

Editors: **Diane Labrosse** and **Seth Offenbach**

Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

**Afshon Ostovar.** “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran’s Way of War.” *Security Studies* (2018). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862>.

Published by ISSF on **9 May 2019**

<https://issforum.org/articlereviews/116-iran>

Review by **Daniel Sobelman, Hebrew University of Jerusalem**

---

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the American media paid little attention to the fact that the U.S. was about to end hundreds of years of Sunni supremacy in one of the Middle East’s most important countries. Among the farthest reaching consequences of America’s introduction of democracy to the Shiite-majority country was the fact that it removed a powerful bulwark from Iran’s path to wider regional influence. The most important long-term change after the invasion was not the adoption of a democratic system in ‘the land of the two rivers,’ it was the fact that Iraq had become a weak state susceptible to foreign influence.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the fall of Iraq revealed and exacerbated the region’s main political and religious fault line between the Arab world and Iran and between Sunni and Shiite Islam. It was a year after the toppling of Iraq’s longtime dictator Saddam Hussein that King Abdallah of Jordan coined the term “Shiite crescent” to describe Iran’s increasing influence in the Levant.<sup>1</sup> This perception was only reinforced in the summer of 2006, when Israel fought and did not win a month-long war with the Lebanese Hezbollah—an organization that constitutes Iran’s most impressive success at exporting its revolution.

The belief that Iran was slowly consolidating its presence in the Middle East received yet another boost in the wake of the Arab Spring, which brought its influence to Syria, and importantly, to Israel’s doorstep on the Golan Heights. When the Iran nuclear deal was reached in 2015, Iran’s adversaries grew ever more alarmed, as the international agreement fell short of restraining Iran’s non-nuclear activities, namely its missile program and regional behavior. And although the United States has since withdrawn from the nuclear deal and re-imposed sanctions on Iran, the geopolitical power struggle in the Middle East continues to revolve around Iran’s desire to shape an anti-Western regional order.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robin Wright and Peter Baker, “Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State,” *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

As Syria descended into all-out civil war, it soon became clear that when it came to guiding events on the ground, Iran, unlike the United States and the international community, was willing and able to put boots on the ground—albeit not exactly its own boots. Rather, Iran has proven quite adept at employing militant groups far from its borders. It is precisely this phenomenon that Afshon Ostovar delves into in his recent article in *Security Studies*. In the twenty-first century, he argues, “no state has had more success in utilizing militant clients outside its borders toward strategic ends.” Iran’s clients, he argues, have “blossomed” into “effective proxy forces,” which have “successfully advanced” the country’s strategic interests and helped the Islamic Republic “expand its political influence” and “extend its military power” (1). Moreover, and this is the article’s central argument, Iran’s strategy of putting others’ boots on the ground has reached a level of conceptual coherence that meets the definition of the much-debated concept of grand strategy. Iran’s military clients, Ostovar claims, have become “the centerpiece of Iran’s grand strategy” and thus “an investment Iran is not likely to easily abandon” (11).

Ostovar is not the first academic scholar to study the employment of armed groups in the context of a country’s grand strategy. In doing so he builds on the work of S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, in which they analyzed Pakistan’s use of proxy militants as a grand strategic tool in the country’s long conflict with India.<sup>2</sup> But whereas Pakistan eventually encountered what Kapur and Ganguly call the “principle-agent problem”—meaning the process by which the client gains independent military and political clout and ends up using it to the detriment of its state patron—Iran has enjoyed “deeper alliances with its clients” (7). That Iran has been able to largely overcome this problem owes to several factors, namely the uniting nature of its type of political Islam. Iran’s clients have adopted its theocratic system and view Iran’s supreme leader as ultimate authority; they also identify with Iran’s state interests (8). Sunni political Islam, in comparison, is divisive, and has thus helped breed groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, whose primary victims have been fellow Sunni Muslims. In contrast, Shiite groups exhibit greater discipline and cohesion. This does not mean that the dynamics of alliance politics, resulting from the fact that even close allies have different capabilities, constraints, and interests, do not apply to Iran’s so-called Axis of Resistance.

The article oscillates between its promising selling point—the notion that Iran has successfully designed and employed a militia-based grand strategy—and the existence of distinct limitations to Iran’s actual ability to harness its clients in the service of credible power projection. Ostovar is well aware of the numerous costs associated with Iran’s growing reliance on militant clients. Militias may be relatively inexpensive, but they entail other costs, which is why Ostovar dedicates nearly an entire section of the article to the costs Iran has incurred, and those it might yet suffer, as a result of its strategic choices. Tehran’s extraterritorial activities, the author acknowledges, played a role in exposing Iran to “sanctions, hostility from neighboring states, and Iran’s general alienation at the regional and world stages” (25). Yet he ultimately believes that those costs “have been outweighed by the success Iran has been able to achieve: the capability to actively counter America’s regional agenda, while expanding its regional political influence and military footprint” (29).

The article offers a detailed and useful historical overview of the origins of Iran’s proxy strategy, starting in 1979 following the Islamic Revolution and reaching all the way to its present involvement in places like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. As Ostovar points out, Iran’s reliance on clients “is a product of its enduring hostility to the United States and US influence in the Middle East” (14). As we are told, it took over two decades until

---

<sup>2</sup> S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, “The Jihad Paradox: Pakistan and Islamist Militancy in South Asia,” *International Security* 37:1 (Summer 2012): 111–41.

Iran's investment in militant organization began to yield meaningful results. Those were sufficiently palpable to instill alarm in Iran's regional opponents, which were fearful of its hegemonic adrenalin. As Ostovar notes, this strategy produced "limited success through the 1990s, but has paid increasing dividends in the 21st century" (22). This variation is no coincidence. The unipolar moment, which shaped the Middle East throughout the 1990s, brought about a Western-oriented regional order that revolved around the Arab-Israeli peace process and what appeared to be Israel's gradual acceptance into the region. The main actors in the Arab world remained firmly in the grip of powerful presidents for life. Syria and Lebanon, which are today firmly in Iran's sphere of influence, were engaged in American-mediated peace talks with Israel or, alternatively, in an attempt to resume them. As noted, the conditions in the region have since shifted dramatically. For over a decade now, the Middle East has been anything but orderly. Beyond the collapse of the peace process, the outcome has been Arab weakness and regional disorder. To this void Iran entered, but importantly also Russia, whose interests in the region are far from compatible with those of Iran. Russia's presence in Syria, which is unaccounted for in the article, places serious limits to Iran's ability to consolidate its presence in the country.

Against this backdrop of regional breakdown, Iran's militant clients have enabled it to show up and assert itself in a war-torn region that has suffered from the absence of a powerful architect and a clear sense of direction. This achievement cannot be belittled, as the balance of power appears to have shifted in Iran's favor. But at the same time, it should not be overstated, as there remain built-in obstacles to Iran's ability to insert itself into a region whose inhabitants have for centuries referred to Persians as *ajam*, meaning non-Arab outsiders.

As Ostovar acknowledges, Iran's strategy "feeds off of regional disorder" (29). For Iran and its clients to maximize their influence, their host states "will need to be weak" and susceptible to Iranian influence (27). At least at the current stage, Ostovar's depiction of Iran's clients in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, as "a transnational military alliance" that "actively promotes and defends Iran's regional interests" (25) is accurate but only to an extent—precisely because Iran's strategy, so aptly analyzed in this article, is asymmetric in nature and requires disorder to succeed. Moreover, there seem to be clear limits to the willingness and ability of Iran's allies to carry their patron's hegemonic ambitions to the next stage, where they are bound to come up against powerful opposition.

This applies to Iran's most formidable ally-client, the Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah may have sacrificed thousands of fighters in recent years in Syria, but one could argue that it would have been compelled to deploy in Syria regardless of the Iranian factor—or else it would have had to fight the Islamic State on the streets of Lebanon. After all, Hezbollah's stronghold in southern Beirut was already being targeted by rockets and explosive cars. The events in the Syrian arena over the past year have so far disproved the author's claim that "Iran can credibly threaten to strike its opponents through its clients." That "Hezbollah in Lebanon has targeted Israel with rocket attacks" (13) is of course true. Moreover, it has, with Iran's help, established mutual deterrence vis-à-vis Israel.<sup>3</sup> But the fact that the Party of God has so far been extremely careful about trying to extend its deterrence to the Syrian arena and stop Israel's systematic bashing of its Iranian patron represents one of Iran's most striking failures. In recent months, Israel has struck dozens of Iranian targets in Syria without having to worry about a potential reprisal from Hezbollah in Lebanon. Likewise, neither

---

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Sobelman, "Learning to Deter: Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006-16," *International Security* 41:3 (Winter 2016/2017): 151-196.

Hezbollah nor Iran's other clients were factors in the decisions of Israel and the United States not to take military action against Iran's nuclear program.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, Hezbollah ultimately operates in a political environment that is deeply suspicious of Iran's regional agenda. For instance, in December 2017, Qais al-Khazali, the commander of the Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq, pledged to send fighters to Lebanon should Hezbollah come under an Israeli attack. The Lebanese government promptly reacted by banning al-Khazali's entry into the country and issuing an arrest warrant against him.<sup>5</sup> Several months later, twenty members of the Iraqi group Kataib Hezbollah—another Iranian military client—were killed near the Syria-Iraq border in an Israeli air raid.<sup>6</sup> Later it was reported that the targeted militants were helping Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps traffic weapons into Syria.<sup>7</sup> Hezbollah made do with offering its sincere condolences. These examples are indicative of the limits to the risks Iran's clients will ultimately take for it, and vice versa.

Ultimately, the most important arena in which Iran's regional influence and grand strategy will be tested is Syria, where Iran has been attempting to establish deterrence vis-à-vis Israel.<sup>8</sup> At present, however, the Syrian arena does not appear too promising from an Iranian standpoint—precisely because Iran's strategy, as Ostovar shows, requires a weak opponent, which Israel is not. Syria may publicly present itself as a member of the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance, but ultimately, once that country stabilizes it will have little appetite to plunge itself in a renewed war so that Iran can solidify its presence in the country. While Iran may have overcome the “principle-agent problem,” and has indeed made advances thanks to the mistakes of others, it has yet to overcome those among the region's actors which have not been ravaged by the recent Arab upheaval. One of the unintended consequences of Iran's perceived rise has been the closing of ranks among Israel and the so-called moderate Arab states.

The distinct gap between Iran's unprecedented yet limited success at employing militant clients in disintegrating countries, and the costs Iran has incurred in pursuit of its regional ambitions is not easily bridged. Ostovar offers a careful and knowledgeable look at Iran's achievements, and presents the heavily caveated conclusion that Iran's gains have been worth the costs. He may prove right, in which case the Saudi-led camp will ultimately have to “share the neighborhood” with Iran and “institute some sort of a cold peace,”

---

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Sobelman, “Restraining an Ally: Israel, the United States, and Iran's Nuclear Program, 2011-2012,” *Texas National Security Review* 1:4 (August 2018): 10-38.

<sup>5</sup> “Lebanon's Hariri Denounces Iraqi Shi'ite Paramilitary's Visit to Border,” *Reuters*, 9 December 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne and Oren Liebermann, “Israel behind Airstrike in Syria, US Official Says,” CNN, 18 June 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen and Felicia Schwartz, “Israel Broadens Fight against Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 July 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Hasan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, “Iran's Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence,” *International Affairs* 95:2 (February 2019).

as President Barack Obama famously prescribed before leaving office.<sup>9</sup> The process, however, is far from over and the jury of history is still out.

**Daniel Sobelman** is an assistant professor of international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. Among his recent publications are “Learning to Deter: Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006-16,” *International Security* 41:3 (Winter 2016/2017): 151-196, and “Restraining an Ally: Israel, the United States, and Iran’s Nuclear Program, 2011-2012,” *Texas National Security Review* 1:4 (August, 2018): 10-38.

©2019 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](#)

---

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, The Obama Doctrine, *The Atlantic* (April 2018).