy sites, which is a task that lacks a definitive end.⁴⁶ IRGC Quds Force operatives in Syria now refer to this duty as the sacred defense, a term that once reserved for the Iran-Iraq War, in an effort to promote a pan-Shia quality for involvement in the Syrian Civil War and to maintain recruitment of foreign fighters traveling to Syria from across the Middle East, especially Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan.⁴⁷

For the United States, the forty-five thousand troops that the commanders of the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units, or the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), claim to field do not represent the force on which the United States can rely as an unconventional partner. YPG commanders assess only half of these troops as combat ready, with thousands of others confined to static positions as the YPG attempts to control over thirty thousand square kilometers of territory in northern Syria.⁴⁸ However, the presence of several hundred US special operations troops in northern Syria has increased the effectiveness of these YPG units, through better coordination with the US-led air campaign, increased US military aid, and improved tactical training. As far as reliability is concerned and much in the same manner as the Kurds in Iraq, the YPG views the struggle with Da’esh as a threat to the Kurdish people and adheres to an ethnonationalism that rejects the concept of *velayat al-faqih* jurisprudence.

⁴⁴ Witty, *Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, 2.

⁴⁵ Knights, “Iran’s Foreign Legion.”

⁴⁶ Hawramy, “Shiite Iconography Electrifies Iranians on Syria.”

⁴⁷ Esfandiari, “Iranian News Agency Removes IRGC Commander’s Comments on Iranian Forces in Syria.”

⁴⁸ Barfi, “Kurds Now Our Best Ally against ISIS in Syria,” 4.

Shifting back to the Middle East in general, both the United States and Iran are focused on expanding the operational areas of their proxy groups and irregular forces. Iran faces a fundamental problem with sectarianism, as much of its unconventional capability is confined to areas where there is a Shia population. For example, Shia militia groups and IRGC-sponsored organizations like Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq lost effectiveness as the Iraqi security forces pushed further into traditionally Sunni areas of Anbar Province to combat Da'esh. As Iran has to rely on its state allies in Iraq and Syria in areas where Iran's proxy forces are not as effective, Iran's ability to shape those efforts toward its strategic goals suffers. In a similar manner, Iran's inability to support the Shia uprising in Bahrain in 2011 and the stalled Shia Houthi revolution in Yemen due to a combined Saudi-Emirati intervention has limited the expansion of an organic, Iranian-sponsored unconventional force in the Gulf. With a lack of state allies throughout this region, utilizing an unconventional capability to promote Iranian strategic goals will be difficult.

For the United States the issue of expanding the operational area for its proxy and irregular forces is equally daunting. Kurdish partners in both Iraq and Syria cannot effectively operate outside traditionally Kurdish areas. However, the United States has expanded support to Arab groups aligned with the Syrian Kurds and has persistently pressed the Iraqi government to allow US special operations forces to train and equip Sunni tribal militias in Anbar Province.⁴⁹ The former allows US-backed forces to operate in non-Kurdish areas in Syria, such as the recent Raqqa offensive. The latter, in combination with recent Iraqi army offensives in Mosul and Hawijah, accomplishes the short-term task of reducing the territorial holdings of Da'esh. In addition, the United States works with regional partners including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states to develop relationships with both conventional and special operations forces. These relationships will allow the United States to leverage the unconventional forces of these state allies toward its regional strategic goals.

Economic and Materiel Support to Unconventional Forces includes the funds, weapons, and logistical support that both the United States and Iran allocate to special operations and proxy groups. Using information from the 2015 issue of *Military Balance* by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Index, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) analysis of the FY2015 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), and *The Economist Intelligence Unit*,⁵⁰ a comparison of the defense budgets of the United States and Iran seems uninformative.

⁴⁹ Barfi, "Kurds Now Our Best Ally against ISIS in Syria," 5.

⁵⁰ This assessment relied on developing projections for the overall defense budget of the United States and Iran, the budget of the IRGC, and the budget of USSOCOM. The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database is available at <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex>. For the CSIS analysis, see Cordesman, *FY2015 Defense Budget and the QDR*. *The Economist Intelligence Unit* is available at <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1273755511&Country=Iran&topic=Economy&subtopic=Charts+and+tables&subsubtopic=Annual+data+and+forecast>.

The average defense budget of the United States between 2005 and 2020 is approximately \$610 billion, compared to that of Iran at a mere \$10 billion.

The total defense budgets of the United States and Iran do not, however, indicate how these countries fund their unconventional capabilities in the Middle East. According to Iranian government figures, the IRGC, as the organization responsible for external operations through the Quds Force and for deterring foreign aggression against Iran through its ballistic missile program, has historically accounted for approximately 70–80 percent of the Iranian defense budget.⁵¹ On the other hand, according to Department of Defense figures, US Special Operations Command, as the current organization of choice for US force projection in the Middle East, accounts for only 1.2 percent of the American defense budget, which includes separate funding for overseas contingency operations.⁵² Granted, the entirety of the IRGC budget does not go toward external security operations involving unconventional forces in the Middle East and the development and maintenance of ballistic missiles. Likewise, the entirety of US Special Operations Command’s budget does not go toward its various special operations forces in the Middle East, and other elements within the Department of Defense and US government commit resources to the region. However, comparing these figures provides a good metric for the importance that each side places on developing and leveraging its unconventional capacity to accomplish foreign policy objectives.

Both Iran and the United States also utilize other monetary sources from which to fund unconventional activities in the Middle East. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the IRGC, as the principle organization responsible for rebuilding Iran after the Iran-Iraq War, manages over “one hundred companies that control roughly \$12 billion in construction and engineering capital.”⁵³ The IRGC reportedly uses Quds Force operatives to provide funding, weapons, and equipment to many of its proxy groups and surrogates such as Lebanese Hezbollah, which enjoys a yearly stipend of between \$100 million and \$200 million.⁵⁴ According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, IRGC support in this vein includes charitable organizations, such as the al-Aqsa International Foundation, as fronts for illicit financing of Iran’s proxy groups in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and Iraq.⁵⁵ On the US side, sections 1208 and 1209 of the National Defense Authorization Act provide US Special Operations Command with additional resources by which to fund unconventional forces to the tune of \$100 million and \$800 million annually respectively.⁵⁶ Despite the highly

⁵¹ *Janes*, “Iran Defense Budget Overview.”

⁵² Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *United States Special Operations Command Operation and Maintenance, Defense-Wide Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Estimates*, 839.

⁵³ Bruno, Bajoria, and Masters, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.”

⁵⁴ Levitt, “Hezbollah Finances.”

⁵⁵ Levitt, “Hezbollah Finances.”

⁵⁶ Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015.

publicized failure of the Department of Defense train-and-equip program in Syria, section 1209, now combined with Iraq funding lines under the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, continues to support US proxies and partners in the region.⁵⁷

Future trends point to the United States and Iran continuing to increase funding for their respective unconventional forces in the Middle East. In the United States, CSIS projects steady increases to the US Special Operations Command budget over the next five years. The 2015 QDR lists seven key force goals for the Department of Defense, three of which apply directly to the continued development of unconventional capacity globally: precision strike; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and counterterrorism and special operations.⁵⁸ As the United States chooses to leverage its special operations forces, along with state and non-state partners in the Middle East, the US Special Operations Command's requests for funding will continue to receive the highest priority.

Sanctions relief due to the JCPOA will allow Iran to increase its defense budget over the next five years, with a significant portion of that increase going to the IRGC. In addition, some portion of the approximately \$120 billion in unfrozen international financial assets will likely go to funding IRGC activities.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Iran has responded to US sanctions against its continued ballistic missile development by authorizing an additional \$600 million for the Quds Force and ballistic missile program.⁶⁰ The importance Iran assigns to these forces matches its strategy to deter technologically superior adversaries by increasing an opponent's risk calculation.⁶¹ A sophisticated ballistic missile program—including the recently developed Soumar long-range cruise missile, Emad medium-range ballistic missile, and the antiship Chinese C-802 variants—complicates the force projection models of potential adversaries.⁶² Meanwhile, a well-funded and well-equipped Quds Force can train, advise, assist, and accompany regional proxy forces to complicate the movement of military units, weapons, and equipment in any potential battlespace.

Force Projection Capability. The ability of the United States to project power anywhere in the Middle East is as much an asymmetry in the unconventional competition with Iran as it is in a more conventional military balance. The network of airbases, forward operating bases, and naval stations that the United States maintains in Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, and Afghanistan through enduring partnerships with state allies provides the United States great flexibility in deploying both conventional

⁵⁷ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *Defense Budget Overview*, 6-4.

⁵⁸ Cordesman, *FY2015 Defense Budget and the QDR*.

⁵⁹ Levitt, *Major Beneficiaries of the Iran Deal*.

⁶⁰ *Iran Primer*, “Iran Allocates Extra \$600 Million to Revolutionary Guards.”

⁶¹ Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine.”

⁶² *Janes*, “Iran – Air Force.”

and special operations forces in the region. However, the United States cannot take this power-projection capability for granted during a conflict with Iran. In fact, although Iran uses proxy forces to influence its neighbors, balance against its enemies, and exploit weaknesses in the US regional security construct, its ballistic missile arsenal is its most advanced military force and serves as its primary deterrent to foreign military intervention.⁶³ Iran views its unconventional and ballistic missile forces as the cornerstones of its military strategy, as evidenced by the increased funding to these programs in response to US sanctions and anti-Iran rhetoric. Most recently, Iran’s parliament voted to increase military spending by \$800 million for the next year, with \$260 million for its ballistic missile program and \$300 million for the IRGC Quds Force.⁶⁴ In addition, Iran has recently tested a slew of missiles, culminating in the launch of the new medium-range Khorramshahr, with its reported ability to evade air-defense radar and to receive terminal guidance, which President Rouhani labeled as an improved deterrent.⁶⁵

Iran’s focus on the United States as its principle adversary has resulted in military spending that depends on asymmetric warfare through its unconventional and missile forces, rather than on the more traditional elements of military power with which Iran would lose in a conventional conflict.⁶⁶ This imbalance in Iranian military forces also has implications for its regional competition with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, who invest heavily in conventional military forces, normally through US sales to foreign militaries. So Iran’s persistent buildup and technological advancement of its ballistic missile arsenal also deters those American allies, forcing them to consider the potential costs of high-end conflict with Iran.⁶⁷ However, the IRGC has been increasingly strained by the persistent, quasi-conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, which require the presence of Iranian personnel to advise, assist, and accompany proxy forces. So what began as IRGC Quds Force deployments to Iraq and Syria have transformed to include elements of the Iranian armed forces that traditionally have exclusively internal roles, such as IRGC Ground Forces, Basij paramilitary units, and the Iranian army.⁶⁸ As such, the maintenance of this force projection model relies on the ability of Iran to move fighters, weapons, and equipment to Iraq and Syria from bases in Iran, often through unreliable mechanisms like aging commercial airliners.⁶⁹ Much as the United States would not necessarily be able to rely

⁶³ Olson, “Iran’s Path Dependent Military Doctrine,” 63.

⁶⁴ Erdbrink, “Iranian Parliament, Facing US Sanctions, Votes to Raise Military Spending.”

⁶⁵ *BBC News*, “Iran Tests Missile Despite Trump Pressure.”

⁶⁶ Olson, “Iran’s Path Dependent Military Doctrine,” 69.

⁶⁷ Connell, “Iran’s Military Doctrine,” 1.

⁶⁸ Bucala, *Iran’s New Way of War in Syria*, 2.

⁶⁹ Nadimi, “Iran Is Still Using Pseudo-Civilian Airlines to Resupply Assad.”

on unhindered access to the region due to Iranian ballistic missile technology, Iran’s force projection methods are highly vulnerable to kinetic targeting.

Implications and Future Research

The unwillingness of the United States and its GCC partners to use their vast conventional military superiority has shifted the balance of power in the region from the conventional to the unconventional realm. Iran then relies on its willingness to assume more risk and its ability to better influence proxies than its adversaries, to achieve favorable foreign policy outcomes despite the opposition of the United States and its Arab allies. The use of proxy groups fundamentally decreases the physical cost a state incurs due to conflict. However, when the soldiers of a state die advising and assisting these proxies, it is more difficult to justify domestically, because using proxies signals that the objectives are not important enough to warrant decisive intervention. Therefore, states are most successful when they use proxies not as a cost-reduction mechanism alone but because proxies are better able to achieve the desired end than conventional military forces. If the United States is unwilling to risk additional battle deaths or domestic political repercussions to prevent Iran from projecting power across the Middle East, then it must instead apply cost-imposing strategies.

Increasing the effectiveness of special operations forces from allied Arab states through intelligence sharing, kinetic strikes, training, and attached American advisors, while encouraging deployments of these elements to areas where Iranian advisors and IRGC units operate, would increase the human cost of Iranian activities. In addition to targeting Iran’s primary efforts in Iraq and Syria, these partnered operations should also confront peripheral Iranian efforts throughout the Gulf, including Yemen, in order to exploit the weakness of Iranian popular support for its presence therein. By working through Arab partners, the United States can apply the indigenous force necessary to confront Iranian proxies, while increasing the likelihood that Arab states achieve a confluence of shared ideology and objectives with their proxies, which eludes the United States as a separate actor. Saudi and Emirati support to Yemeni military units recapturing the port of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait serve as good examples of the type of effort the United States should expand.⁷⁰

In addition to combating Iranian proxy groups directly, targeting the ground, air, and sea logistical routes that the IRGC Quds Force uses to supply its proxies would affect Iran’s ability to support its efforts in the region. As long as Iran continues to rely on a domestically based force projection model, its network is vulnerable to air strikes, raids, and sabotage. An expanded network of friendly proxies partnered with US and allied-Arab advisors would be ideally suited to facilitating this type of targeting. In addition, delegating strike

⁷⁰ Browning, “Yemeni Government, Saudi-Led Forces Retake Red Sea Strait.”

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authority against Iranian sustainment nodes to regional US commanders would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of a counterlogistics strategy.

The effectiveness of both the direct and indirect targeting of Iranian proxies depends on whether these efforts will affect Iran's resolve. Imposing enough cost in areas Iran considers vital to its national interests could result in Iranian leadership assuming too much risk, leading to shifts in domestic public opinion. This loss of popular support could lead to subsequent shifts in Iranian foreign policy to avoid electoral defeat. All this said, the balance of power between the United States and Iran in the Middle East is more a balance of resolve. The United States must either find the willingness to expose its forces to more risk and thus develop more effective and loyal proxies or facilitate the operations of partner states more willing to do so.

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