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**Brothers in the Axis of Resistance or
Pawns?
Iranian proxy warfare, 1979-2019**

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Abstract

Since its foundation, the Islamic Republic of Iran has developed its relationship with non-state allies throughout the Middle East and beyond, often using them to engage in proxy warfare with its enemies. This topic has seen increasing attention by academics and policy-makers. Using the proxy groups as case studies and classical comparison, this thesis analyzes what drives Iran to deploy these proxies to wage war on its enemies, and under which circumstances Iran does not engage in proxy warfare, as well as the factors that make Iran develop lasting and deep relationships with its proxies and under which circumstances these relationships stay superficial.

Three main hypotheses are tested: first the identity-based hypothesis, that Iran feels compelled to help fellow Shias and the Palestinians in their struggles against local oppressors, the West and Israel, being driven by a responsibility to protect them born out of Shia religion and Khomeinist revolutionary ideology, together forming the Axis of resistance. Second the power-based hypothesis, that Iran is primarily driven by realist concerns to defend and secure itself and its sphere of influence, making proxies Iran's pawns. Lastly a factionalism-based hypothesis, an alternative explanation is competition between the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Foreign Ministry as causing the IRGC to engage with proxies to pursue their foreign policy.

By testing these three hypotheses in several case studies spanning four decades and geographically the Middle East and beyond, this thesis presents a comprehensive approach to the reasons behind Iranian proxy warfare as well as a contribution to a more identity and ideology focused approach to the study of proxy wars.

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List of Abbreviations

ANA: Afghan National Army

CIA: Central Intelligence Organization

DV: Dependent Variable

EFP: Explosively Formed Penetrators

FATA: Federally-Administered-Tribal-Areas

GCC: Gulf-Cooperation-Council

ID: Independent Variable

IDF: Israeli Defense Forces

IEA: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

IED: Improvised-Explosive-Devices

IFP: Iranian Foreign Policy

IMN: Islamic Movement in Nigeria

IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps

IRGCASF: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force

IRI: Islamic Republic of Iran

ISA: Islamic State of Afghanistan

ISI: Inter-Services Intelligence

ISIS/IS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Islamic State

ISIS-K: Islamic State Khorasan Province

ISO: Imamia Student's Organization

JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party

MANPADS: Man-portable-air-defense-systems

MEK: Mojahedeen-e-Kalb

MRAP: Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle

NCO: Non-commissioned officer

OIRAP: Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula

PLO: Palestinian Liberation Organization

PIJ: Palestinian Islamic Jihad

PMF: Popular Mobilization Forces

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

RPG: Rocket-propelled-grenade

SCIRI: Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq

SLA: South Lebanese Army

RAF: Rote-Armee-Fraktion

WMD: Weapon of Mass Destruction

Introduction

On January 9, 2020, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force (IRGCASF) Amir Ali Hajizadeh gave a press conference, in which claimed Iranian responsibility for a missile attack on an American base in Iraq the night before. This attack had happened in retaliation for the assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani on January 3rd, 2020, by American forces. The assassination followed by the Iranian retaliation¹ was a watershed moment in the conflict between Iran and the US, a conflict that Iran often waged by supporting armed-non state actors – proxies - that attacked the US and its allies. When Commander Hajizadeh gave the press conference he was speaking at a podium featuring Qassem Soleimani, and he was standing in front of the flags of Iran, the IRGC and the IRGCASF, but also the flags of Lebanese Hezbollah, the Yemeni Ansar-Allah - known as the Houthis, Palestinian group Hamas, the Afghan and Pakistani volunteer units Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainebiyoun and the Iraqi al-Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (donya-e-eqtasad 2020). Together these groups could field hundreds of thousands of fighters across the Middle East. The message was clear, Iran could not only mobilize its own forces against the US but proxies across the Middle East.

With the civil wars that followed the so-called Arab Spring, scholars have increasingly put a spotlight on Iran's proxies that were involved in conflicts across the Middle East. Especially Iraq and Syria highlighted the complex network of proxy groups Iran had built over the years. It seemed that whenever there was a conflict in the Middle East, Iranian proxies would get involved. While some groups had been the focus of intense studies before, especially Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, others like the Houthis became only a focus of attention when they drastically increased their power and almost took over the entirety of Yemen, and

¹ On January 8th an anti-aircraft missile Tor M-1 system of the IRGC shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, killing all onboard. The unit had mistaken the civilian airliner for an American plane attacking Iran (Salmani 2020).

subsequently their relationship with Iran became obvious. Scholars have researched these groups as individual actors in their local contexts and the broader context of the proxy phenomenon, but Iranian proxies have also been studied, by academics and think tanks, in the context of Iran's foreign policy. All these studies usually ascribed Iranian proxy behavior to a mixture of ideology, security concerns, and power projection. Yet these concepts have so far not been thoroughly analyzed, to see which explanations hold true and in which relation the different explanations stand to each other. This thesis will help to close this gap. Analyzing what explanations make sense by assessing them in different case studies of Iranian proxy warfare and some negative case studies, where proxy warfare ought to be expected but has not happened.

Proxy warfare in this thesis is defined as attacks that are on a larger scale than mere terrorist attacks and assassinations and by a relationship between proxy and sponsor – in this case Iran – that is framed by a dependence of the proxy on Iran. The question of whether these groups are proxies will also be analyzed in the context of this thesis. The aspect of dependency is crucial because dependency leads to control. A group that constantly acts against Iranian plans and instructions would be cut off from funding, leading to an end to the proxy relationship. If a group can be considered dependent on Iran, and this support continues in light of its operations, then it is safe to assume that those actions are mostly endorsed by Iran and can be analyzed accordingly as Iranian proxy policy. If a group is independent enough to be operationally not dependent on Iran, there is no proxy relationship. The group might still align with Iran for ideological reasons or because interests converge, but it is not a proxy.

The focus of this thesis is on the motivation behind Iranian proxy warfare. In the literature this is most often ascribed to a mix of ideology and power-based interests – security and/or increased influence. But this relationship and whether these explanations make sense in all cases are never analyzed. This gap will be closed by this thesis. By studying proxy wars,

Iran's behavior will be made more understandable. Should Iranian behavior be driven by ideology and Shi'a identity then Iran will intervene in conflicts that are ideologically relevant or touch upon the identity of Iran as a Shi'a theocratic state. If it is about security, Iran will not get involved in conflicts that are far from its borders and do not touch upon Iran's national security and its economic well-being: Iran would focus on regions that are geopolitically relevant and give it greater status and influence as a regional power. Lastly the role of factionalism is often underrepresented when discussing Iranian proxy warfare but features in works on Iranian foreign policy and will be covered in this thesis.

These three explanations are the main focus of this thesis. By understanding the motivation behind Iranian proxy warfare, future conflicts involving Iranian proxies will be better understood and Iran's priorities in these conflicts will be better specified. The identity and ideology factors show the need to think of proxy wars not only as geopolitical tools but as tools to fulfil ideological and identity-based duties to protect co-religionists, protect holy places, and export revolutionary ideology. This thesis thereby contributes to the development of an ideology-identity based way of thinking about proxy wars.

Importance of the thesis. The importance of this thesis lies in the geopolitical importance of Iran. Iran is a regional power in the Middle East, a region crucial for the world economy because of its vast oil and gas reserves, as well as crucial sea lanes such as Suez and the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, the Middle East has seen some of the bloodiest wars of the early 21st century with the Syrian, Iraqi and Yemeni civil wars costing millions of lives in total. Iran is also situated right at the crossroads between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. Iranian involvement and weapons fuel conflicts across the Middle East. Further, the Iranian nuclear program is raising concerns across the globe. Iran is one of the most important geopolitical players and proxy warfare is the main mode of Iranian military action abroad, therefore understanding the motivation behind it and developing a model of what makes Iran

engage in proxy warfare is essential for understanding patterns of cooperation and conflict in the Middle East.

Thesis structure. The first chapter deals with the theory. Two main theories need to be considered for this subject: first, the theories of proxies coming from international relations studies and security studies. Second, theories on Iranian Foreign Policy; here an extensive description of the existing explanations of Iranian proxy behavior will be presented with power-based, identity-based and factionalism-based explanations presented and discussed. Then the research gap is presented: namely what explanation best explains Iranian proxy warfare – and in which relationship these different explanations stand.

The three aforementioned main explanations have been identified through studies of the literature on proxies and Iranian foreign policy. The first is power-based. It is a dominant school of thought in the study of Iranian foreign policy, which sees Iranian behavior as primarily driven by Iran's geopolitical interests and its desire to increase its security in the face of hostile states, but also to expand its power and increase its influence. A side aspect is to improve Iran's economic situation by gaining access to markets abroad. This explanation sees Iran as primarily having its national interests in mind when engaging in proxy warfare.

The next explanation sees Iran as primarily driven by its identity and ideology. Iran's revolutionary ideology promotes the support of oppressed people and a leadership that invokes revolution export and anti-imperialism. There is also the fact that Iran is a Shi'a state, therefore a desire to protect fellow Shi'as can be a factor in Iran deciding on proxy warfare. There is also the ideological and constitutional commitment to help the cause of Palestinians. This explanation sees Iranian proxy wars as a result of Iranian revolutionary ideology and Shi'a identity.

The last explanation sees factionalism as a driving force for Iranian proxy warfare. Factionalism involves a competition between IRGC and Foreign Ministry over the direction of Iranian foreign policy. Iran's proxies under the guidance of the IRGC could be used to steer Iran's foreign policy into another direction as intended by the Foreign Ministry or at least spoil the latter's foreign policy goals.

These three groups of theories offer alternative explanations of Iranian foreign policy: power, identity/ideology and factionalism. They are tested for each of the case studies, lastly the results from the different case studies are compared to come to an overall conclusion.

The second chapter deals with methodology. This thesis will use classical comparison and case studies to answer the research questions. The cases will be analyzed to produce data. Classical comparison will then primarily be used to analyze said data and in the conclusion to explain patterns of Iranian proxy behavior. This methodology is introduced in detail. This is followed by an introduction of the concept of proxy: The main aspect of the proxy- sponsor relationship being the operational dependency of a proxy on Iran. Then hypothesis and sub-hypotheses inferred from the three main approaches are operationalized and evidence that would strengthen, challenge or disprove each hypothesis is specified. Then the individual cases for this study are presented with a quick overview. There are eight case studies in total - including two negative case studies, in which no active proxy warfare happened, contrary to expectations based on the three explanations of Iranian proxy behavior. There is also a brief overview of other potential cases and the reasons why they got excluded and a description of impossible cases – highlighting circumstances that make proxy warfare impossible and thereby excluding potential negative cases. For the analysis of the cases and the general analysis of Iranian proxy warfare this thesis takes a diachronic perspective.

The third chapter deals with Iranian proxies in the Levante – Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Sabireen Movement in Palestine. Palestine is an important case because anti-Zionism is a cornerstone of Khomeinist ideology. It is also the first cluster case. A cluster case is when several Iranian proxy groups, operating in the same area alongside each other, are analyzed together as one case study, this helps analyze these groups in their shared context. The timeframe under analysis starts basically with the Islamic revolution to the end point of the thesis, in 2019. This analysis is followed by the most famous of Iranian proxy group – Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a center piece in the Iranian proxy network. Hezbollah became especially relevant in the Syrian Civil War, where it would supplement the forces of Bashar al-Assad. Here the timeframe starts with the founding of Hezbollah in the 1980s.

In the fourth chapter are analyzed the Houthis of Yemen and Iran's Iraqi proxy groups – Da'wa party, Badr corps, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The Houthis are a recent proxy of Iran, only arising to prominence in 2015. Iraq is an insightful cluster case because the Iraqi proxies of Iran are the oldest of Iran's proxies, becoming proxies in 1980, and the Iraqi case study touches upon factors of identity, power and security in equal parts presenting a good case study to test the different explanations.

The fifth chapter deals with Afghanistan, featuring the Taliban, a group that has had a complicated relationship with Iran, from being an enemy of Iran to a group that receives support from it. This is followed by an analysis of Liwa Fatemiyoun, an Iranian proxy group made-up of Afghans that operates in Syria alongside government forces as a conventional force.

The last of the empirical chapters is the sixth chapter that looks beyond the Middle East at the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, a negative case study since the group does not engage in violent resistance. Another negative case study included here due to the lack of an Iranian proxy

is Pakistan. The question of why Iran does not engage in proxy warfare in these two cases will be insightful to test the different explanations.

Each of these case studies is presented with a history of the groups, their identity and ideology. In addition, capabilities and relationship with Iran are analyzed, especially the relationship between Foreign Ministry and IRGC. Several phases of their existence are analyzed in detail.

In the seventh chapter the validity of the different explanations is tested and the relationship between the different explanations is presented. The results from the empirical chapter are summarized and compared. This helps exclude certain explanations and give evidence to others. Contradictions and outlier cases are discussed in detail.

Finally, a model that brings together elements from all three explanations and sets them in relationship to each other is developed. This model helps to explain past actions and predict future Iranian behavior. This is followed by brief considerations on further case studies, the relevancy of this thesis for proxy studies and what new research questions arise from empirical results.

I. The Theory of Proxies and Iranian Foreign Policy

1. Introduction

When discussing Iranian proxy warfare, two fields and their respective literatures must be analyzed: First, the literature that is dedicated to proxy wars, originating with security studies; Second, the literature looking at Iranian Foreign Policy (IFP), coming from the field of international relations and Iranian studies. These two fields deal with Iranian proxy wars and explain the motivation behind them. Each field will be discussed with their respective approaches and explanations. There are multiple terms used to describe the subject of this work – Iranian proxy warfare - such as surrogate warfare (Kramer 2010), hybrid warfare or grey zone (Eisenstadt 2021), yet in recent years, the dominant term has become proxy warfare. Like the conflicts, the proxies themselves have variously been described as allies, agents, beneficiaries, clients, friends (Barzegar 2008), mercenaries (Nur Duz, Özcan, and Misto 2021), militias (Leenders and Giustozzi 2019) and surrogates (Kramer 2010). All these terms refer to the same phenomenon and the respective works are included in this survey of the literature on Iranian proxy warfare.

First, this chapter deals with the security studies literature on proxy wars offering some definitions and functional explanations. These functional explanations often offer military and policy recommendations (Fox 2020), but also explanations for proxy wars rooted in risk-aversion, cost-efficiency and strategic opportunity (Fox 2019b). For the most part, proxy war analyses are based on realist assumptions: proxy relations are defined through power hierarchies and dependencies (Rauta 2018). Yet there also exists a nascent proxy warfare literature, which is based on constructivist assumptions (Rauta 2018; Sozer 2016). Constructivism is used to explain depth of relations (Fox 2020), as well as specific (Sozer 2016) and general (Staniland 2015) proxy choices through factors of identity and ideology.

Second, the literature on proxies originating with Iranian studies and international relations, focused more on Iranian foreign policy. This literature splits further: the oldest and most widespread school of thought on Iranian foreign policy and subsequently Iranian proxy warfare is the realist one. The main argument is that power, rational thinking and self-interests are the driving forces behind the decision-making processes of the Iranian leadership. The assumptions behind the realist school will be presented, making a distinction between the defensive realist school (Barzegar and Divsallar 2017), that argues that Iran is defending its sphere of Influence, and the offensive school which argues that Iran is trying to expand its power (Juneau 2015). The conclusion discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the realist approach. This serves as a theoretical background for the first main hypothesis.

Building on the weaknesses of realism, constructivism has developed from the 1990s. It has become quite popular in International Relations (Jung 2019) but is not as widespread in the study of IFP. Basing itself primarily on identity (Karimifard 2012), the assumptions and the arguments of the constructivist literature will be discussed. There are no works dedicated to explaining proxy wars as part of IFP through constructivism, their approach to foreign policy can nonetheless be applied to proxy wars, giving the theoretical background to the second hypothesis.

To give sufficient background to the third hypothesis, which explains proxy wars as a product of inter-agency competition between the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Iranian Foreign Ministry, several fields of the literature will be considered. Firstly the literature on the gradual take-over of the Iranian state institutions through the IRGC Secondly the works on the foreign policy of the IRGC and on the internal power struggles in Iran, especially during the tenures of reformist or conservative governments. These fields of Iran studies will all help paint a clear picture of the scholarly background of the inter-agency

competition hypothesis. So far nobody has explained proxy wars through competition, yet there is sufficient scholarly literature to contextualize it in the existing research.

This leads to the conclusion that summarizes overall gaps and weaknesses as well as common understandings and assumptions.

2. The problem of proxy warfare

Born out of security studies, the study of proxy wars started during the Cold War (Rauta 2020). The military stalemate and the threat of thermo-nuclear weapons made conventional war in the European plains not a feasible solution to the power struggle between East and West. Yet the tensions of the Cold War still found a violent outlet, through wars in the Global South (Hollingshead 2018), which reduced the cost in lives, money and political expenditure for the USA, the Soviet Union and their respective European allies. It is simply more economic to have other people wage proxy wars (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011), rather than have millions of infantrymen and thousands of tanks clash in the Fulda Gap. The Cold War would see many small “hot” proxy wars, starting in 1946 with the clashes in Iran over the socialist puppet states of Azerbaijan and the Kurdish Mahabad republic (Atabaki 2000)² and continuing around the globe, till the end of the Cold War. In some conflicts like the Israeli-Arab wars these proxy wars included both Soviets and Americans supplying arms to their respective allies, in other cases it meant one side fighting a proxy of the other. That was the case in Vietnam, where the US fought the communist insurgency, and Afghanistan, where the Soviets had to fight US-supported Mujaheddin. These new wars were waged more by intelligence officers, elite units and mercenaries than conventional armed forces and led to the creation of dedicated special

² There is a debate in the literature about the scale separatism in Iran’s Azeri and Kurdish provinces and the role these people have played as part of the Iranian nation. Atabakis’ more separatist interpretation of history being not shared by everyone (Ansari 2015).

forces in the involved countries³. The new wars also created a need to academically explain what was happening and to explain the relations that existed between the different actors. This first phase of the proxy literature looked at the then contemporary proxy wars of the Cold War especially in Africa, South America and South-East Asia (Rauta 2020).

A second phase started in the aftermath of 9/11 and the so-called Arab spring⁴, when proxy wars again became a subject of interest, with Hezbollah fighting Israel in 2006 (El Husseini 2010) and the US employing various proxy groups in its war on terrorism. This phase for which the term “Framers” has been suggested (Rauta 2020, 7), also broadened the horizon taking into account empirical examples from ancient history to the Thirty Years War and beyond.

The contemporary phase has yielded a rich theoretical literature which discusses definitions and terminologies. This contemporary literature looks at the questions of what a proxy is, what defines a proxy relationship and how to differentiate between different forms of relationships, also broadening the horizon by including non-state actors as sponsors of proxies (Moghadam and Wyss 2020; Sozer 2016). This literature splits into the dominant realist and a smaller constructivist branch of literature.

Realism is the dominant school of thought in the study of proxy wars. This can partially be explained through structural reasons: given the prevalence of proxy wars in today’s world, there is a demand for experts to explain them to decision makers. This leads to a flow back and forth between government analysts and academics. Many experts on proxy wars have military or intelligence backgrounds making their work focused on building or destroying proxies. Their

³ The US Delta Forces are the most widely known force, which in the last decades has been involved in all US proxy wars, similar formations exist in other countries.

⁴ The Iranian government refers to the so-called Arab spring as the Islamic awakening in places where it is supportive of revolution, wanting to connect the protests to its own “Islamic” revolution (Ahmadian 2021; Zweiri 2016).

outlook is dominated by strategic concerns (Fox 2019a; 2019b), which is conducive to a realist mindset. American officers thinking about the Kurdish militias in Syria are not so much concerned with their ideology, but with the question of how to utilize this American proxy to the fullest. In the same vein, an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) officer might care more about the capabilities, than the ideology, of Iran's proxy Hezbollah. This practical-strategic stance continues in academia, where many researchers produce works mostly concerned with armaments, capabilities, and strategic goals of sponsor countries, rather than questions of identity and ideology (Lane 2020; Kane 2018; Pollak 2016). This is also a methodological problem: troop numbers and armaments are quantifiable and qualitatively assessable, motivations and ideological commitments much less so.

On a basic level, most of the proxy warfare literature assumes a broadly defined realist motivation as the factor behind proxy warfare – proxies are created to secure or expand the power of the sponsor of the proxies. Iranian proxy warfare is assumed to be primarily motivated by power-based concerns: Iran wants to keep or expand its power; therefore, it creates proxies. The advantage this set of literature has over the realist literature dealing with IFP is that it is much more nuanced in its analysis of the proxy relationships, making them the centerpiece of analysis. By considering different proxy-sponsor models, power relationships can be analyzed in greater detail. The realist arguments on why Iran engages in proxy warfare are as follows:

Wear down its enemies. Iran can wear down its enemies without having to engage in full-blown war. Iran cannot afford to endure the economic and human cost of a full-blown war, given the military superiority of its enemies. While there is an Iranian interest in overcoming its archenemy - the US - Iran is aware that if it goes too far it will suffer the superiority of the US air force and navy. Therefore, the ability for Iran to avoid war and still attack its enemies is a motive to engage in proxy war.

Create a sphere of influence. Despite the US having quite a lot of influence in the Middle East, from Tel Aviv to Riyadh or Cairo, the US is quite unpopular with the Arab and Turkish publics. Iran was quite good at gaining favor with the “Arab street”⁵ before the Syrian Civil War (Barzegar 2009; El Kurd 2019). While Gulf-Arabs, Egyptians, Jordanians and others are making peace with Israel, Iran sees an opportunity to gain favor with the “Arab Street” and create networks of influence through its proxies that oppose Israel. This is most evident in Lebanon and Iraq, but also in Yemen and Syria. In all these countries strongly armed Iranian proxies are very influential politically, making Iranian leaders boast that they control four Arab capitals now: Sana’a, Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus (Qassem 2020).

Offset military imbalances. Iran will not be able to match any of its enemies in the near future in conventional terms; thus, proxies enable Iran to pose a formidable threat (Behravesht 2020). Hezbollah has developed into a modern fighting force, which is deeply entrenched in Lebanon both literally and figuratively; the Houthis meanwhile have proven repeatedly that they can go toe-to-toe with the US armed Saudi-military and its proxies in Yemen. These proxies therefore enable Iran to hurt its enemies in case of an attack on Iranian soil.

To conclude, realism dominates the narrative in the proxy literature: proxies are created for security and power goals. Proxy relationships are defined by mostly material interests and power hierarchies. Iran engages with proxies because they are a cheap way of projecting power (Fox 2020). Proxies engage with Iran because in this way they can get arms, money, training and political support (Fox 2019a; Rauta 2018). Realism dominance has yielded a rich and sophisticated literature on proxies. However, it does not consider factors outside of the purview of the power/security nexus. Constructivism tries to remedy this fact.

⁵ The “Arab street” is a term for Arab public opinion especially in the lower strata of society (El Kurd 2019).

In the constructivist proxy literature, the identity factor figures under the terms of transnational constituencies (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Cederman et al. 2013) or co-constituencies; Sozer (2016) identified them as a factor in proxy choice during the Lebanese civil war, building on previous work by Salehyan et al. (2011), thereby introducing constructivism in the field of proxy studies. Yet, so far, constructivism has not offered a comprehensive explanation of all aspects of proxy warfare, rather integrating into the realist one.

The role of religion and identity in proxy choice is important, given that Iran seems to prefer Shi'as (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020). Staniland (2015), using the examples of India and Pakistan, showed how national ideology led states to different stances towards different militias. In his paper, he showed how state ideology shaped decisions towards militias. Pakistan favored Islamist militias while India preferred those with a secular outlook. Thereby showing the way for an ideology-based analysis of a state proxy choice.

Fox (2020; 2021), on the other hand, proposed a new form of proxy relationship that exists alongside others – more realist-based definitions – the cultural proxy. Cultural proxies have a high alignment in identity with their sponsor. This fact, according to him, explains the strength of their bond. This stands in contrast to “contractual” or “coerced” proxies, which are more like mercenaries which are incentivized or forced into fighting (Fox 2020; 2021)⁶. Critics have highlighted that religion alone cannot explain a strong bond, as in cases in Afghanistan and Iraq (Heynes 2014; Ostovar 2018), where Iran failed to build strong and lasting proxy relations with certain groups, despite shared Shi'a faith. Yet, despite this, what these explanations show is that questions of identity and ideology play a significant role in the

⁶ Companies like Blackwater and Wagner are examples of contractual proxies. Coerced proxies would for example be represented through the Afghan National Army that collapsed as soon as Western forces left (Fox 2020). In the Iranian case it is the Fatemiyoun Division which contains Afghan Hazaras who are allegedly forced to join the unit or lured by pay and prospects of citizenship (Schneider 2018).

question of whether a group is chosen as a proxy or not and how strong the subsequent relationships are. Summarizing the arguments:

Identity is a factor that makes a state choose a certain proxy group over others. This can be in the form of ethnic, tribal or religious identity (Cederman et al. 2013). In the case of Iran and Hezbollah, it is religion in the form of Twelver Shi'a Islam. Other political factors exist like common enemies or expediency, yet the strongest factor is identity (Sozer 2016).

State ideology determines how states approach different armed groups. Staniland (2015) showed through the example of Pakistan how an Islamic state primarily relied on militias that are Islamist in nature. The same explanation can be applied to Iran: as a Shi'a Islamist state, Iran will prefer working with those that align ideologically with it. Azerbaijan, for example, is a Shi'a state but ideologically secular and Turkish nationalistic (Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016), which could explain why Iran supported Armenia in its war with Azerbaijan in the 1990s.

Proxies that align culturally with their sponsor have stronger bonds. Overlapping Shi'a identities between proxies and Iran strengthen their bonds, as seen with Hezbollah, which is also Twelver Shi'a and recognizes the supreme leader of Iran as its highest religious authority (El Husseini 2010). This creates a strong bond between those two parties.

The biggest issue of the constructivist proxy literature is that it lacks a coherent theory that touches upon all aspects of proxy warfare. So far, explanations are focused primarily on proxy choice and proxy-sponsor relationship strength. A more comprehensive theory is needed to encompass not just the question about which proxy groups are engaged but also the question of why an engagement in proxy war happens in the first place. This gap in the literature will be in part filled by this thesis, by testing constructivist hypotheses that explain the engagement in proxy warfare. Likewise, the question of motivation for both parties needs more elaboration.

Both the realism and constructivism proxy literature display an exciting potential. The focus on relationships and types of proxies has yielded a rich and well-founded set of concepts to analyze Iranian proxy warfare. The realist literature is less focused on motivations and more focused on materialistic aspects in analyzing power-relations. Meanwhile constructivists lack a comprehensive theory, they explain only piecemeal aspects of proxy warfare. In the case of Iran, a more thorough analysis of the motivation behind Iranian proxy warfare, the goal of this thesis, might yield new insights into why certain proxy relationships form and change. Further aspects, like religious authority and ideology, are relevant when analyzing power structures that are not purely based on materialistic interests.

3. Identity based explanations of Iranian foreign policy

In academia the rational explanation dominates. In the media meanwhile speeches by Iranian leaders are what gains the headlines, often painting a picture of a country run by fanatics and a revolutionary ideology. The real role of such factors as religion and ideology is analyzed by constructivism, which has become an influential school in international relations. Constructivism became relevant in the 1990s with Wendt's (1992) seminal article "Anarchy is what states make of it". Yet despite being relevant in other areas of international relations, in the Iranian case constructivism remains underutilized.

It is important to note that Iranian foreign policy has been interpreted as the result of ideology and religiously inspired identity even before the 1990s. Especially in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution, many scholars interpreted Iranian policy making as an expression of revolutionary and religious-ideological fervor. This pre-constructivist approach was superseded by realists with the presidencies of Rafsanjani and especially Khatami. The realists better explained the more cooperative and economically focused policies of the Iranian leadership in the 1990s and early 2000s, when moderate governments were in power. The constructivist

position, despite being a minority position has since then gained some traction, developing its arguments and frameworks to explain Iranian behavior abroad.

The main argument of the constructivists is that the vast number of legal texts, speeches, fatwas and statements by the Iranian leadership that all affirm ideological and religious commitments cannot simply be ignored as pure propaganda. Instead, the Iranian leadership is indeed strongly influenced in its actions and strategy by religious, domestic and ideological considerations. For this chapter, the constructivist school of thought is split into two branches. While less clear cut than in the case of realists, this division conveys a clear differentiation between constructivists scholars.

The first constructivist branch sees Iranian foreign policy behavior as constrained by its identity. Religious norms and rules, ideological tenants, domestic considerations and feelings limit Iranian freedom of action (Chan 2012). As for proxy wars, this expresses itself in a sort of “responsibility to protect” towards fellows Shi’as, Palestinians but also holy shrines (Nia 2011; Ward 2005).

The second constructivist branch on the other hand sees Iranian behavior as strongly directed by its identity. The ideology of the Islamic revolution, the tenants of the Shi’a creed and the identity of the Iranian state, all heavily influence Iranian foreign policy behavior. While Iran pursues these policies, they are limited by realist considerations and the limited capabilities of the Iranian state and military. In this narrative, proxy wars serve to spread the ideology of the Islamic revolution across the Middle East and the world. They are needed to fulfill religious duties towards fellow Muslims and express a desire of the Iranian leaderships to rule the Muslim world through the ideology of the Velayat-e-faqih (Salamey and Othman 2011).

Both branches of the literature and their arguments regarding proxy wars will be discussed in-depth below. Neither approach has produced any works dedicated to proxy wars,

but the arguments about why Iran engages in proxy wars can be worked out of the constructivist framework.

The idea behind the first constructivist school of Iranian foreign policy is that Iranian decision-makers are limited in their means to implement policy by factors of identity. Agreeing in principle with the realist school that the Iranian behavior is inspired by national self-interest, they affirm that leaders have ideological and religious beliefs, values as well as feelings - in short, an identity (Soltaninejad 2018) - that limits what they consider to be viable options. These beliefs limit Iran from freely engaging with countries with which relations are proscribed by its identity. For instance, siding with Israel and the US over the Palestinians is a proscribed choice. Beliefs also forces the Iranian leadership to act in certain situations even when expecting negative political effects. For example, in Syria, siding with Assad had many negative repercussions and created a lot of hostility towards Iran. Similarly, at times, the Iranian leadership sees itself dutybound to support Palestinians and other Shi'as. The arguments of for the first branch of constructivism are the followings:

Fulfilling duties. Proxies are a way to fulfill religious and ideological duties without compromising Iranian security and other interests and being cheap in money and blood. The support is not an expression of a desire to spread the ideology of the Islamic revolution nor is it an absolute necessity. In certain cases, the leadership needs to live up to its preached values. This fulfills the duties to engage Israel and the US, without compromising the security of Iran itself. This is the weakest form in which identity expresses itself in Iranian foreign policy. It represents the gradual shift from realist to constructivist interpretations whereby Iran just tries to fulfill its duties. This could potentially be seen for example in the case of support for the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, which is a Shi'a non-state actor quite removed from Iran. Yet this support is minimal and more symbolic and does not fundamentally challenge the situation (Tangaza 2019), unlike for example the support for Hezbollah.

Iran has a responsibility to protect. Iran sees itself as having a religious duty to protect fellow Muslims and especially Shi'as and Palestinians (Ward 2005; Nia 2011). This is not unlike Western democracies and their argument to have a responsibility to get involved in conflicts, for example in the Balkans or in Africa. While this duty of Iran in theory applies to all Muslims (and by extension all oppressed humans), the most important groups in this regard are fellow Shi'as and the Palestinians. Whereas Iran's dominant religion is the 12er Shi'a Islam, the Iranian clergy also accepts other Shi'as such as the Alawites or the Zaydis of Yemen as fellow Shi'as⁷. This responsibility to protect fellow Muslims is based on religious grounds and expressed in the Iranian constitution (Kamel 2018). From this perspective, proxies offer a way for Iran to support the case of Palestinians but also enable Shi'as around the Middle East and beyond to defend themselves against aggression either from Western or Sunni forces. This offers an explanation of the question of Iranian proxy choice. Iran will choose proxies of Shi'a denomination or Palestinian identity to help them defend themselves, being less concerned with other causes and peoples. Another aspect is the responsibility for holy sites, meaning grave-shrines of the Imams, their families and important mosques. From the bombing of the Al-Askari mosque in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 to the blowing up of multiple shrines and mosques by the Islamic State (IS or ISIS), Shi'a sites have been the target of violence in recent times. In Syria Iran has formed proxy groups with the express purpose of defending specific shrines: the Liwa Fatemiyoun, a division-sized proxy force formed out of Afghans, has the task of defending the shrine of Zaynab bint Ali (Schneider 2018). The important role these networks of shrines and mosques play in organizing and legitimizing Iranian proxy forces is also insightful since it mirrors the approach of the followers of Khomeini in pre-revolutionary Iran. Here mosques also

⁷ There are various forms of Shi'a Islam, the most important and dominant one is the 12er Shi'as which is the denomination dominating in Iran, other important sects are the Zaydis (5er Shi'as) in Yemen or Ismailis (7er Shi'as). All Shi'as agree on the principle that the leader of the Islamic community (Ummah) should come from the family of Ali. They disagree over which descendant is supposed to be the last one legitimate heir to the mantle of the prophet. Relations between Shi'as are for the most part amicable. The Alawi's of Syria were only recognized in the 1970s as fellow Shi'as (Nasr 2006).

became central hubs of organization and violent actions against the enemies of Khomeinism (Vakili-Zad 1990). Iran therefore pursues a strategy of militarization of the religious space that has its roots in the time before the Islamic revolution.

According to second school of thought of constructivism, the Iranian leadership rather than being limited by its identity, is guided by it. This does not mean that the actions are interpreted as blindly ideological or religiously fanatic, because they embody realist assumptions.

Spreading the revolutionary ideology. By spreading its ideology to other places, the leadership can further secure its own hold onto Iran. Supporting fellow Shi'as and spreading the revolutionary ideology to places like Lebanon and Iraq among others, helps secure the Islamic revolution at home. It can create stakeholders abroad that will come to its aid in time of need, but also creates new followers in times when in Iran itself the revolutionary zeal is only found among the ever-shrinking numbers of regime loyalists (Golkar and Aarabi 2021). This spread makes the (Iranian) Islamic revolution independent of Iran, ensuring the survival of the ideology even when it is increasingly diluted at home. In this view, proxy wars also fulfill the ideological duties of spreading the revolution without engaging in conventional conflict.

Oust Zionists, Western and takfiri⁸ forces from the Islamic world. Although the Iranian leadership is by far not as fanatical as militant Sunni Islamists, there is an important narrative that the holy city of Jerusalem⁹ needs to be liberated from the Israelis (Taremi 2014; Mozaffari 2009) and that Iran needs to liberate the wider Middle East from the domination of the US and the forces of Wahhabi Islam (Ostovar 2016a). Some Iranian discourses even

⁸ In Iranian discourses Sunni Islamists and often Wahhabis are often referred to as takfiri, which means excommunicated Muslims (Kousary and Hansen 2022; Ostovar 2016).

⁹ Usually, Jerusalem is referred to as al-Quds in Iran, the term Beit-e Moghaddas is also used, but not as often. The IRGC special forces are named Quds Forces after Jerusalem which they ought to liberate one day.

challenge the Saudi control over the twin holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Although this is a fringe argument in academia, it is nonetheless one that is picked up from time to time, especially in right-wing media. Proxies are the ground-troops of Iran that help it constantly attack and weaken its enemies to fulfill its ideological goal. This narrative also might help to explain proxy choice since Iran uses proxies that align with its ideological goal.

Building an Islamic civilization. An argument that is related to the former and has gained more traction in academic circles is the idea that Iran is trying to build an Islamic civilization (Assoudeh 2017; Golkar and Aarabi 2021). Khamenei has brought up the concept in speeches of a second phase of the Islamic revolution, a transformation of Iran away from the compromise of an Islamic republic towards an Islamic state, with the end goal of an Islamic civilization. Achieving an Islamic civilization by purging those elements that lack the necessary zeal from positions of power and influence, and changing laws and institutions, is primarily a domestic goal. However, its scope also encompasses foreign policy. The foreign policy goal involves pushing back foreign powers and entrenching Shi'a Islamists in power, so that they can spread their ideology and help create this Islamic civilization (Golkar and Aarabi 2021). In this view, proxies are the tip of the spear in the fight to create an Islamic civilization.

A compelling argument that constructivist can make is that their view is based on statements by Iranian leaders. Especially the late Imam Khomeini and since his ascension Supreme Leader Khamenei are often very vocal, in speeches and publications, in their emphasis on ideology and religion. Both leaders insist on religious ideology and duty as the factors that should drive Iranian foreign policy and strategy making (Salamey and Othman 2011). Constructivists can incorporate the official ideological narratives into their explanations, which realists often cannot.

However, too much focus on ideology fails to explain Iranian behavior that is very much rooted in national self-interest. The Iranian leadership regularly shows what it calls “heroic flexibility” (Yazdani 2019) when engaging with other countries in negotiations. The Iranian leadership is not hellbent on spreading its ideology, and there are cases that at least at first glance contradict the responsibility to protect fellow Shi’as, like in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where Iran supported Armenia, or with discrimination of Shi’as in Pakistan. On the other hand, constructivist narratives can explain why Iran is engaging with even far away partners and is willing to spend such a vast expenditure on its proxies. A problem of the constructivist literature is its lack of dealing with proxy wars. This gap will be filled by this thesis, which will offer and test constructivist explanations for Iranian proxy warfare.

4. Iranian proxy warfare: power-based explanations

Realism is the main schools of thought on IFP and there are good arguments that national interest supersedes ideology when it comes to making Iranian foreign policy (Ramazani 2004). The realist school of thought on Iranian foreign policy focuses primarily on Iranian national interest and power as the deciding factors in explaining Iranian foreign policy (Barzegar 2008). Incidents like accepting Israeli help during the Iran-Iraq war (Ramazani 2004), engaging with the US over its nuclear program in negotiations (Ahmadian 2021), are all primarily explained through realism lenses. The roles played by the Iranian Foreign Ministry and the Iranian presidents and their engagements with the world present Iran as a country run by political realists. The Iranian leadership is, in this narrative, not firebrand fanatics but rational leaders, which advance their own self-interest through carefully calculated decisions.

Accordingly, ideology is not seen as a crucial factor (Soltaninejad 2018). The national interest can be used to explain actions, which are not in line with religious ideology, such as Iran supporting Christian Armenia against the mostly Shi’a state of Azerbaijan in the 1990s

(Mozaffari 2009). Because a strong Azerbaijan might develop aspirations to gain control over Iranian Azerbaijan (Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016; Mozaffari 2009; Maleki and Afrasiabi 2003), supporting Armenia made sense from a realist perspective.

Historically the realist interpretation of IFP started gaining more traction in the beginning of the 1990s (Barzegar 2008). Iran had ended the “imposed war” with Iraq¹⁰, after eight bloody years, and was trying to find its place in the post-Cold War era. During the imposed war, Iran was often portrayed by Western observers as a state run by fanatics consuming itself in an endless war. In the 1990s the focus of its policies was considered as leaning towards reconstruction and reintegration into the local political and economic systems (Maleki and Afrasiabi 2003). The downfall of the Soviet regime had created new states to Iran’s north¹¹ and the end of the war with Iraq paved the way for a normalization in the relations with Saudi-Arabia and other neighbors (Barzegar 2008).

After 9/11, Iran initially cooperated with the Americans, supporting their attacks against the Taliban (Azizi 2020). Yet, after the freight ship *Karine A* was captured by Israeli commandos, revealing it was shipping Iranian weapons to Hamas, the relationship between Iran and the US soured (Milani 2006), culminating in the infamous Axis of evil speech by US president George H. Bush in 2002 (Kamel 2018). The year after that, the US had invaded Iraq, leading many to fear that Iran would be next. However, a Sunni insurgency and Shi’a militants, armed and supported by Iran, were able to bog the US down in Iraq.

Yet even here, a split in analysis by the realist literature surfaces (Treviño 2013). The question was if Iran was acting defensively to prevent a US-led invasion by destabilizing Iraq (Yazdani 2019; Barzegar and Divsallar 2017; Taremi 2014; Ward 2005) or whether Iran was

¹⁰ The first gulf war or Iran-Iraq war is often referred to as the “imposed war” *Jang-e Tahmili* in Iranian sources.

¹¹ Directly bordering Iran were now Armenia, Azerbaijan in the northwest and Turkmenistan to the northeast.

trying to expand its sphere of influence (Ekşi 2017; Juneau 2015). In the years following the Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS and the war in Yemen, this scholarly split deepened.

The defensive realist school of thought, derived from neorealist thinking (Taliaferro 2000), firmly argues that Iran's foreign policy is primarily driven by its national interests, but that its actions are primarily defensive in nature, trying to maximize security. Iran tries to defend its place in the Middle East and the wider world, a self-styled role deriving from its size, population, history and geography (Barzegar 2008). Given its situation, Iran must avoid a repetition of a situation in which its home territory is threatened (Vakil 2018). But for the defensive school, there are further reasons why Iran is involved in conflicts beyond its borders. Three primary motivations are the driving factors:

Economic development. Iran has a young and highly educated population therefore it needs to develop the Middle East's economy and markets (Barzegar 2008) for its own benefit and well-being. To do so it needs allies in the region which are open to Iranian investments and to develop economic ties and cooperate in the sphere of economic policy. Iran's friends and allies in the region are therefore partners to develop Iran's political and, more importantly, economic interests (Barzegar 2008). Given the US tendency to engage in regime-change and military strikes in the region, fortifying Iranian economic interests through proxies is a smart and defensive move.

Defending the Iranian state. Given the historical experience of Iran, this view makes sense: Iran was quasi-colonized from the late 19th to the early 20th century, was split in two after an invasion by the Soviets and British, and it almost lost its northwestern Azerbaijan province as a puppet to the Soviets (Atabaki 2000). It also faced an invasion from Iraq and was forced to wage a war, in which the international community for the most part took the side of the Iraqis. At the same time, it was being flooded by Afghan refugees ("Refugees in Iran" n.d.),

first from the Soviet-Afghan war and then the Afghan civil war. Iran was also almost dragged into a war with the Taliban in the 1990s after they murdered Iranian diplomats (Tarock 1999). This experience led the Iranian leadership to assume a forward defense strategy (Vatanka 2021; Barzegar and Divsallar 2017). The leadership wants to make sure that there is never again a threat coming from its western or eastern borders (Barzegar 2009). It is therefore a logical conclusion that Iran is involved in its immediate neighborhood to safeguard its own borders and national sovereignty (Ghanbari Jahromi 2020; Ahmadian 2021). Proxies are just a cheap means to achieve that end.

Defending its allies. From an Iranian perspective, Lebanese Shi'as and Palestinians suffer under Israeli aggression. Helping Hezbollah is therefore a practical and logical step. Likewise, Syria is seen as under attack by “Wahhabi/Takfiri” - Sunni Islamist forces (Yazdani 2019; Abdolmaleki 2021). The “defending its allies” argument is also linked to the “defending Iran” argument through the idea of the forward defense (Barzegar and Divsallar 2017). The idea behind this is that Iran lacks strategic depth (Vatanka 2021), and its coastlines and Eastern and Western provinces are quite vulnerable. So, to offset Saudi, US and Israeli firepower, Iran is building up and supporting proxies and local allies. In case of war, these proxies could go on the counter-offensive (Behravesht 2020) driving up the cost of war to an unbearable level for the attackers, following the old saying: the best defense is a good offense. Bigonah (2019, 24) argues that “Typically, asymmetric military activities are a consequence of the lack of (...) military capabilities (...) as asymmetric warfare is an instrument in the absence of symmetrical conventional means”. The question of where and when Iran builds up proxies is therefore determined by geopolitical necessity. It builds up proxies where its allies are under attack, or where its immediate security is concerned. Further Iranian proxies are created to have second-strike capabilities. An attack by the US or Arab states would see most of Iran's naval, air, land and missile capabilities weakened if not outright destroyed. Proxies enable Iran to strike back

and therefore enable it to maintain a believable deterrence (Barzegar and Divsallar 2017; Ward 2005).

The problem with the defensive realism explanations is twofold: any move to create a defensive buffer sphere is in its very nature offensive since it impinges on the sovereignty and security of other states – the classical security dilemma (Ekşi 2017). Likewise, some Iranian actions are creating more enemies, rather than making Iran safer. For example, the Iranian nuclear program is causing anxiety in Israel and the Arab peninsula. Iran is expanding its influence in Iraq – thereby creating the much-feared Shi'a crescent¹² - which antagonizes Sunni powers in the region. Individual proxy cases can be explained by defensive realism (Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas), but other proxy cases seem far more offensive in nature.

The offensive realist school bases itself on the assumption that states will always try to maximize their power and therefore will try to expand their influence and control. According to this school of thought, therefore, Iran tries to maximize its power and expand its regional hegemonic power. But Iran lacks the military means for a classical offensive power projection. This results from a lack of modern equipment and capabilities to wage a conventional war (Juneau 2015). The conventional Iranian armed forces especially lack modern air and naval capabilities, but also Iran's land forces are outdated, additionally, equipment includes a wide variety of American, British, Chinese, Soviet and Iranian weapons (Cordesman and Kleiber 2007) putting strains on logistics and maintenance. Iran has sought to offset this problem by building a network of proxies, non-state allies and terrorist groups that help implement its agenda. Iran supported these efforts by developing the IRGCs' Quds Force into a dedicated unit

¹² The Shi'a crescent is a concept first mentioned by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004 it refers to the fear that Iran might create a coherent area spanning from Afghanistan to Lebanon, uniting the Shi'as of the Middle East (Çakmak 2015). Sometimes also parts of Yemen, Turkey and Bahrain are mentioned as being potential encompassed. It expresses a deep-rooted anxiety in Sunni powers in the region of Iranian aspirations.

for irregular warfare. This supports proxy groups with logistics, training, and armaments (Seliktar 2020). To the same goal, Iran is developing a sophisticated missile and drone programs¹³ (Rezaei 2019; Rubin 2020) that are also utilized by proxies like the Houthis (Juneau 2021). In the view of the offensive school, these proxy groups are interpreted primarily as tools serving Iranian power expansion in several ways:

Destabilize hostile countries. Iran uses proxy warfare to strike back for economic sanctions and perceived foreign meddling. The Iranian leadership sees foreign powers behind separatist movements in its Arabic and Kurdish provinces as well as behind frequent protests against the regime (Alfoneh 2010; Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011). Iran uses terrorism and uprisings by Shi'a groups in Bahrain, Saudi-Arabia and in Israel to make their populations weary and tie down their resources for domestic security and thereby weakening them.

Tie down the forces of hostile states. Be it Israeli forces in Gaza, US troops in Afghanistan or the Saudi armed forces in Yemen, to expand its power Iran needs to whittle down its enemies' superior forces and keep them occupied so they cannot attack Iran or stop it entrenching its control in places like Iraq and Lebanon (Juneau 2015).

Expand Iranian influence. Iran's proxies have substantial influence: they have conquered vast swaths of territory in Yemen, and they field armies and exercise substantial control in Lebanon and Iraq. According to the offensive school, Iranian proxies are the extension of Iranian control. They entrench Iranian power: rather than enabling Iranian security they are building a Shi'a crescent from Yemen to Syria and from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

¹³ What is commonly called drones or unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) encapsulates a whole family of different systems: from unarmed reconnaissance systems to unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV), which carry bombs and missiles and loitering ammunition – often called suicide drones – which are basically cruise missiles. For simplicity's sake all unmanned aerial vehicles will be referred to as drones in this chapter.

The IRGC here again is seen as a driving factor in expanding Iranian power, employing money, arms, oil and manpower to expand Iranian influence in the Near and Middle East (Bordenkircher 2020; Ali 2019). Yet, they do this out of rational power calculation not to spread the ideals of the Islamic revolution. Works belonging to the offensive realist school often quote members of the IRGC, or other hardliners to make their case. The president and foreign ministry on the other hand are seen as politically weak in the international arena. In this narrative Iranian proxy groups, such as Hezbollah and the Badr Corps among others, are just employed by Iran as power expanding tools.

The first problem with offensive realism is one of perception: what other countries might consider as offensive action, might be perceived as defensive by Iran (Akbarzadeh 2015). Getting involved in the conflicts in the wider Middle East region is vital for a country like Iran, which is literally in the middle of it (Barzegar 2008). Iran has practical and historical reasons to get involved in its immediate neighborhood. Likewise attacks via proxies that are perceived as offensive by its opponents are seen as retaliation by Iran, for economic sanctions, cyber-attacks and other actions (Treviño 2013).

The offensive realist narrative is historically grown and describes quite accurately the politics of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who built up a sizable Iranian military after the defeat of his father's forces in World War II (Ward 2009). The Shah supported the Kurds in Iraq against the government in Baghdad (van Bruinessen 1986) and had thousands of soldiers fighting alongside the Omani government forces in the Dhofar rebellion (Hughes 2015). Iran also occupied the Abu Musa and Tunb islands in the Persian Gulf and built-up offensive air, land and naval capabilities, as well as starting a nuclear program that would have enabled Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Bigonah (2019) sees this past offensive orientation, during the Shah era, as a cause of current offensive interpretations of Iranian foreign policy. A further point of

criticism is that Iranian discourses on the topic do not feature enough in the analyses, as well as an overreliance on Israeli and Saudi sources.

Realism and therefore power-based explanations have a lot of compelling arguments on its side: they argue that Iranian proxy warfare is an expression of rational and realpolitik thinking because it uses Iranian military resources to its fullest, enabling a plausible deniability and minimizing the direct risk to Iranian forces. Especially since the 1990s, Iranian foreign policy has been marked by an increasingly pragmatic approach to international relations (Ramazani 2004). Iran's economic interests became a focal point and are a relevant issue of national interest to this day, with heavy sanctions causing economic duress. Religion and ideology are accordingly not seen as a crucial factor.

Yet the Islamic Republic of Iran is founded upon a revolutionary and religious ideology, which features heavily in official speeches, declarations and in the constitution and other legal texts (Nia 2011). Simply ignore official arguments and rhetoric is problematic on two levels: First, it superimposes a rational self-interest contrary to the proclaimed Islamic narratives (Koreivaitė 2015). Second, to have domestic credibility for its ideological claims, Iran needs to back it up with actions abroad. But Iran needs credibility not only at home. Iranian proxies are fighting in some of the fiercest warzones currently existing on the planet. It is hard to imagine that Iran would be able to motivate them to fight without following up with actions on ideological rhetoric.

This brings us back to a central issue: the ideological alignment between Iran and its allies. Iran, the Houthis, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Badr Corps, all share ideological commitments to a political version of Shi'a Islam, the ideology of Khomeinism and an anti-Western and anti-Zionist world view, or at least one of them. The PIJ is Sunni but recognizes Khomeinism and its anti-Western and anti-Zionist ideology (Jahanbani 2020;

Ostovar 2018). The Houthis are Zaydi Shi'as, but their ideology mixes religion and politics in a similar fashion to the IRI (Al-Dawsari 2020). The Sabireen movement is made up of Palestinian Sunnis that converted to Shi'a Islam in their commitment to the ideology of the IRI (Ostovar 2018). The problem with power-based explanations is that it does not explain this ideological alignment aspect, but also the Iranian emphasis on Shi'as: almost all Iranian proxies are Shi'as (Rezaei 2019). Iranian proxy warfare seems to heavily engage with groups that are Shi'as.

Likewise, building up Hezbollah in Lebanon while Iran was fighting a desperate war with Iraq seems at odds with a realist perspective. Notwithstanding in Lebanon existed already a Shi'a organization in the form of the more secular Amal (Kane 2018), whose leadership had close ties with the Iranian leadership, Iran chose to found Hezbollah. Engaging with the Islamic movement in Nigeria (Jahanbani 2020), which is quite far from the traditional Iranian spheres of interest and influence, originates similar doubts. Spending resources in peripheral areas does not make sense from a purely rational power-based perspective. Further, Iran built up several proxies in Syria, despite the Syrian army being weak but still operational (Ostovar 2018). Syrian proxies put a higher emphasis on Shi'a religion and ideology than the secular Syrian army. The realist explanation fails to explain why Iran goes the extra mile of making its proxies ideologically and religiously align.

Iran also supports Iraqi leaders who pursued clearly sectarian policies discriminating against the Sunni population (Seliktar 2020) - support which aided the rise of ISIS. This does not make sense, if Iran's policies are purely power-based and aim at having peace on its frontiers and develop economy. Instead, it speaks of an interest in ideological and religious transformation.

Realism is also problematic with regards to proxy agency because it explains proxies only as an Iranian creation: Iran needs allies, so it builds them up. This perspective does not engage with the question of local factors. There are compelling arguments for the realist school, yet it fails in explaining several aspects of proxy warfare and in factoring in ideology and religion, as aspects that influence decision making.

5. Domestic-based explanation: Factionalism

Factionalism has been a feature of the Islamic Republic of Iran since its founding phase. Especially in the 1990s, after the death of Imam Khomeini, separate groups competed over the direction of the country (Siavoshi 1992). Reformist, Moderates, Conservatives and Radicals are the main factions which in temporary alliances shape the policies of Iran (Lim 2015). Beyond that there are different institutions being either part of factions or being split by factionalism. One powerful faction that all other factions nowadays must consider is the IRGC. In the last few years, a new sub-set of the literature has engaged with the increasing power of the IRGC and how it increasingly wields economic and political power (Alfoneh 2010; Forozan and Shahi 2017; Najdi and Azhari Bin Abdul Karim 2012). The main development hereby is undisputed, IRGC members are increasingly taking over Iran's economy (Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011) through either IRGC owned companies or networks of privately owned companies relying on IRGC networks. At the same time, there has been a steady increase in responsibilities for the IRGC, firstly being a light infantry fighting force before transforming into a regular army with tanks and other heavy equipment. The IRGC later formed a navy, an air force, the special forces Quds unit and in 1981 got control over the Basiji militias¹⁴ (Ostovar 2016b). After the 2009 protests, the IRGC even formed its own intelligence apparatus (Behraveshteh 2019; Banerjee 2015). The IRGC is heavily indoctrinated in the ideology of the IRI and its Islamist order

¹⁴ The Sāzmān-e Basij-e Mostaz'afin (The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed), is a popular militia that is used for internal control and suppression, but also as a pool of recruitment for the IRGC and as a *Levée en masse* in times of war (Ostovar 2016).

(Alfoneh 2009). There is also an increasing number of governmental jobs being filled by active or retired members of the IRGC and at each election they gain more seats in parliament (Vakil and Rassam 2017; Forozan and Shahi 2017). Therefore, the question is not if the IRGC is getting more powerful but what the implications are.

Some analysts assume that in Iran there is an ongoing gradual military take-over (Najdi and Azhari Bin Abdul Karim 2012). They use the concept of “Pretorian state” (Alfoneh 2010) to explain a development in which the rule of the clergy is replaced by a rule of the Pasdaran. After Khamenei followed Khomeini as supreme leader, he had to rely on the IRGC for support because he lacked strong theological credentials. The IRGC have become Khamenei's most important powerbase and they have created a dependency because of the support they lend him when he finds himself pitted against more respected clergy or more reform-minded technocrats (Lim 2015). This dependency results in the IRGC taking over the state until eventually it will look like a military dictatorship (Alfoneh 2010). This view is based on realist assumptions about human nature, that the IRGC is an organization interested in increasing its own power.

Other interpretations see, on the contrary, no military take-over but rather an affirmation of clerical rule. The idea behind this concept is that the goal of Khamenei is to create an Islamic state, that the republican elements in the Iranian constitutions are temporary compromises that ought to be overcome, with the end-goal of creating a Shi'a centered Islamic civilization (Golkar and Aarabi 2021). The IRGC serves this purpose by gradually taking over the state institutions and marginalizing more secular and reform-minded technocrats and moderates. In this explanation the IRGC is still firmly loyal to the order of the IRI and is working to fulfill what they see as Khomeini's true vision.

Regardless of the motivation, the IRGC are politically much stronger than in their founding phase and wield considerable influence in foreign policy decisions. Factionalism,

Interservice or in this case also inter-agency rivalry are not a new phenomenon and happen in many states and military forces (Huntington 1961): the competition between army and navy in Imperial Japan in the inter-war years and during the Second World War is a prominent example. The concept has been applied to the case of Iran for several aspects: the competition between different intelligence agencies (Banerjea 2015; Alfoneh 2017b), but especially between the conventional military, the Artesh, and the IRGC (Alfoneh 2011). For this thesis, the relevant aspect is the competition in foreign policymaking between Foreign Ministry of Iran and the IRGC (Alfoneh 2017a) regarding proxy war. So far, this competition between the IRGC and other state institutions has not been used to explain proxy wars and the literature lacks in this regard. Several goals can be identified regarding proxy warfare:

Undermining policies. Elements in the IRGC aim to undermine official government policies aimed at improving relations with the West. Proxies can escalate conflicts with the West. This is evident in the fact that the IRGC in the past have used other means to undermine policies of reform-minded governments. Two examples will demonstrate this: the first is the freighter *Karine A* case. This ship loaded with Iranian weapons intended for Palestinian groups was intercepted by Israeli forces. This led to a breakdown of relations between Iran and the US and the infamous “Axis of evil” speech by US president George W. This has been interpreted by some observers as a ploy by hardline elements, either in or with connections to the IRGC, to torpedo the improvement of relations between the reformist Iranian leadership and the US (Milani 2006; Takeyh 2009, 213). This happened at a time when the government of Khatami was moving ever closer to the US, helping them to topple the Taliban, and allegedly even offering a comprehensive normalization of relations (Takeyh 2009, 217). In another incident in 2016, IRGC naval forces seized an American Patrol Boat and its crew for several hours after it got lost and entered Iranian naval territory by accident. Republicans used this incident to attack Obama for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action otherwise known as Iran nuclear deal. These

incidents display at minimum a willingness, on the part of the IRGC, to sabotage political settlements with the West, and are intended to test the tolerance of US policy makers, but also to undermine too open policies by reform-minded Iranian presidents.

Strengthen the economic influence abroad. A broad set of the literature deals with the IRGC economic empire. Through various companies, the IRGC has built a network of companies both privately and communally owned that have vast influence in Iran. These companies of course have an interest in expanding beyond Iran and increase their revenue. Pro-government militias often become new power centers after the end of hostilities (Voller 2022). Reconstruction and general contracts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen are all very enticing to them. By having their proxies, which are more loyal to the supreme leader and the IRGC commanders than their home countries, Iran has a way of getting influence in these countries to secure these lucrative economic contracts (Vakil 2018). The same way, the IRGC use its influence in Iran to secure their companies contracts.

Run their own foreign policy. Parts of the literature on the IRGC argues that they are trying to run their own foreign policy (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020). In this section of the literature, proxies are usually not explicitly mentioned, and the competition is not at the center of analysis. Still there is a broad agreement that the IRGC tries to pursue its own foreign policy. With war being the continuation of politics by other means, as Clausewitz said, the same can be applied to proxy wars. Historically militaries and diplomats often disagreed on policy and Iran is no different. The main difference is in the fact that the IRGC possesses the ability to pursue its own policies abroad: something most militaries in the world are not capable of doing.

The literature on the IRGC offers many starting points for the third main hypothesis, i.e., that competition between IRGC and foreign ministry can help to explain Iranian proxy warfare. While scholarly literature on IRGC has not engaged to any larger extent with proxies,

it can offer useful insights to help better understand the reasons that lie behind Iran involvement in proxy warfare.

6. State of the literature and research gaps

A lot of important work has been done on Iranian proxies. Both the works on Iranian foreign policy and the dedicated proxy warfare literature have yielded important insights into the subject. The proxy literature has produced a nuanced terminology that can be applied to the Iranian case, by defining terms to describe different forms of proxy relations. Yet the proxy literature does not explain the motives behind proxy warfare sufficiently.

The literature on IFP has yielded many varied explanations for Iranian behavior in foreign policy matters. Both the defensive and the offensive realist schools agree on the rational character of Iranian proxy wars. Yet, narratives are often overly focused on the Iranian side and its interest and often dismissive of official speeches and explanations. These last elements work more heavily in constructivist narratives which emphasize the Islamic character of Iran, its ideological foundations and how domestic discourse as well as religion and ideology inform policy making. While the constructivist school splits into several smaller sub-schools of thinking, they all agree that the Iranian leadership must be understood in its ideological-religious context and that proxy wars like the whole Iranian foreign policy need to be explained accordingly.

The literature on the IRGC on the other hand mirrors splits found in the literature on IFP, but there is a broad consensus on its view of an increasing IRGC takeover of the Iranian institutions and society. Proxy wars are not analyzed yet in this context, but the arguments are the same, the IRGC tries to pursue its own policy goals.

What is therefore lacking in the literature on Iranian proxy wars is the use of several approaches that exist for other topics but have not yet been applied to proxy wars. The constructivism coming from the study of IFP, as well as the emerging field of constructivist proxy theories, needs to be properly applied to the Iranian case. While dominating both fields, the realist explanations for proxies coming from both defensive and offensive strands need to be thoroughly tested. Meanwhile, the studies dealing with the IRGC rise to power in the Iranian state structures have not yet analyzed the impact on the field of proxy wars and how to situate proxy wars in this context. Further, proxies are often studied piecemeal as individual cases or compared one-on-one, or the literature just broadly brushes over them without engaging with the nuances and differences in relationship to Iran, for which the proxy literature has developed refined definitions.

In order to close these gaps, this thesis will offer a comprehensive comparative study of several proxies and proxy clusters, testing hypotheses based on realism and constructivism, as well as the concept of inter-agency competition.

II. Methodology

1. Case studies and Classical comparison

Why is Iran engaged in proxy warfare and what makes Iran develop deep relationships with its proxies? While the realist school of thought claim that Iran is a rational actor and follows realpolitik approaches, ideology plays a huge role in Iran in speeches, propaganda and official statements. So, the question becomes: is Iran pursuing realpolitik power-based goals through identity- and ideology-based rhetoric or is Iran pursuing identity-based goals through realpolitik means? Additionally, what is the role of factionalism? To answer these questions, this thesis employs a theory-testing qualitative approach, grounded upon several selected cases of Iranian proxy warfare including some negative cases where, according to the hypotheses, proxy warfare ought to be expected but has not happened. Thereby the relationship between both power and identity-based explanations and the third explanation which sees Iranian proxy warfare as a result of factionalism will be tested.

To answer the research questions, individual groups will be analyzed as cases to produce the data. Then the three hypotheses will be tested based on the produced data. This will establish which of the three theoretical explanations best helps explain the outcomes on the ground. Next, the classical historical comparative methodology is employed to compare the similarities and differences in the results from the different cases, to conclude about Iranian proxy warfare. Then the different groups and their contexts are compared, especially in the case of the absence of Iranian proxy groups the context plays a crucial role. These negative and positive cases will help to come to generalizing conclusions about Iranian proxy warfare.

To establish causations and to explain outcome Z with causes X and Y, which will be relevant for outlier cases, but also for cases that have multiple causal factors. Each case will be analyzed for the presence of factors that make Iran engage in proxy warfare. Each hypothesis

postulates its own factors. By analyzing the factors for each case and analyzing the proxy engagement by Iran an assessment for each mechanism can be done. This way, I produce data from each case. Also, this way cases that do not fit in with one or several hypotheses can be explained and integrated into the overall narrative. Because during the in-depth case analysis factors that may circumvent the proposed explanations can be worked out. For each case, important phases in the proxy relationship between a group and Iran will be analyzed. Then the hypotheses will be tested with the gained insights (Neto 2016). The results will be used for the overall comparison.

Comparison is the oldest methodology in the social sciences: going back to antiquity, scholars compared different states, constitutions, peoples, religions and rulers and their characters (Azarian 2011). Comparing different elements is a basic way for the human mind to order social reality and comprehend it. Machiavelli often compared his compatriots to their Roman ancestors, whom he deemed superior in every way. Over time, the comparative method has become more refined and used to evaluate theories, as well as to test the relationship between different theories - as is the case in this thesis. When engaging in theory-testing, an important aspect of the comparative method is the use of counterfactuals. Counterfactuals are always present when using comparative methods, often implicitly; it is important to make them explicit especially when testing a theory. There are counterfactuals in-theory and outside of theory (Kiser and Levi 1996). In-theory counterfactuals mirror the hypothesis, with each theory having at least one explicit counterfactual: if such a counterfactual regarding the theory is encountered within a case, it disproves the hypothesis at least for the corresponding case. While a disproved sub-hypothesis does not necessarily imply that the corresponding main hypothesis is disproven, the implication for the hypotheses depends on the nature of the counterfactual. Of course, if all sub-hypotheses are disproven through the existence of counterfactuals, then the main hypothesis is disproven. There is also the issue of counterfactuals outside of the presented

theories, for example logistical limitations of Iranian capability to supply a proxy or limitations in the available resources of Iran be it military material, personal or financial. These counterfactuals outside of the theories do not impact the hypotheses but might be found during the investigation of cases. As mentioned, the comparison is employed for in-case analysis to test the value of the three different hypotheses in explaining the proxy outcomes, but also across cases to come to generalizing conclusions, for which this method is well suited (Azarian 2011). By comparing Iranian proxy engagement across different cases, a model will be worked out that will show when Iran engages in proxy warfare and with which intensity: which hypothesis best explains Iranian proxy wars.

This way this thesis will give good insights into all the cases and produce reliable data that will result in good theory testing. Given that the thesis ends a few years before the time of writing, hindsight might cause some bias when analyzing the data, but it will also enable more profound analysis since the developments that happened after the selected end point in 2019, will help to make arguments for one or the other hypotheses more profound.

2. Conceptualizing Proxies

The aim for this thesis is to contribute not only to the debate about Iranian foreign policy, but also the debate about proxy wars. Therefore, a sound concept of proxies is essential. This thesis will build on existing concepts of the proxy literature and operationalize them for the purpose of this thesis.

A proxy is broadly defined as an armed non-state actor that is dependent on Iranian support to be operationally capable (Rauta 2018; 2021), that serves Iranian interests and over which Iran can exert some form of control. Iran must mostly delegate the act of fighting in the relevant conflict to its proxy, because otherwise the proxy would become an auxiliary. This thesis will exclude political proxies (Hughes 2015; Moghadam and Wyss 2020), since their

relationship with Iran is harder to analyze and they do not fit in the context of this thesis. States will also be excluded; the topic of state proxies is a complex one (Allison 2018) and has not featured as much in the literature as non-state actors so far and requires more in-depth analysis per case. While some have made the argument that the Syrian state has become a proxy of Iran (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020), the question of whether Syria is or is not a proxy merits its own thesis. Therefore, the actors considered for this thesis are only non-state actors.

An important condition for a case is that the Iranian support for the actor must be a well-established fact in the literature. This has two reasons: first, it will be hard to assess the level of support if there is no consensus whether such support even exists; Second, if the support is so small that it is disputed in the literature, it cannot be substantial enough to really create an operational dependency. An actor that can operate on its own it is an ally and not a proxy, regardless of Iranian support (Rauta 2021). For an actor to become a proxy its operational capabilities must therefore be severely limited without Iranian support. The fact of Iranian support also implies that the actor's ability would be degraded without it. Iran is not a rich country, and it must use its resources efficiently. At the same time, a proxy actor always intends to be as independent as possible, refusing useless support that can damage its domestic credibility and make it look weak. Therefore, support can be assumed to imply dependency at least to maintain a certain operational level. This dependency on support also separates proxy relations from alliances (Moghadam and Wyss 2020; Rauta 2021) as for example the alliance between Ba'athist Syria, Russia and Iran in the Syrian Civil war, whereby Syria is not a proxy of Iran because it could survive due to Russian support (Heydemann 2020). Support takes several forms, such as:

Material support. This support can take the form of small arms but may also include drones (Rubin 2020) or even tanks¹⁵. This can take the form of the direct supply of weapons either made or acquired by Iran for the proxy. A second form of material support for proxies is weapon parts or technical support that is needed to improve or build weapons locally. An example for this is Iranian support for the Houthis, enabling them to field more sophisticated drones that are produced or at least assembled in Yemen (Samaan 2020). Material support is the most visual form of supply and the most critical one since it enables a proxy to conduct military operations.

Troop deployments either for training, logistics or combat. The IRGC, and especially the Quds Forces, are well-trained in regular and irregular warfare (Ostovar 2016). Some of the forces aligned with Iran have ample access to weapons and supplies, like Syrian state-affiliated militias, which use the arsenals of the Syrian army, or the Houthis which captured many depots of the Yemeni army. In such instances Iranian troops (Solomon 2013) are deployed to train proxy troops in the fields (Juneau 2016; 2021), in other instances Iran's proxy Hezbollah (Solomon 2013) provides training. Proxy wars can often escalate into wars in which Iran itself is involved (Kraus 2018), or Iran might be so invested in their proxy that it deploys its own troops to work alongside the proxy forces to ensure success, as in the case of Iraq. In either case the deployment of troops into the field is a sign of a strong Iranian commitment and a demonstration of great political relevance (Azizi 2020; Heras 2017).

Financial or economic support, to gain local legitimacy proxies must maintain patronage networks and pay their fighters (Voller 2022). Proxies will need to maintain hospitals, social services and educational institutions. With Iranian proxies operating mostly in weak states, which lack good public services, economic and financial support is often more

¹⁵ "Iran Gave Upgraded Tanks to Its Iraqi Proxies" 2021

crucial than military support since it enables proxies to develop social network among the local population. In this way, the population supports the proxies through times of war and crisis: one such example is Hezbollah which maintains an extensive network of hospitals, schools and other services (Levitt 2021; Bassam and Francis 2021). At other times, Proxies will be able to acquire weapons on the illegal market easily (Juneau 2021) – making financial support an easier way to arm the proxy than direct weapon supplies.

Political support. While it might seem trivial, receiving support by Iran can increase the legitimacy of a group (Moghadam and Wyss 2020). Political support will also increase that group's legitimacy with and help by other Iranian proxies (Levitt 2021) who see the accepted group as part of their "Axis of resistance" (Soltaninejad 2018). The depth of a relationship can broadly be measured with the level of support and the willingness of Iran to embrace the group: Iran has for quite some time openly embraced Hezbollah, likewise, it embraced its groups in Iraq. For other groups material support and public support were at times much sparser as with the Houthis or the Taliban. Using available information, a ranking curve for support will be developed placing Hezbollah as the model proxy, because there is a consensus that its relationship with Iran is the deepest among all the proxies (Khan and Zhaoying 2020; Seliktar and Rezaei 2020). Then groups will be defined accordingly on a curve in terms of support, based on available information.

Proxy groups do not need to receive all the forms of support all the time, but support is a necessary condition to apply the concept. The proxy group cannot be operational, on its current level, without it. Both the Iranian support and the group's dependency on it constitute necessary conditions for the actor to be defined as an Iranian proxy: if an actor is not dependent on Iran it is not a proxy (Salehyan et. al 2011). So, proxy relationships exist on the ground of dependency. While it is hard to make definitive statements on these dependencies an overview of the literature will be used to give answers to the individual aspects. Additionally, the factors

established through the other aspects of the proxy relationship will help give an answer here. If Iran's support is high and Iranian troops are present, operational *habitus* alone will create a high dependency - while a weak dependency limited to a few military capabilities will not create a deep patron-client relationship. Further, there is the issue of proxies owning economic means: for example, both Hezbollah (Levitt 2021) and the Houthis (Juneau 2021; Tsukerman 2020) have other economic sources of income, and Hamas too might be able to solicit support from sources other than Iran (Gleis and Berti 2012).

This can lead to cases where actors, through the course of a conflict, have such losses in men and material that they become more dependent on Iranian support, as in the Syrian case (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020). Other groups that used to have several sponsors, and thereby a high level of autonomy vis-à-vis their individual sponsors, lose some patrons; thereby becoming more dependent on Iran, such as in the case of Hamas (Ostovar 2018; Rauta 2018). Likewise, a group can develop capabilities of its own or gain new allies or sponsors and thereby become less dependent on Iran, such as the Houthis with their alliance with former president Saleh and the army units loyal to him (Juneau 2016; Elisabeth Kendall 2021; Juneau 2021). So, dependency is not static and changes over time will have to be factored into the analysis.

Additionally, an actor must fulfill the agency of Iran or at least partially serve Iranian interests and be under the control of Iran to be considered a proxy. Traditional power-based explanations see proxies as tools fulfilling the wishes of their masters, while the more recent literature ascribes agency to proxies and construes relationships as complex systems of *inter-dependency* (Moghadam and Wyss 2020; Rauta 2019; 2018). For a proxy relationship to exist, Iran must at least partially direct the agency of a proxy. An important aspect hereby is the presence of strains in the relationship, which are yet again hard to assess: neither the proxy nor Iran has an interest in showing splits in the relationship vis-à-vis common enemies. Yet, there have been cases where groups and Iran had a public showdown or the behavior of a proxy was

contrary to Iranian interests, such as the troubled Iran-Hamas relationship. This is important to understand the relationship between Iran and its proxy. A strained relationship undermines trust, which is one of the most important currencies in proxy relationships (Khan and Zhaoying 2020). A relationship full of contradictions will never be as deep as one without them. Strains in a relationship directly affect Iran's trust in its proxy to fulfill the interest of Iran. A proxy must serve Iranian interest, be it defined by power, identity or factionalism. Some proxies will enact agendas set by Iran and will look more like pawns, while other proxies are much more independent, have their own agency, and goals - it is just in Iran's interest to see them succeed or at least tie down its enemies, with Iran exercising little control. To summarize: for a relationship to be a proxy one, an actor must further Iranian interests. A case where an actor receives support but does not act in the Iranian interest would present an extreme counterfactual case that is not probable.

In conclusion, a proxy is a non-state actor that is dependent on Iranian support – be it material, political or economic – act in Iranian interest and with Iran having a modicum of control over it.

3. Overview of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (Identity based). Iranian decision to support a proxy war is the result of ideology and identity. Iran chooses to get involved when it sees a responsibility to help fellow Shi'as or Palestinians because the Iranian leadership identifies with them. Additionally, Iranian proxy warfare is the translation of Iran's revolutionary ideology into policy and must therefore serve the ideas and the spread of the revolution.

- Sub-Hypothesis 1.1 Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.

- Sub-Hypothesis 1.2. Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).

- Sub-Hypothesis 1.3. Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.

- Sub-Hypothesis 1.4. Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.

Hypothesis summary: This hypothesis is based on constructivist identity- and ideology-based explanations. Iranian foreign policy behavior is an expression of the worldview, identity, values and ideas of its leadership. Proxy warfare results from Iranian desire to help the oppressed and fulfill the ideological vision of Imam Khomeini. There is an abundance of speeches by Iranian leaders emphasizing ideology and identity regarding proxies and a huge secondary literature that analyses Iranian proxies' identities and ideologies. The mechanism is that once Iran is faced with a situation where its identity or ideology mandates an intervention, proxy warfare will happen.

Hypothesis 2 (Power based). Iranian proxy warfare is motivated by geopolitical power-based interests since proxies are a cheap way for Iran to tie down enemy forces and protect Iran's borders, security and influence. But Iran can also expand its influence into other regions. Where Iran engages in proxy warfare is primarily defined through Iran's national

interests. Iranian proxy warfare only happens when Iran hopes to pursue its national interest through it. Actions are limited by the need to keep Iran and its interests safe. If proxy warfare is not in the national interest, it will not happen. Therefore, it will only happen in geopolitically relevant regions and countries.

- Sub-Hypothesis 2.1. Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.

- Sub-Hypothesis 2.2. Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.

- Sub-Hypothesis 2.3. Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.

- Sub-Hypothesis 2.4. Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.

- Sub-Hypothesis 2.5. Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.

- Sub-Hypothesis 2.6. Deep relations will develop when Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.

Hypothesis summary. The second hypothesis assumes that Iran is a country that like other countries tries to maximize security and power. Economic interests, security concerns and sphere of influence frame Iranian thinking. Proxy warfare is an expression of that thinking. It

is a cheap way for Iran to compete with more powerful actors in the Middle East in the pursuit of its interest. Given the abundance of realist literature on Iran and statements by Iranian leaders on the topic, there is no shortage of available data. The mechanism derived from this hypothesis is that Iran will wage a proxy warfare if it expands its power or safety. While Iran should not engage in proxy warfare when doing so has a negative impact either on Iranian power or security.

Hypothesis 3 (Domestic competition). Iranian proxy warfare is the result of competition or factionalism between the IRGC and the Iranian Foreign Ministry, especially under reformist and moderate governments like Khatami and Rouhani. The IRGC leadership has at times disagreed with the foreign policy of the elected branch of the government. Proxy warfare is a way for the IRGC to pursue its own foreign policy agenda.

- Sub-Hypothesis 3.1. In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, it will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve its own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.

- Sub-Hypothesis 3.2. The Iranian foreign ministry will only have limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where its proxy is active.

- Sub-Hypothesis 3.3. Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.

Hypothesis summary. The last hypothesis is not a fully-fledged explanation like the first two. It is safe to assume that not all Iranian proxy warfare is based on factionalism, or even that it will be the sole explanation in even one case. It is a supplementary explanation. The IRGC has become much more powerful over the last few years, and it is safe to assume that this power will also manifest itself in the form of their influence on foreign policy. Whether

this manifestation happens in the form of proxy warfare remains to be seen. An issue that will complicate working with this hypothesis is the limited availability of data. Not every split in IFP between the foreign ministry and the IRGC will become public, not every aspect of IRGC influence will become visible. The third hypothesis is the one with the least amount of available data. Despite this, it is an important part of the thesis and will yield important insights. Another problematic aspect is that it assumes a certain degree of monolithic decision making within the IRGC. In the theory section different explanations have been offered as to why the IRGC strives for more power. Given that the action is more relevant in this case than the motivation, a monolithic decision making in the IRGC can be assumed. The mechanism is that proxies enable the IRGC to pursue its own foreign policy through the proxies. A connection between proxies and IRGC must be shown, and the proxies must act in a way that undermines the official Iranian foreign policy line.

4. Operationalization of Hypothesis

It is necessary to define conditions under which a hypothesis is proven or disproven. The dependent variable (DV) in this research is the existence of proxy warfare or the expectation of proxy warfare. While the independent variables are ideology/identity, power/security and factionalism. To operationalize the independent variable (ID), several conditions will be presented below. Each hypothesis needs to be operationalized individually to prove its mechanism. This is done with conditions that if fulfilled will prove the individual hypothesis or disprove it through their absence.

For the identity-based hypothesis, to prove the hypothesis in general terms, there needs to be Shi'as or Palestinians in danger or under oppression in the area where proxy warfare is happening, and these proxy groups must primarily act to alleviate that situation. Or, if proxy warfare is the result of Iranian ideology, then it must enable Iran to fulfil ideological commitments. A case in which there is a deep relationship, but groups are neither Shi'a nor

Palestinian nor Khomeinist or at least close to Khomeinism, or they are but do not perceive themselves as part of the Axis of Resistance, would represent a counterfactual to the hypothesis.

The first identity-based sub-hypothesis postulates that Iran will defend Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war, which means most cases should fall into that category. The most critical situation for Iran is the scenario in which Shi'as or Palestinians are persecuted. In this case, Iran will try to help them by building up local proxies. This hypothesis not only shows the role identity plays in Iranian proxy warfare, but also the defensive nature of it. If most cases feature threatened Shi'as or Palestinians, then a case can be made for Iranian proxy warfare just fulfilling its responsibility to protect co-religionists and the Palestinians, whose cause was important to Khomeini (Salamey and Othman 2011). A counterfactual case that might disprove the hypothesis is a case in which Shi'as or Palestinians are under threat, but Iran does not engage in proxy warfare (Rezaei 2019; Behravesht 2020). Pakistan might present such cases and must be analyzed in detail.

The second identity-based sub-hypothesis will be analyzed by looking at all the enemies of Iran in its proxy wars. Do the proxies help Iran fight its ideological enemies or are they also engaging other actors in combat? This hypothesis helps also answer the question of whether Iran is overall more defensive or offensive in its proxy wars. If Iranian proxy wars are more identity-based but defensive, then they will support proxies but not care so much about the enemies of their proxies. If Iran is more offensive, it will try to use its proxies to fight its own ideological enemies, thereby fulfilling its ideological responsibilities to fight, especially against Israel, the US, and Takfiri forces (Golkar and Aarabi 2022).

Connected to the question of fighting ideological enemies, there is the aspect of spreading the ideology of the Islamic revolution. An identity-based explanation of Iranian proxy wars naturally emphasizes the ideological character of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The spread

of the ideology of the Islamic revolution was a clear goal of Iran, and Hezbollah became the first case where Iran was successful (Ostovar 2016). The aspect of ideological exclusivity is also important. A group might embrace the Islamist rhetoric of Iran and ally with Iran at times, but also embrace a more localized nationalist ideology¹⁶. Therefore, is not only the level of commitment important but also the question of exclusivity. If a group is not ideologically exclusive, it might turn away from Iran more easily than a group that has fully and exclusively embraced Khomeinism.

The third sub-hypothesis will be analyzed by looking at all the proxy relationships that are deep and analyzing the ideology of the groups and their motivation and identity. In some cases, groups fully embrace the whole ideology of Khomeinism and see themselves as part of the Axis of resistance (Clausen 2020), leading to inter-proxy support (Samaan 2020; Seliktar 2020). In other cases, actors might only embrace part of the ideology such as Anti-Americanism or Anti-Zionism. A group might also embrace the ideology but not embrace the Axis of resistance. In some cases, an actor might have only a few shared ideological enemies with the IRI (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020).

Parallel to the question of ideology, there is the question of identity. According to the fourth sub-hypotheses, Iran should have the deepest relations with fellow Shi'as since religion plays such a key role as a marker of identity and belonging (Koreivaité 2015; Taremi 2014). It is therefore to be expected that if identity drives Iranian proxy warfare, Iran will have the closest relations with fellow Shi'as. An argument can be made that Sunnis, who are pro-Iran, would also be supported; yet such cases would only partially prove the hypothesis. Cases in which the actor supported pursues anti-Shi'a policies or is non-Muslim would present a counterfactual case to this identity-based hypothesis.

¹⁶ Examples of this are Lebanese Amal (Khan and Zhaoying 2020) or the Iraqi Mahdi Army (Ostovar 2018).

The first sub-hypothesis of the power-based explanation argues that proxy warfare happens when a country or region is important for Iranian security (Barzegar 2010). The analysis therefore focuses on the primary area of operation of a proxy, and tests the hypothesis based on the importance of that area for Iranian security. The highest importance is assigned to the states directly bordering Iran or threatening Iran; the lowest for countries outside of Iran's sphere of influence who do not impact Iranian security directly.

Sub-Hypothesis 2.2 is about the economic aspect. As previously mentioned, Iran needs to develop its own economy and for that it needs regional partners and markets. Given the unstable nature of many states of the region, armed proxies are an efficient way to secure and expand economic interests, without having to rely on the partnership of corrupt and weak states. While the absence of economic interests does not alone disprove the power-based explanation, the presence of economic interests is a persuasive argument in its favor.

Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state; if it cannot increase Iranian security in any way, it would represent a counterfactual case. If one assumes Iranian proxies serve the purpose of making Iran safer, they must create an overall net gain in security for Iran. Proxies enable this increase in security through the capture of critical areas, but also through second-strike capabilities (Barzegar and Divsallar 2017) against Iran's enemies - should they attack Iran. By driving up the price for any would-be aggressor, Iran increases its security through deterrence (Ahmadian 2021). A case in which a proxy group increases insecurity for Iran disproves the power-based hypothesis.

While defensive realists assume that Iran wages proxy war to secure itself and its sphere of influence, offensive realists assume that Iran's purpose is to expand its sphere of influence. A counterfactual disproving this sub-hypothesis would be a case in which Iran supports a group despite it does not yield any increase in security or influence.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” This old stratagem in international relations is the foundation for Sub-Hypothesis 2.5. The main assumption is that Iran will engage with groups so long as they engage enemies of Iran: the US, Israel and the gulf monarchies. Proving that a group does not fight any of the enemies of Iran does not necessarily disprove the second main hypothesis, yet the absence of a common enemy fought by the proxy would seriously question the hypothesis.

The last sub-hypothesis of the power-based explanation concerns the aspect of deep, lasting relations between a proxy and Iran. It is assumed that based on a realist view a lasting relationship can only happen when both sides' interests overlap. While it is unlikely that they will align completely, a high degree is to be expected. The important aspect here is that these interests are material. If a group has deep and lasting relations with Iran but their interests do not highly overlap, this explanation for deep and lasting relations must be dismissed.

If factionalism is to be part of the explanation of Iranian proxy warfare, then proxies must undermine the official foreign policy of Iran. If the foreign ministry always pursues policies in line with the IRGC, then there would be no need to pursue an independent foreign policy via proxies. So, if proxies do not act in a way to undermine the official foreign policy, it can be assumed that either the IRGC agrees with the official foreign policy or for some reason or another does not use proxies to pursue an independent foreign policy. For this sub-hypothesis to be proven, proxies must at least regularly contradict Iranian foreign policy. One important caveat remains, namely, that the number of cases of disagreement might be too small or the undermining too subtle to be recognized, so while the conclusion might be that the hypothesis is disproven this might be the result of a lack of available data.

The second sub-hypothesis tests if proxy warfare is an expression of inter-factions' competition. If the IRGC relies more on proxies than regular state officials to conduct their

communication, then their foreign policy approach is in essence “non-state.” If the Iranian Foreign Ministry has limited engagement with the proxies, despite them being embraced by the IRI leadership, then this shows a competition among different foreign policy approaches. In cases where either the civil administration or the IRGC work equally with state and proxies, the hypothesis does not apply. Because it can be assumed that in such cases the foreign policy is not a field of competition but either one of dominance of one group or one of an alignment of interests.

If the IRGC uses proxies for their own economic interests, it would prove factionalism to some extent. The IRGC uses Iranian state budgets to sponsor and support proxies. Using proxies in turn for its own economic benefit would strongly suggest that at least an element of its support for proxies is based upon factionalist interests. These interests do not necessarily align with the interests of the wider Iranian state. A big problem here is that even for experts, discerning the economic networks of the IRGC is complicated. Some cases might be falsely dismissed due to lack of information.

5. Case selection

The question of what constitutes a case is important, because not every Iranian military involvement constitutes a proxy war. In addition, since 1979, Iranian proxies have also operated across borders, which makes a country-by-country comparison less useful because it does not fully grasp the transnational nature of Iranian proxies. Here, each group or a cluster of groups will constitute a case. The timeframe for each group will be from the start of its interaction with Iran, as far as it is known, and continue until the group ceases operating or the terminal point of this research in 2019. In cluster cases, where groups operate in larger frameworks like the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq (Heras 2017), individual groups will be highlighted

for analysis. The absence of groups is also important to study: the reasons why no groups operate in a territory or why groups don't turn into proxies are of particular interest.

The selection of cases is informed by the research question and the hypotheses: what drives Iran in using these proxies to wage war on its enemies? Under which circumstances does Iran develop lasting and deep relationships with its proxies? The goal is to analyze the different contexts in the negative cases and compare them with the positive cases and work out the relevance these differences make.

In terms of geographical distribution, the hypotheses imply that three kinds of countries or regions are of interest: those with oppressed Shi'a or Palestinian populations, those that touch upon Iran's security and sphere of interest and those which fall specifically into the area of interest of the IRGC. While three categories of potential cases overlap often; overall, they include several countries from the Middle East, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria.

These potential cases are further limited by factors that make proxy warfare impossible, namely strong and stable states (Juneau 2021). A strong state can intercept any large equipment transfers. Meanwhile a stable state, with high levels of support for the ruling system across the population, does not offer an opportunity to create proxies. Impossible cases are countries that have a strong state capable of intercepting supplies to proxies as well as high support for the state and high levels of stability. They are not relevant for this research since the conditions for proxy warfare are not present (Mahoney and Goertz 2004), one such case is Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan borders with Iran and has a Shi'a population (Çakmak 2015), but the state is stable; the government has high levels of support in the population, which means proxy warfare cannot happen¹⁷ beyond the scale of limited political activity or terrorist operations.

¹⁷ There exists a proxy group of Azerbaijanis, the Islamic Resistance Movement of Azerbaijan also known as Husayniyun (Bultannews.com 2016), which formed out of Azerbaijani students that studied in Iran and volunteered to fight in Syria. Members of the group, that have returned to Azerbaijan, have been arrested. While

Negative cases that will instead be analyzed are weak states with divided populations, which fulfill the necessary conditions for proxy warfare. Further, they must fit at least the power-based explanation, to be geopolitically relevant for Iran, or the identity one, being identity politics relevant. If a state fulfills one or both these conditions and there is no discernable Iranian proxy warfare, then it qualifies as a negative case. The state will then be analyzed more in-depth to understand why the expected result has not occurred. Pakistan and Nigeria will be two such negative cases, there is no Iranian proxy active in Pakistan¹⁸ in 2019 and there is only one major non-armed pro-Iranian group active in Nigeria, which has not developed into a fighting force. The reason why this group has not developed into a proxy will be particularly insightful.

Minor cases, where proxy warfare is alleged but nothing concrete is known will be excluded since the available information is too sparse. Bosnia is such a case, where there is limited information available on the amount of Iranian support and how it compares with other support. While there is enough evidence that Iran was involved (Ostovar 2018), it is hard to evaluate the amount and the impact of Iranian aid on the battlefield. Thereby, Bosnia is not a useful case for this thesis.

An important factor is the development of the relationship over years and how the motives behind proxy warfare changed over time. Proxy groups develop into political actors that form parties and compete in elections; this can cause strains in the relationship but also increase the importance of certain proxies. Temporal context will also be used to frame

it might become a factor in the future, the reports indicate that this is a small group with less than 50 members. Given that the group formed in Iran and operated in Syria, it does not constitute a case of proxy warfare in Azerbaijan.

¹⁸ The Zainebiyoun is a regiment of several thousand Pakistani Shi'as that serves in Syria that was split off from a division of Afghan Shi'as fighting in Syria (Schneider 2018), but Iran so far has not deployed them to Pakistan. It is also being led by IRGC officers from Iran. The unit is being trained in Iran, meaning it does not constitute a Pakistani proxy case.

motivations in the founding phase of any proxy relationship, as well as when the relationship has matured.

A problem with comparisons is the issue of the favored case, which is used as a model to compare other cases with. In the context of Iranian proxy warfare, Hezbollah is usually used as such a case (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020). This thesis will try to avoid favored cases and instead compare all cases with each other regarding the three hypotheses. Interplay between the cases is not a big issue, since any interplay between the groups does not affect the theoretical assumptions behind the three hypotheses. On the contrary interplay between groups will be evidence of the increased importance and acceptance of a proxy group in the Axis of Resistance and factor into the analysis.

Each section will follow a similar structure, a historical overview of the group and its context. Then several phases of the group's existence, its actions and its relationship with Iran and other states are analyzed. This is followed by an analysis of the capabilities and the assessment of the proxy relationship with Iran: the delivery of capabilities is a good indicator of the depth of a proxy relationship. Next step is to study the group's ideology and identity against which the first hypothesis is tested. The second hypothesis is tested against the geopolitical and economic context of the proxy group, followed by an analysis of the engagement of the proxy with different political actors in Iran to test the last hypothesis that proxy warfare is an expression of factionalism in Iran. Finally, each case study is closed by a summary, where the arguments for each hypothesis are compared and an overall judgment is given.

A limitation that inevitably exists, but is much harder to quantify and assess, is logistical limitations. Whether Iran would be able to supply a group with equipment is a complicated question. Iran and its main proxy Hezbollah have developed black-market and smuggling

networks reaching as far as South America and East Asia (Lane 2020). Iran has naval and air transport capabilities, yet it cannot be excluded that in some cases Iran would be unable to effectively supply a potential proxy. This might have been the case with Tajikistan during the 1990s civil war, although it is unlikely given Iran's mediating role in the conflict (Maleki and Afrasiabi 2003), but also the case of Nigeria and the early phase of the Houthi insurgency (Stoddard 2020).

Another issue is the unevenness of knowledge about different cases, especially with cross-culture comparisons (Thies 2002). This will be avoided since almost all cases are situated in the wider Middle East - mostly in the Arab world – the authors area of expertise. The only exception is the Islamic movement in Nigeria, which is situated in Africa, which will require special attention. Another issue is the uneven availability of information, which has been circumvented by picking cases that have somewhat equal levels of available information. Some cases have been excluded due to the limited availability of information on these cases. This creates a selection bias to some degree, but a necessary one since it makes for more reliable conclusions. These criteria produce the following list of cases:

Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the Sabireen movement (1979-2019)

One of the most fundamental shifts in foreign policy after the Iranian revolution was the ending of good relations between Iran and Israel (Abadi 2004). Instead, Iran started to support the Palestinian cause. Iran has supported various Palestinian groups over time: it started with the PLO under Arafat, but Iran soon switched to supporting the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) (حركة الجهاد الإسلامي في فلسطين) and Hamas (حركة المقاومة الإسلامية). In 2014, a further group called the Sabireen movement (ركة الصابرين نصراً لفلسطين - حصن) was created (Jahanbani 2020). These three Palestinian groups represent a case cluster. It is also a case that will present an insightful challenge to the power-based hypothesis, due to the previous good political and economic

relations between Israel and Iran, as well as Israeli support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Identity-based explanations will also be challenged through this case because only the Sabireen movement is Shi'a, while Hamas and PIJ are, like most Palestinians, Sunni Muslims. The Sabireen movement is very closely aligned with Iran, while PIJ is mostly aligned, and Hamas has overlapping ideological elements but is ideologically different. The relations between Palestinian groups and Iran have also seen their fair share of tensions especially regarding Syria, where Hamas supported the uprising against the Assad regime while Iran supported Assad. The Iranian support for Hamas and PIJ has been a main obstacle for rapprochement between the US and Iran.

Considering timeframes, the first phase is from 1987 to 2000 from founding and establishment of the PIJ to the end of the first Intifada. The focus will be on Iranian motivation to engage with the Palestinians and what factors led Iran to engage with the PIJ specifically. The second phase of focus is the second Intifada and the Karine A affair. This is followed by a short analysis of the Hamas takeover of Gaza. The last phase that will be analyzed is from 2011 to 2019 – the So-called Arab spring and its impact on Palestine – when Hamas and Iran also had a split over the support of the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition. It is also during that time that the Sabireen movement came to be, after it had split off from the PIJ. The movement also formed in reaction to the way Hamas was ruling in Gaza and acting in its foreign policy. Especially the question of what caused the differences between Hamas and Iran and the Iranian support for the Sabireen movement will be relevant for this thesis.

Hezbollah (1985-2019)

Hezbollah (حزب الله) – meaning ‘the party of God’ – is the most known of Iran’s proxies. Founded in 1985 by the IRGC, Hezbollah evolved to become the only militia to continue existing after the end of the Lebanese civil war (El Hussein 2010). It was allowed to do so

because it kept waging war on Israel, which was still occupying the South of Lebanon alongside its own proxy force the South Lebanese Army (SLA). Hezbollah waged an increasingly sophisticated guerilla war against these forces till Israel withdrew in 2000. Hezbollah legitimized its continued existence with the need for a continuation of the resistance against Israel (Sozer 2016). In the West, Hezbollah became well-known when it fought Israel in the 2006 war. In the years after the war Hezbollah got involved in the Syrian civil war and the war against ISIS, helped Iranian proxies across the region (Levitt 2021) and got involved in smuggling and black-market activities around the globe (Chulov 2021). The case of Hezbollah is relevant since it is often seen as the “model proxy” in the literature. Hezbollah was also founded in a time when Iran was fighting a costly and brutal war in Iraq, making it a case of geopolitical investment in a time of spare resources. Religiously Hezbollah is Twelver Shi’a. Ideologically Hezbollah has fully embraced Khomeinism, while also having become the party and group that represents most Lebanon’s Shi’as in the domestic arena. Geopolitically and economically speaking, Lebanon is a wealthy and important country despite its small size. The question of what motivates Iran to engage with Hezbollah is therefore important for this thesis. Hezbollah is also a relevant case since it is one of Iran’s oldest and longest proxies.

In more detail, four phases will be analyzed. The founding phase up to the end of the civil war. The phase of the continued resistance against Israel and the SLA. The war of 2006 and the engagement of Hezbollah in Syria from 2011 till 2019. All these phases involved a fundamentally different group, from a militia fighting in the civil war to an insurgency fighting Israel and the SLA to a more regular armed force in the 2006 war to an anti-insurgency force in the Syrian Civil War. In recent years, the question of whether Hezbollah is a proxy at all has been raised. Many commentators see the group as economically and militarily independent enough to be on the level of an ally rather than a proxy. This question will be answered in the case study as well.

Houthis (1992-2019)

The Yemeni movement called Ansar Allah (أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ) commonly referred to as the Houthis named after its founder – Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi – represents an insightful case study. While Iran was suspected of supporting the Houthis from the beginning (Freeman 2009), the initial movement formed without substantial Iranian help in the 1990s and became a fighting force in 2004 (Salisbury 2015). Since 2014, their capabilities have been massively strengthened through Iranian help (Samaan 2020), making them a proxy of Iran, albeit one that would still be operational on a lesser level even without Iranian support (Kendall 2021).

The first period to focus on will be the six wars between the Houthis and the Yemeni government between 2004-2010 (Stoddard 2020). In this time the Houthis transitioned from a political movement to an effective guerilla army, which is where allegedly Iranian support set in, although evidence for this is sparse. This is followed by the so-called Arab spring in Yemen, the ousting of Saleh and the role of the Houthis and their interaction with Iran, in the wider context of Iranian foreign policy in the phase of the So-called Arab spring. The last phase of analysis is the civil war that started in 2014 and the Saudi intervention, events that continue past the end point of this thesis in 2019. Throughout these phases different levels of Iranian engagement can be observed and analyzed regarding the hypotheses.

The Houthis case is relevant because Houthis operate in a strategically important area near the Suez Canal and next to the Saudi border. Further, the Houthis are (Zaydi) Shi'as: their movement was initially founded as a movement to strengthen the Zaydi faith. Wahhabi missionaries were trying to eradicate the faith and replace it with the extremist interpretation of the Sunni creed (Salisbury 2015). This means that an in-depth analysis of the power-based and the identity-based explanation of proxy warfare are both relevant. Both the explanation that Iran is helping fellow Shi'as, and that Iran is trying to strengthen its geopolitical situation in the

region have some merit and will be analyzed. The Houthis, being a case where both explanations work, will be an excellent opportunity to analyze the relationship between realist and constructivist explanations. The Houthis also represent an important case regarding the factionalist hypothesis. Given that the IRGC is the organization handling contacts between Houthis and Iran. The Houthis are also one of the strongest armed non-state actors in the Middle East. They field drones, missiles, tanks, artillery and their infantry has shown themselves to be able to go toe-to-toe with Saudi and UAE led forces supported by Western mercenaries. Making them a prime example of how to build up an efficient proxy.

SCIRI, Badr Organization and PMF (2003-2019)

Iraq is one of the oldest cases of Iranian proxy warfare, and one of the most enduring despite rapidly changing circumstances. Iran has several successful cases of proxies in Iraq such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) (المجلس الأعلى للثورة) (الإسلامية في العراق), its military wing, the Badr Organization (منظمة بدر), and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (الحشد الشعبي), which evolved out of the orbit of both to fight the Islamic State. These groups constitute the Iraqi case cluster. But there are also other groups active in Iraq such as the Mahdi army (جيش المهدي), nowadays known as the Peace companies (سرايا السلام), which is a group independent from Iran. While SCIRI and Badr are part of the Axis of resistance and closely aligned with Iran, the Mahdi army under its leader Muqtada al-Sadr always strived for more independence and opposed Iranian influence (Barzegar 2010). While SCIRI, Badr and PMF are the focus of this study, the Mahdi army will be referenced repeatedly during this case study to highlight differences that will help explain the proxy outcomes.

Iraq has a Shi'a majority and borders Iran, it is economically relevant for Iran, and it features many of Shiisms holiest sites. Both an identity- and a power-based explanation make sense in the context of Iraq. This makes the Iraqi case cluster a potential candidate for multi-

causal explanation, but it is especially relevant for the question with whom Iran develops deep and lasting relations.

The first-time frame of analysis is the Iraqi Civil War 2003-2010 – from the US invasion to the withdrawal of the US combat troops from Iraq. With a special focus on the role that Iran’s proxies played in the insurgency and the civil war. During this time, other Shiite groups emerged, like the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr. At the same time, in Iraq, Al-Qaeda was waging a relentless war not only against the occupying allied forces, but also against the Shi’a community. It was also during this time that Badr and SCIRI became two different political organizations. At that time groups like the Da’wa party moved away from the Iranian orbit. Despite this defection, Iran became more influential. However, Iran’s proxies also struggled with other groups over control of the newly “liberated” Iraq. The next phase covers the period 2010-2013. With the pullback of the American forces Iran’s proxies gained greater leeway politically. But they used their power to oppress the Sunnis of Iraq, facilitating the rise of ISIS. The phase following is the period from the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2013 and its conquest of large parts of the country till 2017. After ISIS had conquered large parts of Iraq in a lightning war in 2014, the popular mobilization forces were founded to give formal structure to many of the militias that were formed to defend holy sites, protect villages, and fight back ISIS after the Iraqi army had failed in this task. Most units that formed in that time fell under the umbrella of the PMF, and they aligned closely with Iran. But also, Sadr made a comeback by forming the peace companies’ militia that reconstituted the previously disbanded Mahdi army. Iran became much more influential through its control of the PMF, but also deployed thousands of its own soldiers, volunteers and heavy equipment and its air force to fight back what Iran calls Takfiri forces and Iraqis Daesh – the Islamic state. The Last phase is the confrontation between Iran and the US under President Donald Trump in 2018/19. Which saw

attacks on US compounds and resulted in the death of Qasem Soleimani in early 2020. It is especially insightful for the factionalism hypothesis.

Taliban (2004-2019)

The Taliban (طالبان) are not a classical proxy of Iran: a superficial study shows that, in all aspects of dependency that define a proxy relationship of Iran, they have a low dependency be it political or material support, while strains in the relationship are high. Yet, since 2004, NATO states have alleged that Iran has been supporting them to tie down western forces (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020). During the 1990s, Iran had even waged a proxy war against the Taliban through the Northern Alliance (Azizi 2020). The Taliban have been one of the causes of the massive refugee flow from Afghanistan to Iran; also, the Taliban murdered Iranian diplomats almost leading to a war between both countries in 1998 (Tarock 1999). Iran also helped the West win the war against the Taliban in 2001, offering Iranian air space for the allied forces and helping with targeting information about Taliban positions for air strikes (Azizi 2020). Therefore, their relationship was more hostile than friendly. Yet, the spring in Western-Iranian relations was not to last and after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 Iran found itself encircled by US military bases and feared to become the next target of US imperialism. This situation, among other factors like changes in Taliban policy, led to an improvement in relations between the Taliban and Iran and eventually even Iranian support for the Taliban in their fight against the NATO forces (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020).

Two phases will be analyzed: first, the period between 2001 and 2008, from the phase of open hostility and support for the US invasion to the phase of warming relations. The second phase is from 2015 to 2019, when the Islamic State also became active in Afghanistan (Kousary and Hansen 2022) in parallel to its activity in Iraq and Syria. This led to a situation where Iran was once again threatened from both West and East.

The Taliban are a crucial case study because they are ideologically completely opposed to Iran, being Deobandi Sunni Islamists with a long history of persecuting Shi'as. Therefore, this case presents a challenge to the identity-based hypothesis. But also, power-based explanations are challenged regarding the support of the Taliban, given that they grant Iran little in terms of influence. But supporting the Taliban did enable Iran to engage western forces, weakening the US through a never-ending war in Afghanistan and tempering US desire for further military engagement in the region. The most important hypothesis for this case is the third one, i.e., factionalism. The foreign ministry had good relations with the Afghan government, while the support for the Taliban came from the IRGC, making the Taliban the perfect case to show the merit of the third hypothesis.

Liwa Fatemiyoun (2014-2019)

The "Brigade of Fatima" (لواء فاطميون) is Iran's most important proxy in Syria. The force is composed primarily of Afghans and especially those of the minority Hazaras that have fled to Iran. It started out as a brigade, but later reached division size by numbers. Additionally, there is a spin-off unit, called Liwa Zainebiyoun, made-up of Pakistani Shi'as who initially served in the Fatemiyoun brigade, but later were concentrated by the IRGC in their own unit. Liwa Fatemiyoun has fought alongside Syrian and Iranian forces in the Syrian civil war since at least 2014. Many reports on the unit emphasized that, while there is an ideological hard core, many members joined because of the financial incentive and to avoid deportation to Afghanistan for themselves and their families, or even the chance to gain Iranian citizenship. Officially, the unit was founded to defend the shrine of Zaynab bint Ali – a daughter of Ali and sister of Hussein: she is a figure of significant religious reverence for Shi'as. Yet, despite this official designation, the unit has taken part in fighting all across Syria, often being deployed to some of the fiercest combat zones.

Liwa Fatemiyoun offers an important case study, given that it represents most closely what has been deemed a contractual proxy – a mercenary force (Fox 2020). Yet, Liwa Fatemiyoun is not only interesting because it is in some respects comparable to other modern mercenary forces like Wagner or Blackwater, but also because it demonstrates the trans-national nature of Iranian proxy warfare. The group has not been deployed to Afghanistan, despite having its roots in Shi'a militias in Afghanistan that fought the Soviets and the Taliban. Instead, Liwa Fatemiyoun is a proxy group of Afghans build up by Iran and led by the IRGC to fight specifically in Syria and help Assad's regime survive and win the civil war. Three phases are important here: the situation of Afghans in Iran and the pretext of the Syrian civil war, the time of the first deployment from 2014 till the intervention of Russia in 2015, and a third phase till 2019, when, with the combined Russian and Iranian help, the Syrian government was able to regain control of most of the country. This includes the conquest of the last ISIS strongholds on Syrian soil. The way Iran approached the Syrian civil war through its proxy makes it an interesting case study here, but also raises the question whether Iran will in the future use such formations abroad to aid allied states and groups.

Islamic Movement in Nigeria (1990-2019)

The Islamic movement in Nigeria (الحركة الاسلامية في نيجيريا) was founded by Ibrahim Zakzaky, who had converted to Shi'a Islam after visiting post-revolutionary Iran (Tangaza 2019). His goal was to create an Islamic state in Nigeria and to proselytize Nigerians to the Twelver brand of Shi'a Islam. From 2014 onwards, his movement has clashed repeatedly with Nigerian security forces who allegedly killed several hundreds of his followers in several attacks. Ibrahim Zakzaky was detained in 2015 and has been kept in detention since then. There is limited support for the movement from Iran, mostly in terms of financial and political aid (Jahanbani 2020). The movement is active in political demonstrations against Israel and in promoting the ideas of the Iranian revolution. Nigeria is far from Iran, not part of its claimed

sphere of influence, and Iranian economic interests in the country are limited. The number of Shi'as in the country is limited, and Shi'a Islam first appeared with the Islamic movement in Nigeria (IMN) after 1979. In the timeline under analysis, the IMN has not shown an inclination to use violence to pursue its goals (Jahanbani 2020; Behravesht 2020). The group is not a case of proxy warfare but has the potential to become one, turning into a significant negative case.

Why hasn't Iran tried to escalate the group into an armed proxy group, given that it was repeatedly attacked by the state? To answer, the timeframe from the consolidation of the movement from the 1990 till 2014 will be analyzed, followed by the period 2014-2019 when the clashes with the Nigerian government escalated and the movement was repeatedly attacked by Nigerian security forces.

Pakistan

Pakistan is one of the negative cases. Pakistan borders with Iran along its tumultuous Baluchistan province; it is the land route for Iranian trade to India, and it has a sizable Shi'a minority of 10-20% that has faced repeated persecution and terrorist attacks. The Pakistani state is weak in many fringe areas, and it has to tolerate the existence of militant Sunni Islamist groups. Therefore, it ought to be expected Iranian proxy warfare activities in Pakistan. Yet, no Pakistani proxy has been created so far. While Pakistanis serve in the Liwa Zainebiyoun (Vakil 2018), they do not operate in Pakistan so far. Both from an identity based and a power-based perspective, one would expect Iranian proxy warfare in Pakistan. The Pakistani state is weak and divided enough to make such an undertaking feasible, making Pakistan a good negative case study, to test both realist and constructivist assumptions about Iranian proxy warfare.

Excluded Cases

Given that the focus of this study is more on qualitative insights than quantitative data, several cases have been excluded. Below is a compilation of the potential cases that were considered but then excluded and the arguments for their exclusion.

Hezbollah Al-Hejaz, OIRAP and other groups active in the Gulf monarchies. Hezbollah Al-Hejaz represents another cluster case, together with the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIRAP) and several other groups. These groups represent Shi'as and have repeatedly used terror attacks against the governments they are fighting (Rezaei 2019). Of special interest among them is Bahrain - a Shi'a majority state ruled by a Sunni elite. The groups channeled revolutionary sentiment after the successful revolution in Iran in 1979, leading to clashes with security forces across the Arab Peninsula. Due to limited information on their most active phase in the 1980s, they have been excluded.

The Islamic Army of Bosnia, which allegedly received thousands of IRGC troops as trainers and equipment from Iran 1992-1995 to help them fight in the Balkan wars of the 1990s (Ostovar 2018). There is little information on these activities and the extent of the Iranian support is hard to quantify. It is hard to even clarify which units specifically were supported, with the support going either to the seventh independent Muslim regiment or to units counted among the Mujaheddin. Additionally, given that the Bosnians received support from many other countries like Turkey and Saudi-Arabia, it is almost impossible to establish factors like dependency. While support for Bosnia in Iranian discourses is referenced in the literature (Ostovar 2016), it is usually bemoaned for not resulting in any gains for Iran (Ostovar 2018).

Various Shi'a groups in Afghanistan. Iran supported several groups during the Soviet-Afghan war and against the Taliban (Emadi 1995). Iran also supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban (Azizi 2020). Yet again, the level of available information is somewhat limited, and it is hard to establish the level of support and the dependency of these groups, but

also what goals they pursued and what their ideology was. While it is alleged that the Fatemiyoun Division developed out of the orbit of these Afghan groups (Schneider 2018), there is too little information on Iran's Afghan proxies of the Soviet-Afghan war and the struggles against the Northern Alliance to be useful case studies for this thesis.

Al-Qaeda is sometimes mentioned in the literature on Iranian proxy warfare (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020). The problem with that is that information is limited, and it seems to be a political relationship rather than a proxy relationship between a state and a non-state actor (Tabatabai 2019). Al-Qaeda is not in any form dependent on Iranian support and what is known of their interactions is too sparse to come to any definitive conclusions.

There are a host of groups, mostly originating in Iraq which have varying degrees of relations with Iran – some of which also have fought in Syria. Most of them are small to medium sized. Some like the Mahdi army operate clearly independently of Iran (Levitt 2021), while others might be more dependent. Yet, given the often-limited information, they will be excluded from this thesis in favor of the more well established, better researched and relevant SCIRI, Badr and the PMF.

The Kurds are the biggest ethnic group excluded. While Iran sponsored various Kurdish groups over the years, it failed to establish any meaningful proxy among the Kurdish population especially in Iraq (van Bruinessen 1986). Iran did have relations with the Iraqi-Kurdish PUK and KDP when they fought Saddam and later-on when they fought ISIS (Hollingshead 2018). Yet, these relations are again more on the level of non-state or quasi-state actors having diplomatic relations with Iran. They do not represent proxy groups that are the subject of this thesis.

6. Data and Sources

There is already a rich and diverse literature on Iranian proxies available, and the aim of this study is to explain the motives behind Iranian proxy warfare through comparative means. The data needed for this project are on Iranian actions and identity, as well as the identities of

specific groups and their actions and on the context and situation in which Iran and its proxies operate (Falleti and Lynch 2009). For the analysis of the identity of groups and the IRI, primary sources will be consulted: speeches, official statements and documents, as well as media interviews¹⁹ by the leadership of Iran and the leaders of the respective proxy groups, as well as newspaper articles published in pro-regime outlets, such as the Iranian newspaper Kayhan (Tabatabai 2019) or internationally aimed outlets like Press TV. For the actions of Iran, its proxies and the overall context, this project will build on the existing secondary literature produced by academia and think tanks as well as a range of other sources: the UN, Congressional Research Service, and bodies of the EU. Additionally, media sources, especially newspaper articles in English, German, French, Italian and Farsi will be used to describe actions on the ground. Given that field research in active war zones is not possible, secondary literature must fill the gap on capabilities and actions of the different actors. The resulting data will then be analyzed and the results compared for within-case theory-testing but also between cases to come to generalizing conclusions.

7. Summary

With the cases and classical comparison, I will approach the central questions of this thesis. The presented hypotheses are operationalized through sub-hypothesis. The selected case studies will be tested against the presented explanations. While most cases are positive cases of Iranian proxy warfare happening with lasting and deep relations – at least at a superficial survey of available literature – there is a negative case of no proxy warfare happening with Pakistan and outlier cases like Nigeria and the Taliban. Overall, cases have been selected to represent a

¹⁹ For example, the interview foreign minister Javad Zarif gave to Afghan News channel TOLO News in which he also discussed the foreign policy making of the IRGC (“Exclusive Interview with Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif | TOLONews Interview” 2020)

broad temporal and geographical spectrum. There is an abundance of data for the selected cases both from secondary and primary sources, the lack of data in some other cases led to their exclusion, as mentioned above. I deemed sufficient data availability for the selected case. Only the third hypothesis might at times suffer from a lack of available information.

III. Proxy War in the Levant

1. PIJ, Hamas and Sabireen movement in Palestine

a) Introduction

The Palestinian case study stands in the center of Iran-Israel relations and the conflict between the US, Israel and Iran. It is very insightful since it touches upon aspects of Iranian aspirations for hegemony in the Middle East and Islamic world; but also, the ideology of the Islamic Republic often framed as Khomeinism (Karimifard 2012). Even before taking control of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini had set his eyes on Palestine (Reda 2016). While the Palestinian-Israeli conflict had previously mainly been framed in nationalist terms often being referred to as the Arab-Israeli conflict (Goodman and Boudana 2019), Khomeini would reinforce the religious aspect of the conflict (Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016). Arafat's PLO and other Pro-Palestinian groups were usually left-wing and moved in the circles of the international leftist terrorist groups, allying with groups such as the German Rote-Armee-Fraktion (RAF) or the Japanese Red Army. The PLO even took up training leftist would-be-guerillas in Lebanon camps (Schmidt-Eenboom and Stoll 2016). Khomeini meanwhile did not think of the conflict in nationalist or leftist terms, being critical of nationalism and instead embracing pan-Islamic ideas (Reda 2016).

For Khomeini, the conflict had two levels: the religious one about Jerusalem and Islamic lands and the anti-imperialist one (Taremi 2014). The first one is based on a ruling in Islamic law, that lands that have been controlled by Muslims cannot be lost or given away, they have to be retaken (imam-khomeini.ir 2016). By emphasizing this point Khomeini could, both strengthen his pan-Islamic credentials and built on his criticism of the Shah. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was pursuing a foreign policy that was friendly towards Israel, the other big ally of the US in the Middle East (Abdolmohammadi and Cama 2020). The Shah' foreign policy also aligned with the Israeli periphery doctrine, in which Israel would align itself with the

periphery of the Arab world namely Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia and Kurdistan (Alpher 2015). While Khomeini's criticism focused mostly on the Shah's secularism and economic policies (Ansari 2001), the close alignment with the US led to further criticism of the Shah's foreign policy. The other aspect is that by pressing the Palestinian issue, Khomeini could gain favor with the Arab-Muslim masses that were frustrated with the repeated failures of mainly Egyptian and Syrian states to defeat the Israelis. For Khomeini, this failure was the result of secularism and emphasis on non-Islamic ideologies like nationalism. His answer was Islam.

But beyond that, Khomeini emphasized the anti-imperialist aspect. Israel the "little Satan" was an imperialist project of the British and Americans – The "Great Satan"²⁰ (Karimifard 2012). It weakened the Islamic world by placing a foreign state in its very heart. This of course resonated with anti-imperialists around the globe, but especially in the Middle East. Therefore, it was logical for Khomeini that one of his first acts upon taking power was to end relations with Israel and hand over the Israeli embassy to the Palestinian leadership. This ideological background highlights the importance of this case study for identity- and ideology-based explanations and to challenge power-based explanations. The involvement of the US also makes it insightful for factionalism-based explanations.

While the topic of Iranian-Palestinian relations is complex and has many facets, this case study will focus on the three groups: Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Sabireen movement. Hamas and PIJ have the most engagement with Iran in recent years and have most strongly shaped the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the three decades since 1990; while the Sabireen movement represents an insightful case due to its Shi'a nature.

²⁰ The Soviet Union with its atheist ideology, invasion of Afghanistan and military support for Saddam Hussein gained the title the lesser Satan. While its ideology was hated by Khomeini, its influence in the Middle East was limited compared to the US.

b) Historical Background

To understand the Palestinian case study, it is important to look at the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and relationship between Israel and Iran over the years. Ever since Jewish migration really took up pace in the beginning of the 20th century, there had been clashes between Arab Palestinians and Jewish – later Israeli – settlers. The founding of Israel started a phase of conflict between the Arab states and Israel. After being defeated in 1948/49, most of the Arab states - especially Egypt and Syria - started to reform and modernize their militaries. But the Arab states also started supporting Palestinian insurgents that continued the struggle against Israel. Egypt faced off again against Israel during the Suez Crisis in 1956 (Steed 2016). In 1967 Egypt, together with Syria and Jordan was soundly defeated in the Six-Day-War, which in turn was followed by the Egyptian and Syrian defeat in the Yom-Kippur War of 1973 (Susser 2017). While the Arabs fought with Israel, Iran had decided on friendly relations with Israel (Vakil 2018) that lasted until the revolution in 1979. The reason for this was that Iran was closely aligned with the US and was looking for allies in a mostly Arab neighborhood to its West.

The soon-to-be Iranian revolutionaries meanwhile had forged contacts with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Ostovar 2016b). Through its bases in Lebanon and Southern Yemen, the PLO was heavily involved in training would-be guerillas/terrorists and freedom fighters of varying colors: German RAF, Japanese Red army, but also some European right-wing terrorists among others (Schmidt-Eenboom and Stoll 2016) and, of course, men from Iran hostile to the Shah (Ostovar 2016b) were training in these camps. Once the revolution succeeded, the Iranians that possessed the right -Islamist - mindset would be formed into an organization that would then develop into the Sepah-e-Pasdaran-Enghelab-e-Islami the IRGC (Ostovar 2016b). The Islamic republic therefore not only had an ideological ally in the PLO,

but it owed a debt of gratitude to the PLO for training some of its members in combat skills, which became crucial in turning the tide for the Islamic revolutionaries in 1979.

So, when the revolution happened, Iran severed relations with Israel. Yet in September 1980 Iran found itself in a war with its neighbor Iraq. While Iran was able to successfully push back Iraq and even go on the counter offensive, most of the Arab world and by extension many other countries supported Iraq (Nonneman 2004). In this situation Israel supported Iran – unofficially. The support took several forms, but most importantly Israel helped Iran keep its Air Force flying (Abadi 2004). The Iranian Air Force had been equipped by the US and was now suffering from a lack of spare parts. Additionally, Israel sold anti-tank missiles most famously during the Iran-Contra Affair (Abadi 2004). This support was despite Khomeini's fierce anti-Zionist rhetoric, even one of the Iranian offensives against Iraqi lines was named Tariq al-Quds – the path to Jerusalem (Tasnim 2014). This cooperation -the result of the common threat by Saddam Hussein²¹ - did not however lead to a fundamental change in politics. Israel might have been motivated by the hopes to regain some influence in Iran and retain its ally, but in the end Iran and Israel would become enemies. This hostility would for the most part play out in two fields: Lebanon and Palestine.

While Iran handed the keys to the Israeli embassy to the PLO - and it remains the Palestinian embassy to this day - Iran never warmed to the more secular PLO. Over the years, the left-leaning and secular Palestinian groups lost their appeal (Emanuilov and Yashlavsky 2011) leading to the foundation of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in 1981 (Bartal 2022). It was growing out of the circle of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood but had split off due to ideological differences. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad was instead heavily influenced by

²¹ In 1981 the Israeli Air Force – the Air and Space Arm – destroyed the Iraqi Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad. This happened after previous Iranian attempts to destroy the reactor had failed. Israel and Iran had consulted over the issue. Allegedly the Iranian supplied Israel with information from their previous attack and offered their airfields for emergency landing of the Israeli planes.

the ideas of the Islamic Revolution (Bartal 2022). In 1987 another group that would become known as Hamas was founded, being the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim brotherhood (Dunning 2015), looking to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood organization for inspiration.

While some of the Arab states were making peace with Israel – Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 –, Iran was building up its support for the Palestinian cause. Especially during the first Intifada, 1987-1993, the Iranian government-backed groups PIJ and Hamas became infamous for their use of suicide bombers and car bombs (Mansharof 2020), a tactic that had first been regularly deployed in the neighboring Lebanese Civil War (DeVore and Stähli 2015). Both groups worked against the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Juneau 2015). In 2007, Hamas was even eventually able to gain territorial control over Gaza. In 2014, splitting off from Palestinian Islamic Jihad, former members that had converted to Shi'a Islam founded the Sabireen Movement. The split was based on religious differences but also disagreements on policy regarding conflicts in Syria and Yemen (Bartal 2022). The Sabireen movement fired rockets at Israel and tried to expand, leading it into conflict with Hamas. Hamas moved against the organization first in 2015 and finally in 2019, dissolving the Sabireen movement in Gaza (Rauta 2018; Bartal 2022) since Hamas tried to maintain a ceasefire, while the Sabireen movement preferred to engage Israel in battle.

c) Phases of Historical significance

1987-2000 The first Intifada and its aftermath. The first Intifada was a mixture of protests, terrorist attacks, and riots that formed against the backdrop of Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank (Alimi 2007). While initially it was supported by almost all Palestinian groups including the PLO, Hamas and PIJ, there soon appeared a rift. While Arafat and his PLO engaged Israel in diplomatic talks, Hamas and PIJ favored the way of violence (Byman 2013). While Iran had previously supported Arafat and the more secular Palestinian movement, it now switched to supporting Islamist forces: those that most fiercely attacked Israel, while also

rejecting any kind of peace deals. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad started deploying suicide bombers entering a form of competition of who could strike more targets and could cause more casualties (Bartal 2022). Although the support was limited, given that Iran was still at war with Iraq, this is not surprising. Politically, Iran organized the first International Conference on Supporting Palestine Intifada in October 1991 (Qods News Agency 2011). The symbolism was intended: the conference was happening at the same time as the Madrid conference, which was aiming to broker a peace deal between Palestinians and Israelis. Iran was clearly favoring the non-compromising elements among the Palestinians over those seeking compromise. While this makes sense from an ideological standpoint, it also raises some issues. Iran had massively suffered during the Iran-Iraq war and the economy was still devastated from the aftermath of the war, yet Iran chose the path of confrontation and to invest in Hamas and PIJ to keep the conflict going with Israel. While this expanded Iranian influence in Palestine, it did not increase security for Iran since it would position Israel and the US as hostile to Iran. In the years that followed, Iran would continue to support the rejectionist forces among the Palestinians. Leading up to the failed 2000 Camp David peace negotiations.

The second Intifada and the Karine A affair. The tipping point that caused the second Intifada was Ariel Sharon's insistence to take a walk on the temple mount (Pressman 2003). Palestinians feared this would be the prelude to an Israeli challenge over ownership of the holy site. Making it the trigger of the second intifada. Deeper reasons were the dire economic situation and the overall stagnant political process that saw Israel build more settlements and no fair peace deal for Palestine arising from the negotiations. In 2001 Iran in response hosted another conference supporting the Palestinian intifada, featuring Hamas, PIJ and even Hezbollah (Brandenburg 2010). While Iranian support for its Palestinian proxies during this time is not particularly noteworthy one event of the second intifada is: The Karine A affair.

The Karine A was a cargo ship bought in Lebanon by Palestinians. It sailed to Sudan, took on cargo and replaced the crew with Palestinian personnel, before sailing to Iran. Here on the island of Qeshm it was loaded with weapons and explosives. It then sailed via the Red Sea towards the Mediterranean. Here the goal was to load the weapons onto smaller boats which would then smuggle them to Palestine to use them against Israel. But it was intercepted in the Red Sea (Satloff 2002). This interception had a profound impact on International Relations in the Middle East. Iranian weapons had been smuggled by members of Fatah - people close to Arafat - to be used against Israel. Shortly before Iran had aided the US in fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and the potential for improved relations between both the US and Iran was being discussed (Milani 2006). In addition, it shifted US policy towards the Palestinians, US president Bush saw Arafat no longer as a reliable partner damaging the Israeli-Palestinian peace process under the auspices of the US (Satloff 2002). This incident is relevant, because it shows that the IRGC was willing to work with members of the PLO that wanted to continue terrorist attacks against Israel. While modern studies of Iranian proxy behavior focus on the groups Iran has deep ties with, this shows that in the past Iranian proxy behavior was much more opportunistic. This incident is also relevant since the IRGC was willing to risk the improved relations between the US and Iran. The effect was quite grave, after the Karine A incident Bush put Iran on his list of countries belonging to the Axis of Evil and a new ice age in Iranian-US relations ensued (Milani 2006). While it is possible to assume that other actors than the IRGC smuggled the weapons it is very unlikely for several reasons: The IRGC oversees supplying proxies of Iran with weapons – at that time primarily Hezbollah. The army of Iran – the Artesh – is tightly controlled and much more under the control of the elected government. It was also claimed that the ship, which transferred the weapons to the Karine A at Qeshm island, belonged to the IRGC (Radio Free Europe 2002). The most likely explanation is therefore that the IRGC either accepted the risk this action posed to Iran's foreign standing or that it actively took this step to

undermine relations with the US. Showing that factionalism is a likely explanation for this action.

Hamas takeover of Gaza. In five days in June 2007 Hamas took over Gaza. Fighting with Fatah was short and decisive and resulted in Hamas taking over Gaza (Milton-Edwards 2008). This led to a massive increase in Iranian support for Hamas (Gleis and Berti 2012). Smuggling by sea and land – via Egypt – enabled Iran to supply Hamas with advanced equipment. Yet at the same time Hamas needed more cash injections. While Hamas was able now to tax the citizens of Gaza and benefit from the smuggling it also required more money to provide social services and to keep Gaza running. Hamas became more powerful, but it also became more dependent on Iran. Meanwhile Iran gained a second front from which it could attack Israel via proxies, after Hezbollah had ousted Israel from South-Lebanon in 2000 (Sozer 2016). This once more shows the dynamic in proxy relationships. Hamas became more powerful and in theory more independent than before. But the increase in power also meant a greater dependency if Hamas could not secure more funding from other sources.

2011-2019 The protests and Palestine. In 2011-2019, Iran and its Palestinians proxies went through the most challenging phase of their relationship when for a brief time both sides split. The split between the PIJ and Iran as well as Hamas had a simple reason lying roughly two to three hundred kilometers to the North-East of Gaza: Syria. The so-called Arab spring often referred to as the Islamic awakening by Iranian leaders (Çakmak 2015) hit Syria in 2012. But rather than leading to a (temporary) shift in power, like in Egypt, the demonstrations in Syria turned into a civil war – becoming the bloodiest war in the Middle East since the Iran-Iraq war.

After internal discussions and much prevacation, Iran decided to intervene (Vakil 2018). Rather than embracing the popular revolts as it had previously done, when it was against autocratic rulers like in Egypt or Bahrain (Chubin 2012), Iran in Syria would come out to

support its long-term ally Ba'athist Syria. The Alawi sect, to whom the Assad clan belonged, were only fully embraced as Shiites by Musa al-Sadr in the 1970s (Nasr 2006). The Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria had a close relationship ever since Syria helped Iran in its war against Iraq and both countries had for the most part cooperated in Lebanon and forged a close alliance. Rather than siding with the masses on the street – often expressing conservative or Islamist aspirations – Iran would side with the socialist and secular State of Bashar al-Assad. This was perceived by many across the Middle East as a sectarian based decision (Ostovar 2016a) and one that had ripple effects throughout Iran's proxy network.

Hamas and PIJ did not join Iran in supporting Assad, rather they aligned with most of the Arab world in opposing Bashar al-Assad's government (Karmon 2013). Iran reacted by cutting funding to both organizations. For PIJ this became an existential crisis (Bartal 2022), they became unable to pay their fighters. Hamas meanwhile looked abroad to invite funding from places such as Saudi-Arabia and Qatar. This culminated in a widely publicized visit and public prayer and sermon by Yussuf Qaradawi, a famous Egyptian TV preacher living in Qatar. In his sermon Qaradawi attacked Hezbollah and Iran and aligned himself with Anti-Shi'a clergy from Saudi-Arabia (al-Rashed 2013). That Hamas would give a stage to him shows that they wanted to distance themselves as clearly as possible from Iran, highlighting a deep split in the Hamas-Iran relationship. Iran answered by starting to support a new movement that would form in 2014 – the Harakah as-Sabirin Nasran li-Filastin – the movement of the patient ones for victory for Palestine or short Sabireen Movement (Ostovar 2018). The founding of the Sabireen Movement is of importance since it can potentially show several things. Ostovar (2018) argues that the movement was founded to create a new Palestinian Islamic Jihad to either replace PIJ or put pressure on it. Iran either wanted a movement closer to its own identity, ideology and general world view or was unhappy with PIJ and to some extent Hamas and wanted to create a new organization that would gradually replace them and be more compliant with Iranian policy

wishes. While the argument has some merits it takes away agency from Palestinian actors and the fact that Shi'a Islam has found some attraction in Palestinian territories in recent years (Al-Monitor 2022). Equally it is not unlikely that some members of PIJ unhappy with policymaking by the leadership would split off to form their own organization. Either way Iran was willing to embrace the new organization and continue to support it even when Iran reconciled with PIJ (Bartal 2022). PIJ and Hamas meanwhile realized that they could not gain the funding they needed to maintain their operational capabilities from other sources.

This led to a slow reconciliation with Iran. While neither PIJ nor Hamas switched to supporting Assad and remained vague on their stance towards the Houthis, both sides mended fences and started working together again. According to the Secretary-General of PIJ, General Qassem Soleimani became heavily involved in supplying the group with weapons. This was in line with a policy set out by Khamenei in 2014, to up-arm Palestinian groups (Radio Farda 2020). The reasons for this reconciliation and renewed cooperation were that the Palestinians needed Iranian monetary support, especially after the Muslim brotherhood had been ousted from power in Egypt. But Iran also failed to build the Sabireen movement into a powerful movement that could rival either Hamas or PIJ. The Shi'a identity and the pro-Assad and pro-Houthi stance did not endear it to the wider Palestinian public. Both sides came together again, because they needed each other. Hamas even felt bold enough to arrest and dissolve the Sabireen movement in 2019.

Whether it is for ideological reasons or geopolitical ones, Iran wants to continue to challenge Israel through Palestinian groups (Catran and Shine 2017). Iran could not permanently bring itself to cut support to these groups. While they are far less committed to the Axis of resistance and do not aid Iran on other battlefields such as Syria, Iraq or Yemen, they remain Iran's only way to maintain influence in Palestine. Iran wants the Palestinian resistance to continue so it must work with those groups that maintain that resistance. Yet the support for

the Sabireen movement also shows a desire to have ideologically aligned and reliable allies among the Palestinians. It might even hint at a desire to spread Shi'a Islam in Palestine, although the Sabireen movement itself is too little evidence to prove that point.

d) Capabilities and Iranian support

The capabilities of the Palestinian groups changed over the years. This is a consequence of the fact that over the last forty years the nature of warfare has fundamentally changed with drones, computers, satellites and long-range weaponry playing ever more important roles. But also, the way wars are fought in the Middle East has changed. Israel adapted to the changing nature of warfare through new equipment and tactics, and the US also developed its capabilities. This in turn benefited Israel that got access to US equipment, training and tactics. Iran in turn had to also adapt what it delivers to its Palestinian proxies.

The other aspect is that a changing geopolitical situation necessitated different equipment. With the retreat of Israel from Gaza and the take-over by Hamas the need for different support arose. Fighting a guerilla war in Gaza Strip and the West Bank using ambushes, suicide and car bombs is different from having to govern Gaza and maintain territorial control during the frequent clashes with Israel. Israel also successfully countered the tactic of sending suicide bombers, by building a wall and increasing the barriers between Gaza and Israel. This together with Hezbollah's successful use of missiles in the 2006 war led to a shift to missiles and rockets, as well as drones in combination with tunnels as the primary means of waging war (Watkins and James 2016). The tunnels are important for Hamas to get its fighters into Israel but also to smuggle goods coming in over the Sinai into Gaza. Since Israel has imposed a naval blockade in recent years, smuggling by sea is not possible as in earlier years (Butt and Butt 2016).

The needs of Hamas and PIJ over the years therefore became bigger but also more conventional. Probably the biggest capability the Palestinian groups have are their array of

missiles and rockets. They fire these in barrages at Israel, which in turn has developed a layer of missile defense systems that try to intercept them. Iranian support for the Palestinian groups hereby is most crucial since the production capacities on themselves in Gaza are limited due to the blockage. Another important form of support is drones, which can be used to attack targets in a more guided fashion, but also be used for reconnaissance (Sims 2018). But probably the most important aspect of support is financial. When PIJ and Iran had a rift, the former struggled to pay its fighters (Bartal 2022). Hamas has smuggling and taxation as sources of income, but it also has to provide for millions of Palestinians living in Gaza. Both groups have in recent years tried to acquire other sources of funding, but only with very mixed results, eventually returning to Iran. It is therefore safe to state that without Iranian support both groups' capabilities would be severely curtailed. While Hamas and PIJ can train their own fighters and some make some of their own missiles, they cannot pay their fighters on their own (Bartal 2022; Mansharof 2020).

The Sabireen movement meanwhile was only active as a military group from 2014-2019, when Hamas crushed it. It had similar capabilities, being in possession of small arms and missiles, but on a smaller scale. Overall, in terms of capabilities the PIJ and the Sabireen movement are very dependent on Iran. Without funding from Iran, they cannot afford to pay their members, let alone wage campaigns against Israel. Hamas is more independent and could potentially be fully independent. The problem for Hamas is, that despite trying to gain new supporters in recent years, namely Qatar and Turkey, neither are very committed to the Palestinian cause and therefore Hamas has repeatedly found itself needing to come back to Iran (Ostovar 2018). That Hamas would do so, even though they must subordinate their policies to Iran, shows that while they try to be more independent, they are not. Hamas is dependent on Iran, especially for equipment to wage its war against Israel. But it is dependent on a smaller scale compared to the Sabireen movement and PIJ. Hamas could continue functioning without

Iranian funding, albeit on a starkly reduced scale. This makes all the Palestinian groups proxies, albeit to differing levels at different times.

e) **Ideology and Identity**

All three groups are made-up of Palestinians, in the vast majority (Sunni-) Muslims. They are all counted among the Islamists groups in contrast to other Palestinian groups like Fatah which is seen as more secular, and various left-wing groups that have lost relevance since the end of the Cold War. Geographically all three groups are mostly present in the Gaza Strip where Hamas since 2007 has been in power. But Hamas and PIJ are also present in the West Bank and abroad among Palestinian communities in Lebanon, Jordan and have followers and supporters across the globe. They all represent Palestinian Islamists that reject any peace deal with Israel.²² Their main differences regard foreign policy and the relevance ascribed to the ideology of Khomeinism, the role of Palestinian nationalism and, in the case of the Sabireen movement, the religious identity.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Palestinian Islamic Jihad is unique in its ideology. The group is made up of Sunnis, it is anti-Zionist, antisemitic and anti-Western, but it also embraces the ideology of Khomeinism. Given that most Sunni Islamist groups have embraced a fierce anti-Shi'a position in the last few years, PIJ is unique. But how does that play out in detail? Palestinian Islamic Jihad formed as an offshoot from the Muslim Brotherhood. But its founder was heavily influenced by the Islamic Revolution. Fathi Shaqaqi authored a book, called "Khomeini, The Islamic Solution and the Alternative ", in which he praised Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution (Bartal 2022). He argued that the method and message of Khomeini is

²² Hamas in recent years has acknowledged the possibility of a negotiated settlement that results in an end of hostilities and a return to the borders of 1967, but also emphasized they would not have a peace deal or diplomatic relations with Israel. PIJ and Sabireen Movement both have called for total victory and a restoration of Palestine in the borders of 1947.

universal for the Islamic world; subsequently Pan-Islamism features strongly in the ideology of the PIJ.

Hamas: The Islamic Resistance movement is Sunni Islamist. Its fiercely anti-Zionist, anti-Western and antisemitic. But its ideology is rooted in the ideology of the Muslim brotherhood (Gleis and Berti 2012). Additionally Palestinian nationalism plays an important role. Hamas is firmly rooted in Palestine and does not broadly ascribe to pan-Islamist ideas like the ones promoted by ISIS. On the other hand, Hamas is not Shi'a and not particularly inclined in favor of Shi'ism. The Hamas government in Gaza has repeatedly persecuted people for converting to Shiism (Al-Monitor 2022). Overall while also Islamist, Hamas has a markedly different ideology than Iran. Hamas has not embraced the ideas of Khomeinism, it does not look to Iran as a model for an Islamic state. Rather than being ideologically similar, Hamas has ideologically common enemies with Iran. Politically there are big differences that have shown themselves on several occasions. The biggest source of difference, which led to a veritable split and deteriorating relations, was the Syrian civil war. While Hamas sided with the Syrian opposition, Iran supported Assad and his crackdown on the former. Hamas moved its office from Damascus to Qatar. While both Hamas and Iran were able to mend fences later-on, this incident shows that rather than being a fixture in the Iranian camp, Hamas is grateful for Iranian support but strives for ideological and political distance. The way Hamas rules in Gaza is also different from the Islamic republic. While Palestinians in Gaza suffer from many of the same religious-based restrictions, the rule of Hamas is not centered on clerics but on the organization itself. While Hamas had a strong personality cult around the cleric Yassin, he has not been replaced with an equally venerated clerical figure.

Sabireen Movement: The Sabireen movement highlights how ideology and identity cannot be separated easily in the Middle East. It split off from the PIJ when the relations between it and Iran were at a low point. Conversion to Shi'a Islam had been observed before

among Palestinians and especially members of PIJ, but now an entire organization was founded that consisted of Palestinians who had embraced Shi'a Islam (Bartal 2022). Its flag is modeled after the Hezbollah and IRGC flag. It is positioning itself against Saudi-Arabia and its intervention in Yemen. It also took a decidedly pro-Assad stance. The Sabireen movement, while small and not long lasting, nonetheless is the ideologically firmest of all the Palestinian groups. It fully embraces Khomeinism and situates itself in the Axis of resistance. The members of the Sabireen movement took their ideology as far as to change their identity from Sunni Islam to Shi'a Islam. That Iran was supportive of the movement shows an Iranian interest in an ideologically more reliable Shi'a ally among the Palestinians.

f) Geopolitics and Economic factors

From a cursory glance, Iran's conflict with Israel does not make sense if one assumes a classical realist underpinning. Israel does not border Iran; Iran has no disputed borders with Israel and except for competition in Lebanon in the 1980s both countries do not vie for control over the same neighboring countries. On the contrary, as previously mentioned, both countries had a working alliance during the Pahlavi era. Israel even kept supporting Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. So, it seems the Iranian approach is irrational and does not make sense from a geopolitical perspective. Yet this ignores two crucial aspects of Iranian foreign policy: status and the "long game". The former is a consistent line in Iranian foreign policy since Reza Shah Pahlavi. Iran sees itself as a regional power – historically the Achaemenid dynasty was the antique equivalent of a global power, the Sasanians and Safavids all at least became regional powerhouses. It is only during the decline of the Qajar period that Iran lost its status. Mohammad Reza Shah tried to regain status through rapid modernization and by building one of the world's biggest armies (Ward 2009). From the perspective of status, it is not a feasible strategy to ally with another regional power and have to defer to it, since both want to dominate the same region. They are therefore natural competitors from this perspective.

The other aspect is the “long game”. Iran since the revolution wants to force the US out of the Middle East to fulfill its agenda (Reda 2016). It does not matter if that agenda is interpreted in terms of identity, ideology or power – as long as the US dominates the region any Iranian aspirations are stymied. The Islamic Republic of Iran does not want to be a regional power in the US system alongside Israel and Saudi-Arabia; it wants to destroy that system and replace it with one shaped by itself (Reda 2016). If Iran wants to destroy the US hegemony in the Middle East, it has to do so through subversive means – proxy wars being at the forefront. Given that Iran can ill afford an open pitched battle with the US or even its regional allies like Saudi-Arabia and the UAE, it is opting for a strategy that attacks the pillars of US hegemony in the Middle East. Khomeini expressed this view with his terms of little Satan (Israel) and Greater Satan (USA) (Karimifard 2012; Salamey and Othman 2011), highlighting the contempt but also the view of the Middle East as dominated by the US primarily through Israel. Whether the Iranian assessment is correct or not – Saudi-Arabia and Turkey also play important roles in US Middle East policy – it is the prevailing view of the Iranian leadership to this day. From a perspective that sees Iran as striving to increase its influence therefore there is an argument for Iranian involvement in Palestine. This involvement does increase Iranian power since Iran can keep up the Palestinian resistance, meaning there will not be a peace deal without Iranian consent. So, while Iran might not be able to force out the US, it will sit at the table of any future peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.

An argument against this is that it goes against classical geopolitical wisdom. As mentioned, Iran neither borders Israel nor are they fighting for influence over countries to such an extent that it would pose a critical threat to Iran. While the idea of overcoming the US hegemony in the Middle East is appealing, it is made unlikely through the limits Iran faces in terms of economic means. Simply put, it does not make sense for Iran to spend millions and millions of dollars of sparse cash to fight a war against Israel, while also having to engage in

conflict in Iraq, Yemen and possibly Afghanistan. From a defensive standpoint the engagement in Palestine does not make sense. From an offensive standpoint it can but given current Iranian resources it also is problematic due to the cost. Iran has to spend a lot of money to wage all its proxy wars, money that it lacks for domestic spending. This causes unrest at home, going so far that “Marg ba Filistine” (Death to Palestine) has been shouted at anti-government protests in Iran (Katz 2018). Highlighting the hostility, the spending of sparse resources on Palestine causes unrest among the Iranian people.

Economically Palestine offers little for Iran. Palestine is a relatively underdeveloped region, it has some agriculture and exports some raw materials, but a very limited industrial basis (OEC 2023). The Palestinian population is not wealthy and therefore not very suitable as a market for Iranian products. Further as long as Israel and Palestine are in a conflict, Iran will have problems accessing the market, additional problems are that the West Bank is encapsulated by Israel and Jordan, who both have vested interests in this market (OEC 2023; PCBS 2022). The Palestinian emigrant communities are a potential market for Iran, but they are far and widespread, and Iran would depend on the goodwill of their host nations, far more than the sympathy these communities might have towards Iran due to Iranian support of Palestinian groups.

The economic argument does not convince, there is just no feasible way for Iran to achieve a return of investment in Palestine in an economic sense. An economic argument can be constructed in the negative sense. The costs of occupation and of anti-insurgency operations are high for the Israeli state²³. Likewise, the US has to spend resources on Israel to help it maintain its military superiority in the region. Palestinian and associated groups' continued terrorist actions have in the past created tensions affecting global oil prices (Kollias, Kyrtsov,

²³ In 2019 Israel spent more than 5% of its GDP on defense (World Bank 2022), further expenses for intelligence services, police forces, etc. are not included in that sum, showing the steep cost Israel pays to maintain its security.

and Papadamou 2013). By supporting Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Iran is at least weakening its enemies' economies. But overall, the economic argument is not convincing. Iran is not engaged in Palestine for economic benefits.

g) IRGC and Foreign Ministry

Iran and Israel do not have official relations since Iran officially sees the Israeli government and state as illegitimate. In regard to the Palestinians, the relationship between Iran and the PLO, especially Fatah, have been tense for many years now. Official relations between both sides exist, but they are much sparser, compared to the relationship between Iran and Hamas. It is important to note that the relationship between Hamas and Iran exists on all levels. The Foreign Ministry and Revolutionary Guards both have cordial relations with the Hamas government. The relationship with PIJ is not as formal but, given that the group does not exercise governmental power, it is less the job of the Iranian foreign ministry to engage with them and more the job of the IRGC. The importance of the IRGC for the PIJ can be seen in the fact that the leader of PIJ boasted in an interview about his good relationship with General Qasem Soleimani (Al-Alam 2019).

There is also the matter of the *Karine A* affair. The ship was seized by Israel during a time when relations between Iran and the West were improving. Iran had supported the US/NATO invasion of Afghanistan (Takeyh 2009; Azizi 2020), benefiting from the ousting of the Anti-Shi'a Taliban: a real reconciliation between both sides was on the table. This rapprochement ended when the ship full of weapons was seized. It did not matter if the IRGC intentionally got it seized, or if they were willing to risk it. The IRGC were willing to destroy any rapprochement between Iran and the US, and by extension the affair also torpedoed the relationship between US and Palestine. The US President Bush moved more firmly into the pro-Israel camp, deteriorating the relations with Palestine (Satloff 2002). While the sabotaging of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process can be attributed to a more comprehensive Iranian foreign

policy strategy, the damage to Iran-US relations was something that would be acceptable to more hardline elements in the IRGC but something the foreign ministry at that time would have tried to prevent. The IRGC are more committed to the ideology of the Islamic revolution (Alfoneh 2009) and rapprochement with the US, without a fundamental change in US foreign policy is contrary to that ideology. The foreign ministry under President Khatami meanwhile was trying to improve relations with the West and thereby improve the economic situation of the country (Takeyh 2009). That the Karine A affair undermined President Khatami was also noted by analysts at that time (Satloff 2002).

All this shows that, while there is a high alignment between the Foreign Ministry and the Revolutionary Guards, there are still aspects where the IRGC actively undermined the Foreign Ministry either intentionally or accidentally. Yet, beyond this one instance, for the most part the IRGC and the Iranian government seem to have worked together. Both Rouhani and Soleimani called on Hamas and PIJ to resist Israel in the context of the recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital by the US (Majidiyar 2017d). This shows that there is a high alignment in the foreign policy of Rouhani and the IRGC regarding Palestine. Meanwhile, the relations between Iran and the PLO and its Fatah president have declined over the years. Iran has heavily criticized the Palestinian leadership around Mahmoud Abbas for engaging in peace talks with Israel (Brandenburg 2010). The Palestinian Fatah and PLO leadership on the other hand sees Iran as threatening them through the Iranian support of Hamas (Jacob and Barkan 2010). For Fatah, Iran is a threat to their more compromising approach to the conflict with Israel; but on a more fundamental level it is a threat to their power in Palestine: Iran does not want Fatah and others who want to compromise with Israel to succeed in the Palestinian power struggle. Whether one explains it with ideology or power politics, a peace in Palestine - however far-fetched that idea sounds - is simply not in Iranian interest. Yet, the hostility between Fatah and Iran means that Iran has little engagement with the official Palestinian authorities (Brandenburg

2010) and relies much more on – officially through the Foreign Ministry and clandestine through the IRGC – Its relationship with Hamas, PIJ and the Sabireen movement. This level of engagement with PLO and other left-leaning groups also shows a gradual shift in Iranian foreign policy towards Palestine, away from the leftist and more secular groups to those groups embracing Islamist principles (Brandenburg 2010; Emanuilov and Yashlavsky 2011), culminating in the backing of a Shi'a group that fully embraces Iranian ideology and even religious identity.

h) Conclusion

Ideology/identity-based explanation. An ideology-based explanation can make sense of the Iranian support for the Palestinian cause. Khomeini criticized the Shah's foreign policy regarding Israel, building on religious and anti-imperialist elements, that both framed Iran's policies in the following years despite Israel's help during the Iran-Iraq war. Iran sees Israel as an ideological enemy: Iran is willing to compromise with groups like Hamas and PIJ who do not share Iran's goals in the wider Middle East. On the other hand, Iran tried to form a new Shi'a-based group, which aligned itself completely with Iran. This showcases that Iran was struggling to overcome the sectarian divide, since the Sunni groups did not want to support Iranian endeavors in Syria and Yemen. But the failure of the Sabireen movement also shows that Iran cannot simply build new Shi'a proxy groups; rather, it must work with the local environment. The Iranian proxy war strategy, while clearly favoring a Shi'a group, is realist enough to work with everybody to achieve results.

Power-based explanation. Iran's support of Palestine does not align well with explanations that see Iran's behavior as defensive. On the contrary, Iran antagonizes Israel and the US by supporting Palestinian groups even though Palestine is not economically interesting: not only is Palestine underdeveloped, but also Iran cannot establish economic ties since Egypt, Israel and Jordan control the market access. Iran also invests more money into the conflict than

could reasonably be extracted by Iran through economic concessions at this stage. From a more offensive viewpoint, it makes sense that Iran wants to challenge America's biggest ally in the region. But only in the very long run. The plan to destroy Israel through support of the Palestinian groups might take decades if it will ever work. If the Iranian involvement in Palestine is purely about power, then investing in groups closer to home in Iraq, the UAE and Afghanistan would benefit Iran more. The past tensions between Hamas, PIJ, and Iran have also shown that even if Hamas were to succeed against Israel, Iran could not dominate Palestine. Rather, the Palestinian leadership would strive to reach independence as it has in the past. A power-based explanation does not sufficiently explain Iran's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the contrary, Iran is creating a powerful enemy that in recent years has repeatedly struck against Iran's nuclear program (Merom 2017) and attacked Iranian positions in Lebanon and Syria (Boms 2017). Even as Iran is investing vast amounts of money into this conflict, so much that Iranians have taken to shouting "Marg ba Filistine" (Death to Palestine) in recent demonstrations, opposing the investment of Iranian money in this foreign conflict (Katz 2018). To conclude, investing in this conflict not only costs resources, but helps ferment unrest at home: this shows that Iran is not increasing its security through that investment.

It does secure more influence in the region. As the main sponsor of the Palestinian groups rejecting peace with Israel, Iran becomes an important player in the region. Any peace deal that is supposed to put an end to the violence will need Iranian approval. This increases Iran's power.

Factionalist Explanation. Both the Foreign Ministry of Iran and the IRGC seem to be on the side of Hamas and PIJ, but there was a crucial incident highlighting that the IRGC was pursuing its own foreign policy at the expense of the Foreign Ministry: the Karine-A affair. The incident showed that the IRGC, or at least elements of it, were willing to risk relations with the West to arm Palestinian groups. While this shows that factionalism does exist, the Karine-A

affair also displays the willingness to work with a broad spectrum of actors. The IRGC achieved two things with this move either intentionally or accidentally: they damaged Palestinian-US relations, and also nibbed the bud on any improvement in US-Iran relations. Again, due to its lack of economic opportunities, the IRGC does not really benefit from the engagement in Palestine economically, especially when considering that the part of Palestine on which the IRGC has real influence – Gaza – is very underdeveloped. Although financial gain in smuggling of weapons cannot be excluded.

The relationship between Hamas, PIJ, and Iran were strained after the so-called Arab spring. This has to do with Iran's wider engagement and its attempts to bring other groups on-board to help each other and share tactics, technologies and experiences. This method to form the Axis of Resistance as a formal alliance has failed in the Palestinian case in the timeframe of this thesis. The Palestinian groups were not interested in supporting either Assad or the Houthis.

PIJ struggled financially when Iran cut them off and Hamas unsuccessfully tried to gain new sponsors and thereby independence from Iran. This shows a strained relationship in which both sides need each other without it becoming as deep a relationship as Iran has in other cases.

Empirical findings are summed up in the following table:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	Israel is one of Iran’s core ideological enemies. Building up its Palestinian proxies enables Iran to fight it. Iran also has worked on spreading its ideology.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi’a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	Hamas is the furthest from Iran ideologically of all Palestinian groups, but also PIJ has fundamental differences especially in questions of identity. Their strained relations prove the hypothesis correct. The Sabireen movement meanwhile aligns completely and has the closest bond.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi’as.	Hamas and PIJ are Sunni, the relations are strained, Sabireen movement is Shi’a, relations are good.
Iran will support Shi’as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	Iran has been supporting the Palestinian groups, albeit with a focus on those that keep the resistance up and undermine efforts at a compromising peace.

Table 1 Identity Findings Palestine

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	Palestine is not directly important for Iran; it does not border it and does not belong to its traditional sphere of influence.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	Economically Palestine might be interesting for Iran eventually – if they are successful but for the moment it does not create any economic benefit.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	This hypothesis is disproven, Iranian proxy warfare in Palestine, decreases security for Iran and creates a powerful enemy in the form of Israel.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	This hypothesis is fulfilled, the proxy war expands and entrenches Iranian influence. It also means no peace in Palestine is possible without Iran.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	This hypothesis is fulfilled, Iran will even work with non-proxy groups to attack its enemies. Its proxy groups are likewise ideologically distant but militarily useful for Iran.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	The interests of the Palestinian groups and Iran somewhat align. But Iran's proxies have proven to be unreliable. Disproving the hypothesis.

Table 2 Power Findings Palestine

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.	The IRGC damaged the efforts of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, either intentionally or through neglect, in at least one case. But for the most part both factions align in their policies.
The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.	While the Foreign Ministry has some engagement with the PLO Palestinian government, for the most part both Foreign Ministry and IRGC focus their efforts on Hamas and PIJ.
Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.	The limited economic opportunities in Palestine make this unlikely.

Table 3 Factionalism Findings Palestine

2. Hezbollah in Lebanon

a) Introduction

Hezbollah has become a household name for proxies in recent years. The group became internationally famous and infamous, after the 2006 War with Israel, which saw Hezbollah face a confrontation with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). It is no stretch to argue that Hezbollah is Iran's most important non-state ally today. Hezbollah through its dominant position in Lebanon and its leading role in Iran's proxy network is at the center of a lot of scholarly attention. This focus has created a rich body of literature that analyzes almost every aspect of the organization, its actions and relationship with Iran and Syria. But it has also created an imbalance in the form that Hezbollah is used as a most favored case (Azarian 2011) when studying Iranian proxy engagement. The use of Hezbollah as the most favored case leads to scholars using Hezbollah as the blueprint, to analyze other organizations against. The blueprint approach is problematic since it assumes a systematic and uniform proxy approach by Iran. This approach ignores the

high-level of adaptability and flexibility Iran has shown in developing its proxies and to some extent decontextualizes Iran's proxies.

But beyond this issue, as a case study of its own, Hezbollah is relevant for several reasons: first, it is a Shi'a organization which is fiercely loyal to Iran and the ideology of Khomeinism, making it relevant for testing the identity-based hypotheses. Secondly, Hezbollah has become a factor increasing Iranian influence in Lebanon and giving Iran the potential to threaten Israel. Additionally, Hezbollah fought in Syria alongside Iran to defend Bashar al-Assad's regime, thereby supporting one of Iran's most important state allies. These reasons make it a relevant case study to test power-based explanations. The third reason is the importance of the IRGC in the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah. The IRGC founded Hezbollah and works closely across battlefields in the Middle East. Making their relationship extra tight. Which will make it an insightful case for the factionalism explanation.

b) History

With its mountainous terrain, Lebanon has been home to many minorities for a long time. Its Christian and Druze population enjoyed a protected position under Ottoman rule. However, the minorities also opened a doorway for engagement of colonial western powers. While France and the Russian empire engaged with the Christian population – France supported the Maronites, and Russia backed the Orthodox Christians – the British Empire supported the Druze. Their influence weakened the Ottoman state and brought about a French intervention when, in 1860, a civil war-ravaged Lebanon. In the aftermath of World War 1, France lay claim to Lebanon and Syria and got control over them as a mandate. France toyed around with several administrative ideas for the entire region before settling on a Syrian province that would form the modern state of Syria and what would in 1943 become the state of Lebanon. To make Lebanon a more feasible state and better defensible, the historical area of Mount Lebanon and

Beirut was expanded to its north, east and south. This gave the state substantially more agricultural land, especially in the Beqaa Valley and gave Lebanon better defensible borders. The expansion also added a substantial number of Sunni Arabs, but more importantly Shiite Arabs especially in the South bordering the British Mandate of Palestine and in the Beqaa Valley. Mount Lebanon which had been a Christian-Druze dominated province became a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state (Traboulsi 2012).

Under pressure of the Allies, France had to let Lebanon go into independence during World War 2 in 1943 (de Wailly 2015). The same year saw the formation of the National Pact: the Christians would accept Lebanon as an Arab country; the Muslims would not try to unify it with Syria. The President would be a Maronite Christian. The Prime Minister a Sunni and the Speaker of Parliament is Shi'a. Several other posts went to a Greek Orthodox, and Druze with further rules down the line (Bogaards 2019).

Additionally, the parliament would be split 6:5 in favor of the Christians, based on a census from 1932. This unequal power relation and the power concentration in the hands of the president enabled a Christian and especially Maronite dominance in Lebanon that would lay the foundation of future conflict. While Sunnis had gotten some influence, the Shi'as were marginalized (Seaver 2000). Tensions in the following years rose (Shanahan 2011). One reason was the founding of Israel, which saw large scale expulsion of Palestinians by Israel. Many Palestinians fled to Lebanon changing the demographic balance, mostly in favor of the Muslims (Hudson 1997). After the Six-Day war and the Jordanian Civil War, otherwise known as Black September in 1970, the PLO and its armed wing settled in Lebanon and started waging a guerilla war against Israel from bases in South Lebanon (Shiblak 1997). This created tensions especially with Christian right-wing groups.

At the same time, the political dominance of the Christians caused resentment among the Muslim population. The final trigger that caused the civil war is disputed. In April 1975, a drive-by-shooting killed several Christians leaving a church mass. This was followed by an attempt on the life of Pierre Gemayel, the founder of the Christian Phalangist Party. In retaliation, roadblocks were erected and a bus full of Palestinians was ambushed, killing several individuals. While some of these events are disputed, the following violence escalated into a full-blown civil war, which saw heavy fighting between Christian and Palestinian militias. Other Militias soon joined and soon a civil war was afoot. A war that would see Israel and Syria get involved. The Shiites tried to stay out of the conflict as best they could initially. In 1982, the Israeli army invaded on a broad front to destroy the PLO bases in Southern Lebanon. Israel was successful in forcing the expulsion of the PLO (Parkinson 2007), but it also clashed with the Syrian Army and so Syria got more heavily involved in Lebanon. Eventually in 1985 Israel withdrew to the mostly Shiite south of the country building up its proxy the Free Lebanon State.

In 1984/85 Hezbollah emerged as a group. While previously there had already existed a Shiite political organization cum militia in the form of the Lebanese Resistance Regiments – called *Amal*²⁴ (Shanahan 2011), it had become more secular after its founder Sadr disappeared in Libya. This opened an opportunity for Iran to found an Islamic Shiite movement. The Islamic Revolution had captivated many Shi'as in Lebanon and so Iran found a fertile soil for its ideology (Ostovar 2016). Hezbollah became a force to be reckoned with, especially attacking Israel and its allies the Maronite Phalangist militias. But Hezbollah also clashed with *Amal* in the so-called War of Brothers. Overall, the civil war destroyed much of Lebanon and saw factions switching sides regularly. Infighting between different representatives of the same sect was common. Massacres occurred regularly. The civil war only ended in 1990 with the

²⁴ The Harakat Amal - translated as the Hope movement, was founded in 1974 by Musa al-Sadr of the Sadr Clan. It wanted to represent the Shi'as of Lebanon and improve their living situation.

agreement of Taif (Bogaards 2019). All militias had to dissolve, with the notable exception of Hezbollah which was allowed to continue to fight in the South against the Israeli occupation. The political changes now gave more power to the Muslim community, with the parliament being split 50/50 between Christians and Muslims and the power of the Christian president being curbed. Hezbollah struggled with the question whether to engage in Lebanese politics as a regular party or limit itself to being a militia that fights Israel. Hezbollah decided to also become a political party at the urging of Ayatollah Khamenei and has taken part in every election since 1992 (Avon and Khatchadourian 2012)- Hezbollah is sharing the Shiite votes with Amal in an electoral alliance (Cavatorta, Storm, and Resta 2020). In 2000, Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon, its proxy state collapsing in the aftermath (Norton 2007).

Hezbollah through the years built up a social infrastructure for its followers (Ghaddar 2018), a vast weapons arsenal - especially missiles - and forged an economic network including clandestine activities such as drug smuggling (Cardenas and Noriega 2011). In 2006 after Hezbollah ambushed an Israeli patrol and dragged two captured IDF soldiers, who later perished, across the border, a war with Israel started (Gleis and Berti 2012). While the destruction in Lebanon was severe, Hezbollah had survived, and the organization turned the destructive outcome into a propaganda victory (Pan 2006). While formally, the Lebanese army was to take control over Southern Lebanon that had previously been the sole domain of Hezbollah, as part of the ceasefire deal, Hezbollah still celebrated its “victory.”

After protests in Syria escalated into full-fledged civil war, Hezbollah decided to send fighters to help the Assad government in 2012. Initially, Hezbollah worked to regain control over border villages and secure the Lebanese-Syrian border. Later-on, Hezbollah engaged in combat operations alongside Assad forces. Hezbollah even started forming tank-units using the vast material reserves of Soviet-era equipment that Assad’s regime possessed to up-arm its troops that normally operate as light infantry. This overview shows the complex context in

which Hezbollah emerged and operated over the years. This helps contextualize Hezbollah and put the following analysis on a more profound basis.

c) Phases of Historical Importance

Founding phase. The founding phase is an interesting aspect of Hezbollah, while on the one hand there is a dispute about the year be it 1982 (Shanahan 2011) or 1985 (Norton 2007) with most agreeing on the first date as the starting point on what would become Hezbollah. There is also a consensus that a large number of IRGC personnel was sent to Lebanon to build up Hezbollah. The Shi'as who initially had tried to stay out of the conflict had been targeted by different sides. Amal had joined the civil war in 1980. In 1982 meanwhile the Israeli army invaded Lebanon, which greatly affected the South of the country where many Shi'as lived, at the same time Syria was getting involved. 1982 also saw the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, while these atrocities are usually associated with Palestinian victims, many of the victims were actually Shi'as from the South that had fled to Beirut seeking safety (al-Shaikh 1984). The Shi'as of Lebanon faced an acute threat and so did the Palestinian refugees. This shows a clear case for the identity-based explanation, which ascribes a sense of responsibility to protect in the Iranian leadership.

But if Iran were only interested in protecting Shi'as and Palestinians it could have supplied weapons and training to the Amal movement. Why was Iran building up Hezbollah as an alternative? There are two possible explanations. Either Iran wanted a more Islamic alternative to the increasingly secular Amal, or it wanted a proxy of its own since the Amal movement had been a close ally of Syria (Ali 2019). The first explanation has some merit to it. Iran did not try to sway Amal to its side with substantial offers of help or otherwise gain its favor vis-a-vie the Syrians. Rather Iran went straight towards founding a new organization. There is also the aspect that there had been groups splitting off from Amal, the most important

one being Islamic Amal which was founded because many members of Amal saw betrayal in the leadership's cooperation with Maronites and the increased secularism (Shanahan 2011). So, an argument can be made that Iran not only wanted to fund an Islamic alternative but that there was also a demand for such an organization. There can be however little doubt about the fact that Syria did see Hezbollah as competition and in later years of the civil war there would be fighting between Hezbollah and the Syrian army, leading even to a massacre of Hezbollah party members by the Syrian forces (Ali 2019). The same goes for Amal which clashed repeatedly with Hezbollah, the conflict only ending in 1990. It is important to note that Lebanon had been one of the areas where Reza Pahlavi had tried to gain influence in the Middle East (Reisinezhad 2019), so there is also merit to the argument that Iran wanted to have a proxy of its own to influence developments in such a vital area. The most logical conclusion therefore is that Iran wanted both a more Islamic alternative and more influence in Lebanon.

Another aspect that should be highlighted is the fact that the Iranian involvement happened at a time when Iran was fighting Saddam, while most of Iran had been liberated by 1982 the war would now go into its most bloody phase when Iran tried to overthrow Saddam's rule by going on the offensive. That Iran was willing to invest sparse resources into the Lebanese Civil War, without any immediate gain, while it was fighting Iraq, shows that Lebanon mattered greatly to the Iranian leadership. Because there was no tangible gain to be had from getting involved, on the contrary it could antagonize Israel, the US and other Arab countries even further. I would therefore argue that Iran did it for ideological reasons. The investment in Hezbollah did not increase Iranian security, nor did it gain Iran substantial influence in Lebanon at that point in time. Investing in another war while being involved in one directly at its own border contradicts defensive explanations of Iranian proxy war behavior. Iran made it its mission to fight Israel, so supporting a group that would enable Iran to do so made sense from an ideological viewpoint. The founding phase overall with its big investment, the

emphasis to create an ideologically reliable proxy and the fact that Iran was fighting Iraq in the meantime, make a strong case for an ideology and identity-based explanations.

Civil War. The Lebanese Civil War was a chaotic affair that saw changing alliances and while it is often depicted as a fight between Christians and Muslims in reality intra-communal violence was rife. One group that suffered particularly badly were the Palestinians, who often found themselves victims of massacres and persecution by different sides. How Hezbollah operated in this environment is insightful. For the most part Hezbollah focused on fighting Israel and taking hostages. For both it was supported by Iran with thousands of Pasdaran being deployed to Lebanon to help the organization in its starting years (Norton 2007). As previously stated, this engagement while the Iran-Iraq war was still going, is best explained through ideological reasons. Iran wanted to challenge Israel and Lebanon was the place to do it. During the civil war Hezbollah became infamous for their hostage taking. Two of the most prolific cases were local CIA bureau chief Buckley and US Marines Colonel Higgins, both were later killed. For their kidnapping Hezbollah used a front called Islamic Jihad Organization. At least one hostage David S. Dodge was even brought to Iran where he was interrogated before being released a while later. The hostages were an insurance for Hezbollah against US retaliation for terrorist attacks, but also in the case of Higgins and Buckley provided valuable information to Hezbollah and Iran. In addition, Iran tried and was successful at freeing operatives that had been arrested in Europe. A last advantage for Iran was the US willingness to provide Iran with Israeli weapons during what would become known as the Iran-Contra affair (Siekmeier 2015). These weapons were needed for the fight with Iraq. The hostage taking shows that at this time Hezbollah was also a convenient tool for Iran to achieve its political ends.

Beyond hostage taking, Hezbollah was mostly fighting Israel. But what is truly remarkable is who else Hezbollah fought - namely the other Lebanese Shi'a organization Amal (Traboulsi 2012). For the first time this happened shortly after the founding phase. When Amal

was waging war against the Fatah and other Palestinian organizations together with the Syrian forces called the War of the Camps (Traboulsi 2012). The War of the Camps was a bloody affair that saw many civilian casualties. Syria had been seeking better control in Lebanon and in the Palestinian refugee camps, through Amal, and saw the Fatah presence in Lebanon as a challenge to that. Hezbollah would side with the Palestinians and fight on their side. In retaliation Syria would move against Hezbollah storming its headquarters and executing a number of its followers. Despite the casualties Hezbollah would not give up and another Amal-Hezbollah war would follow. This time lasting more than two years - the War of Brothers (Norton 2007). The reasons for the conflict were lying in the increasing influence of Hezbollah at the expense of Amal. But also, Hezbollah actions that did not align with Amal policy: Hezbollah abducted US Colonel Higgins - he would later be murdered after extensive torture; the hijacking of planes to Beirut and Hezbollah support to the Palestinians in previous clashes. All these caused hostility between Amal and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah had been critical of the inner-Muslim clashes seeing the Israelis as the true enemies to fight. Despite this, when challenged, Hezbollah would take up the fight with Amal. The War of Brothers was intermittent but fierce. In the end Hezbollah gained more control and showed its military superiority. In the end Syria and Iran brokered a peace between both organizations and an alliance between Hezbollah and Amal was formed (Shanahan 2011). What is insightful is that Hezbollah did not initiate fighting to take control of parts of Lebanon from other factions, rather it would defend itself against attacks and then go on the counteroffensive. But throughout the time of the Civil War, it would focus most of its efforts on fighting Israel. If Iran's intention had been to increase Hezbollah's power in Lebanon and thereby Iranian influence this passivity does not make sense. A power-based explanation cannot explain why Iran's proxy Hezbollah was so focused on fighting Israel rather than securing its share of influence primarily. It does make sense if one takes an identity-based explanation as the basis.

If Iran's goal was to fight Israel and protect Palestinians, then Hezbollah's actions make sense. Challenging Amal and even suffering Syrian attacks in order to protect the Palestinians makes sense from an ideological explanation standpoint.

The long war 1990-2000. When the civil war ended with the agreement of Taif all militias in Lebanon were to be dissolved, except Hezbollah which was classified as a legitimate Resistance force against the Israeli occupied South of Lebanon. Here Hezbollah would continue the conflict with Israel. Fighting over the Security Zone in Lebanon, as Israel called the occupied area, had started in 1985, but now Hezbollah would focus all its efforts on fighting Israel here. Over the span of ten years Hezbollah would gradually become more efficient reaching almost parity with the IDF and the South Lebanese Army in terms of casualties. This phase also represented the final transition of Hezbollah from an organization using terrorist attacks like suicide bombers and car bombs to a force that fights in a more conventional style (Gabrielsen 2014). Iran kept supporting Hezbollah throughout this time, yet it could not do so freely, rather Syria was heavily involved in the whole process. Syria maintained a tight grip on Lebanon and maintained tens of thousands of soldiers and intelligence officers in the country. Hezbollah had to accommodate Syrian interests if they wanted to operate against. This is important because it offered Hezbollah an opportunity to become more independent from Iran. In 1992 Hezbollah contested the Lebanese elections as a political party at the urging of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Norton 2007). It did so in alliance with Amal (Avon and Khatchadourian 2012). Since it was now part of the Lebanese political system, heavily dominated by Syria and had to accommodate Syria anyways, it could have used this situation and balance between both Iran and Syria to gain more independence. Syria, Iran and Hezbollah all had an overlapping interest in pushing Israel out of the South of Lebanon. Yet despite this Hezbollah for the most part remained a loyal proxy of Iran. A "Syrianization" of Hezbollah (Gambill and Abdelnour 2002) did not happen. This is insightful because it shows that rather

than being purely about interest Hezbollah has an ideological connection with Iran, which defines their relationship. Syria had a working proxy relationship with Amal and showed itself to be a reliable partner. Hezbollah and Syria were working together in Lebanon and their cooperation would only increase in later years, but Hezbollah stuck with Iran. This makes a case for the identity-based explanation. Hezbollah's identity as a Shi'a organization with commitment to Khamenei as their leader as well as their ideological commitment explain best why Hezbollah is a proxy of Iran, rather than simply shared interests.

The 2006 war. In 2006 Hezbollah tried to abduct some IDF soldiers to exchange them for its prisoners held by Israel. The operation was somewhat a success; several Israeli soldiers were killed and two were dragged across the border, where they died of their injuries (Norton 2007). The massive Israeli reaction was something Hezbollah had not intended (Azizi 2020). The war would last for roughly a month and see large scale destruction in Lebanon. Hezbollah fired missiles at Israel, which in turn used air strikes and artillery trying to destroy Hezbollah. Israel followed this up with a ground offensive into Southern Lebanon. While the war saw massive destruction, Hezbollah proved itself during the war and it won because it survived (Pan 2006). Its mobile teams firing missiles at Israel proved effective, its troops proved themselves in combat with the Israeli Army and it even managed to damage an Israeli ship (Toi Staff 2019) and destroy several tanks (Mitnick 2006). Both sides claimed victory afterwards and a UN resolution was passed, control over Southern Lebanon meanwhile was supposed to pass to the Lebanese Armed Forces. The war itself seems to have been the making of Hezbollah, with Iran being somewhat surprised by events unfolding (Azizi 2020). The important part though is what followed. Israel did not defeat Hezbollah, on the contrary Hezbollah could claim victory when it exchanged hundreds of prisoners held by Israel for the bodies of the two IDF soldiers in 2008. Hezbollah became a global household name. Hezbollah and by extension Iran gained a lot of popularity with the Arab publics - the Arab street. Iran through its steadfast anti-Americanism

and Anti-Zionism was quite popular already, but now Hezbollah became a crucial factor for Iranian influence (Grace and Mandelbaum 2006). But beyond this popularity, it gave Iran something else: A second strike capability. The 2006 war showed that Hezbollah could open a front against Israel, causing a problem for Israel in regard to a potential air strike against Iran's nuclear program (Samaan 2020). The 2006 war increased the security of Iran, because it showed Iranian second-strike capability. It also that Iran was capable of training forces that can operate against an enemy that has total air superiority. The war of 2006 was an Iranian military power demonstration. There is a compelling argument that Hezbollah made Iran more secure, that it did not engage Israel in large scale fighting ever since, can also be interpreted as showing that Iran does not need another demonstration and is not interested in escalating the conflict unnecessarily.

Syrian Civil War. When the demonstrations of the so-called Arab Spring in Syria started turning into a civil war, it became clear that Bashar al-Assad's regime was in trouble. While his father Hafiz al-Assad had established an Alawi minority rule Bashar and could count on a large number of Alawi officers and elite units staffed by Alawi's, many enlisted soldiers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and even many officers were Sunni Arabs; And of those many now deserted the army and joined the rebels (Bou Nassif 2015). Increasingly Syrian government troops would find themselves on the defensive, often encircled in a war they were losing. Iran deployed the IRGC, to train up militias that would fight alongside the government (Leenders and Giustozzi 2019; Solomon 2013), but beyond that Iran needed soldiers on the ground that had experience in guerilla and urban warfare - Iran needed Hezbollah.

This posed problems for the organization: Hezbollah had gained considerable popularity due to the 2006 war and its claim to be the first Arab army to defeat Israel. The uprising against Bashar al-Assad had popular support and his regime did not enjoy much popularity with (mostly Sunni) Arabs in other countries. Intervening on the side of Assad would curb this popularity

and even create hostility. A further aspect of this was Hezbollah's domestic situation. While Hezbollah could count on the support of the Lebanese Shi'as and those Christians in favor of Assad, the Sunnis were overwhelmingly supportive of the rebellion, likewise many Palestinians living in Lebanon supported the uprising. Hezbollah therefore not only was risking its popularity in the wider Arab world but was risking trouble at home in Lebanon.

On the other hand, there were reasons why Hezbollah would get involved on the side of Assad's regime. The primary reason being that both were allies. Syria had been a dominant force in Lebanese politics since the end of the civil war in 1990 and had been supportive of Hezbollah, which in turn had supported Syrian dominance in Lebanon (Ali 2019). Another crucial reason was that Hezbollah was getting its material support from Iran via Syria. Since flying or shipping in weapons and other material through Lebanese air- and seaports risked Israeli attacks, Iran was transporting them in via the land route: First they were flown to Damascus and then transported across the border to Hezbollah. If the Assad regime would fall Hezbollah would find itself cut off from crucial supply (Behravesht 2018). This shows the problem facing the Hezbollah leadership when deciding on what to do. Iran tried to coax its ally into helping for quite some time. Initially Hezbollah limited itself to liberating some Lebanese villages that had been conquered by Syrian rebels crossing the border. But eventually after a personal intervention of Supreme Leader Khamenei Hezbollah started really getting involved. Hezbollah showed that Iran could rely on it, losing much of its popular support and risking increased tensions at home - Hezbollah got involved in the Syrian civil war on a large scale. By 2019 more than one thousand Hezbollah fighters had been killed in Syria and many more wounded (Kane 2018; Levitt 2021). The intervention is relevant since it shows the importance of identity. It was according to the accounts, the intervention by Khamenei that made Hezbollah intervene, his religious and ideological authority swayed the Hezbollah leadership, making a case for identity-based explanations. Another important aspect is that Hezbollah fully embraced

the Axis of Resistance, rather than continuing living off its glory as “victors” of the 2006 war Hezbollah decided to do the unpopular thing and support Assad. As previously shown, there were persuasive arguments in favor of staying out of the Syrian Civil War. This episode shows the importance that commitment to Khamenei plays in the proxy relationship between Hezbollah and Iran.

d) Capabilities

Hezbollah's capabilities changed over the years. In its founding phase it was completely dependent on Iran not only for weapons and other equipment but also for manpower. In the following years it would develop the skills necessary to fight the Israeli army in South mainly through suicide bombers and ambush tactics. But it also employed human wave tactics against Israel's proxy, the South-Lebanese Army, while this often led to high casualties it meant that entire outposts were overrun if successful. But over time Hezbollah developed into a light infantry force that excelled at urban close combat surviving the Lebanese Civil War and even fighting and overcoming the Syrian equipped Amal (Gabrielsen 2014). It developed skills of combining infantry with artillery and switched to a more conventional fighting style relying more on classical combat rather than suicide bombers or human wave attacks. Rather than these tactics Hezbollah would rely on missiles and mortars. These capabilities would increase over the years, after Israel retreated from Lebanon in 2000 and its proxy state collapsed, Hezbollah had occupied the South of the country and prepared for a conflict with Israel: stockpiling ammunition and building fortifications.

The 2006 war showed Hezbollah's capabilities as a fighting force. It deployed anti-tank missiles and rocket and tube artillery to pronounced effect (Shaikh and Williams 2018). During the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah gained access to the vast arms supplies of the Syrian army, thereby adding tanks and IFVs to its inventory (Nakhoul 2013). But given the equipment's age

and the absolute superiority of the Israelis in air power their use would be limited. Additionally, Hezbollah has been using Iranian drones, including reconnaissance and attack variants (Pollak 2016; Rubin 2020). To summarize Hezbollah is truly a force to be reckoned with and its fire power surpasses that of other Iranian proxies.

Yet it is very much dependent on Iran. While Hezbollah has its revenue from donations coming from local and global supporters and its vast smuggling network it also must provide a lot. Paying for its fighters, those injured in combat and the widows and orphans is just one aspect. In addition to these measures Hezbollah maintains a vast network of hospitals, schools and provides aid to the Shi'a community of Lebanon but also the wider population. The Shi'as of Lebanon support it, but they get support in return, because the failing Lebanese state cannot supply its citizens with basic services anymore (Bassam and Francis 2021). Hezbollah has a strategic-social-depth in Lebanon, which results in its supporters sticking with it, even when they suffer under Israeli bombs, but in turn Hezbollah takes care of them. This gives Hezbollah strategic depth in Lebanese Shi'a society to fight at home and abroad without causing much dissent. Yet this comes with a price tag that makes Hezbollah dependent on Iran. When Iran struggles financially Hezbollah likewise has to make cuts, which endangers its support base and shows the dependency (Ghaddar 2018). Hezbollah has a vast arsenal of weapons, but it needs Iranian money, especially hard currency to pay its fighters independently of the spiraling inflation of the Lebanese Lira.

e) Ideology and identity

Ideologically Hezbollah is aligned with Iran. Hezbollah has fully embraced the ideas of the Islamic revolution. Initially Hezbollah aimed at building an Islamic Republic in Lebanon like Iran. It softened its approach after the 1990s and participated in Lebanese Politics (Avon and Khatchadourian 2012). But Hezbollah remains committed to Khomeinism (Norton 2007),

is the centerpiece of the Axis of Resistance (El Husseini 2010) and operates around the globe. It is involved in almost every one of Iran's proxy conflicts.

The question is therefore not the level of commitment to the ideology of the Islamic republic, but rather whether its political compromising approach in Lebanon a well calculated policy decision or an ideological deviation is. One can argue that Hezbollah has deviated from the IRI, by not pushing for an Islamic republic in Lebanon. Yet Hezbollah has a Shiite state in the areas under its control (Norton 2007). Its female followers wear the chador, and the males grow beards. Hezbollah simply does not want to antagonize the Christians and Sunnis. For Hezbollah, building an Islamic Republic is not feasible at the moment, without causing new conflict at home. While there are other Shi'a parties and the Communist party of Lebanon has historically been strong among Shi'as in Lebanon and Amal was the biggest representative of Lebanon's Shiites in the early phase of the civil war (Shanahan 2011), Hezbollah nowadays is clearly the most dominant force politically. Given the lack of real competition and the strong emphasis on religion in Lebanon Hezbollah does not have to fear competition at home. Rather than competition over the support of the Shi'as in Lebanon the main concern for Hezbollah is a potential renewal of conflict with other religious groups in Lebanon.

The question of Hezbollah's identity is also more intricated than it seems at first glance. Hezbollah is a Shiite organization. Yet the ties of Iran and Lebanon are not just religious. The ties between both Shiite communities have historically grown (Chehabi 2006). When the Safavids conquered Iran and decided to make 12er Shi'a Islam the creed of the country they needed scholars, which they imported from Lebanon. Over the centuries a network of family ties has formed that connects Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. This means that Iran's clergy has long ties with the country. These ties were a point that even Mohammad Reza Shah considered when he was getting involved in Lebanon (Reisinezhad 2019). Lebanon can therefore to some extent be considered a quasi-kinstate for the Iranian clergy. Another aspect is the question of Marja's.

Every 12er Shi'a is supposed to follow one Ayatollah of the rank of Marja. While Officially Hezbollah considers Khamenei their Marja, many Hezbollah members look to other Marja's for religious guidance (Norton 2007). This might cause tensions in the future. For Hezbollah, the question of identity is also one of Arabness and Lebanization. Hezbollah has undergone what is called a Lebanization process in the last decades, entrenching itself more in Lebanese politics and arranging itself with the Lebanese political system. This national identity of course requires a certain distance from Iran, since Hezbollah wants to gain domestic legitimacy beyond its Shi'a constituency, but even among them it needs to be seen to primarily focus on local issues and the interests of its supporters. Through their Arab identity its supporters are likewise susceptible to anti-Persian sentiments that have increased ever since Iran expanded its attempts to gain more influence abroad through its proxies (El Kurd 2019).

f) Geopolitics and Economy

Lebanon and Iran are roughly 1,700 km away from each other²⁵. There are two countries – Syria and Iraq, or Syria and Turkey in between the two countries. Lebanon therefore is not in Iran's immediate neighborhood, and it is not of existential importance to Iran geopolitically. But as mentioned, Iran and Lebanon have deep historical and at times family ties. Lebanon is relevant for Iran geopolitically for three reasons: It enables Iran to strike or at least threaten Israel. The importance of this possibility has to do with Iran's perception that sees Israel as instrumental for US hegemony in the Middle East. Likewise, Israeli policy is restrained through the threat of Hezbollah. Israel cannot for example attack Hamas in Gaza with all its might because it is threatened by Hezbollah to its north. The issue is that Hezbollah increases Iranian security only as far as it gives Iran a second-strike capability against Israel from Lebanon, so it

²⁵ For context, the distance Rome-Berlin is 1184 km and the distance Paris-Rome-Warsaw roughly 1800 km.

increases Iran's security via deterrence. Hezbollah is a deterrence against an enemy, who is an enemy because Iran supports groups like Hezbollah.

Additionally, any actor wanting to change the status quo in Lebanon must take Iran into account. Hezbollah is the most powerful group in Lebanon and any change in Lebanon will only happen with the acquiescence of Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran. Likewise, it gives Iran the ability to influence developments in Palestine, should Hamas for some reason decide to sign a peace deal without the consent of Iran, then Iran can undermine Israeli willingness to sign the deal by maintaining a threat from the North. Iran can also support any attacks from Gaza through attacks from Hezbollah into northern Israel. Any fundamental change in the situation in the Middle East therefore needs Iranian consent. This is a compelling argument for the power-based explanation that sees Iran expanding its power and trying to change the status quo. Overall, Lebanon has relevance for Iran, but the situation lends itself more towards an explanation that sees Iran as a power that tries to expand its influence in the Middle East, rather than any Lebanon-centric explanations.

The third reason is that it enables a land-route for Iran with access to the Mediterranean without having to rely fully on Syria, especially for shipping. While Syria and Iran are good allies, even more so after Iran saved Bashar al-Assad's regime during the civil war, creating a trade route that involves Lebanon makes Hezbollah another stakeholder in it in addition to Syria and Iraq. Especially for a potential pipeline to the Mediterranean Sea this is relevant (Shana 2013), since Iran might be more inclined to have it terminate in Lebanon in an area under control of Hezbollah rather than one controlled by the Syrian state.

g) IRGC and Foreign Ministry

The relationship between Hezbollah and Iran is a classic case of plausible deniability for the early part of Hezbollah history, especially when Hezbollah operated under the hat of the

Islamic Jihad Organization. Iran did not openly embrace Hezbollah during the 1980s. Rather Hezbollah was a conventional proxy in that Iran could deny the relationship. Iran was using the hostages taken by Hezbollah as a pressure point for negotiations with the US. With Hezbollah becoming a legitimate actor in Lebanese politics the Iranian position shifted, both Khatami (Al-Bawaba News 2003) and Ahmadinejad (Oweis 2007) met with Nasrallah confirming the ties between both sides. Rouhani did not go, but his Foreign Minister did (Radio Farda 2019a). IRGC general Qassem Soleimani regularly visited Nasrallah (Azizi 2020). So, both the Iranian state and the IRGC engage with Hezbollah. The engagement of the IRGC with the official state on the other hand is low, while official Iranian institutions do engage with the Lebanese state. It also does not seem that Hezbollah was used to undermine the Foreign Ministry on any substantial level. When Hezbollah took hostages and Iran used them to negotiate there was cooperation between the institutions rather than competition. The 2006 war happened during the Ahmadinejad presidency, the involvement in Syria happened alongside Iranian forces. Hezbollah has been linked to terrorist attacks abroad, but here again is little evidence they were working to undermine the Foreign Ministry. Economically Hezbollah is interesting for the IRGC because of its vast smuggling network. Hezbollah has built up a substantial network for the smuggling of weapons and drugs (Ezzeddine and Azizi 2022), which could help the IRGC also create income this way. Additionally, it is the economic presence of the IRGC in Lebanon. After the 2006 war the IRGC founded the Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon, officially to help reconstruct the areas destroyed by the war with Israel (Majidiyar 2017a). While this foundation helped Hezbollah rebuild its infrastructure in Lebanon it also gave the IRGC an opportunity to expand their influence economically in the country. This shows that there is an economic argument for the IRGC to remain involved with Hezbollah, it has to be kept in mind that this is a rather recent development. For most of the 1990s and early 2000s Syria has dominated Lebanon politically and economically (Norton 2007) curtailing any IRGC economic activities. The founding of Hezbollah was clearly not motivated by any

economic interests of the IRGC, the economic benefits for the IRGC are more a side-effect in recent times.

h) Conclusion

Hezbollah is an insightful case since on the one hand it is one of the oldest Iranian proxies, after the Iraqi ones. On the other hand, Hezbollah plays a pivotal role in Iran's modern proxy network. Hezbollah is also operating as a parallel state in Lebanon. What this case study again showed is the complexity of the motivations behind Iranian proxy wars, which does not lend itself to easy simple answers but rather to a nuanced analysis.

Identity-based explanation. Hezbollah makes a good case for identity-based explanations of Iranian proxy warfare. It was founded to fight the Israelis in Lebanon while Iran was fighting an existential war against Iraq. Hezbollah enabled Iran to fight Israel - the Small Satan - in Lebanon. The hostility to Israel is an ideological pillar of the Islamic Republic and Anti-Zionism was a recurring theme in the speeches of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini. The relationship between Hezbollah and Iran are profoundly deep, both sides operate alongside each other on the battlefield in Syria. Hezbollah has completely embraced the Iranian ideology and the leadership of Khamenei. But Hezbollah not only provided Iran with an ideological committed ally in Lebanon, but it also enabled Iran to protect Shi'as in Lebanon and spread its ideology. In 2019 Hezbollah has almost completely taken over the Lebanese Shi'a community on all levels. Hezbollah also enabled Iran to protect the Palestinians living in Lebanon, even against allies like Syria and fellow Shi'a organizations like Amal.

Power-based explanation. Lebanon is important for Iran, but not for geopolitical reasons. While there are religious and family ties between Lebanon and Iran, Lebanon is not in the traditional sphere of Iranian influence. The last Shah had tried to gain more influence, but it is not existential for Iran like Iraq is. Economically the Iranian involvement can also not be

explained. While it has gained some more economic influence in Lebanon in recent years the investment Iran makes into Hezbollah does not stand in proportion to what Iran gains. There is no economic argument for Iranian proxy warfare in Lebanon. The only economic argument that can be made is that Hezbollah forces Israel to spend more money on defense, weakening the Israeli state. The question of security is multilayered: initially the Iranian involvement did not increase the security of Iran rather it risked antagonizing Israel and the US; but the 2006 war did increase Iranian security, since it established Hezbollah as capable of seriously threatening Israel and thereby giving Iran a second-strike capability vis-a-vie the Jewish state. Hezbollah definitely expanded Iranian influence in Lebanon. Hezbollah also helped Iran save its ally Assad in Syria. Thereby securing Iran's land-route to the Mediterranean.

The case of Hezbollah also shows an Iranian preference for ideologically committed Shi'a groups in the 1980s. Rather than working with the secular Amal organization, Iran created Hezbollah, contradicting power-based explanations of Iranian proxy behavior for the 1980s. While the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran is based on shared interests, can Hezbollah's commitment to Iran not be explained purely through shared interests? Especially the involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian Civil War, the bloodiest engagement of its history, had persuasive arguments against it. It cost Hezbollah the popularity it had built up over the years since 2006 and threatened the peace at home in Lebanon. To explain the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran as purely defined through shared interests is incorrect.

Factionalism. Factionalism does not seem to play a role in the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah. The policy regarding Hezbollah seems to be embraced both by the IRGC and the Foreign Ministry. There are also no clear instances where Hezbollah actions undermined the Foreign Ministry directly.

The case of Hezbollah shows the importance of ideology for the relationship between a proxy and Iran. Hezbollah at separate occasions had the opportunity to gain greater

independence, either in the 1990s through Syria or popular support and by reaching out to Arab states after the 2006 war. Hezbollah never took these opportunities. Rather it stayed loyal to Iran from its founding to this day. While Hezbollah and Iran share interests, the level of commitment by Hezbollah to Iran, shown for example in the intervention in Syria is best explained through ideology and identity. What goal Iran pursues with Hezbollah is more nuanced. Initially the ideological goals are clear. Hezbollah was Iran's way of fighting Israel and supporting the Shi'as of Lebanon while spreading its Islamist ideology there. That Hezbollah's initial goals included creating an Islamic State in Lebanon on the Iranian model speaks volumes to the ideological domination of Iran of its Lebanese proxy. But with changing times the Iranian approach changed. After the 2006 war Iran had veritable deterrence against Israel through Hezbollah. It has not risked the organization in the years since and seems content to deter Israel with Hezbollah rather than fight it.

Hezbollah did increase Iranian influence in the Middle East and drastically in Lebanon, but Iran did not translate this into economic benefits for itself. The IRGC has benefited from their relationship through Hezbollah's smuggling operations though. But despite this, the costs clearly outweigh the economic benefits. Overall Hezbollah shows the nuances needed when analyzing Iranian proxy warfare: different times have different priorities.

Empirical findings are summed up in the following table:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	Through Hezbollah Iran can fight Israel, its declared enemy. Hezbollah also enabled Iran to spread its ideology in Lebanon. Hypothesis fulfilled.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	Hezbollah aligns completely with Iran ideologically. They adhere to Khomeinism and embrace the Axis of Resistance. The relationship is extremely deep and strong. Hypothesis fulfilled.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.	Hezbollah is Shi'a. Fulfilled.
Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	The Lebanese Shi'as and Palestinians were under direct attack in Lebanon, through Hezbollah Iran had the means to protect them. Hypothesis fulfilled.

Table 4 Identity Findings Hezbollah

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	Lebanon does not border Iran; it is in its historical sphere of influence though. While Lebanon is important it is more for religious and family bonds than geopolitical interests. Partially fulfilled hypothesis.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	Iran has some economic influence in Lebanon, but not substantial. Partially fulfilled.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	Supporting Hezbollah initially decreased Iranian security, it created hostility from the US. Later-on Hezbollah became a second-strike capability for Iran against Israel increasing Iranian security. Partially fulfilled.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	Hezbollah secured Iranian influence in Lebanon. Hypothesis fulfilled.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	Does not apply since Hezbollah is aligned.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	Hezbollah and Iran's interests mostly align, their relationship is deep and reliable. Hypothesis fulfilled.

Table 5 Power Findings Hezbollah

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.	Hezbollah has not in any meaningful way undermined the Iranian Foreign Ministry.
The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.	Not fulfilled. Foreign Ministry and IRGC both engage with Hezbollah. The IRGC does not interact with the Lebanese state on any meaningful level.
Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.	The IRGC has some economic influence in Lebanon, although it is more of a byproduct of Hezbollah's influence. Since the 2006 war IRGC influence has grown. Hypothesis is fulfilled.

Table 6 Factionalism Findings Hezbollah

IV. Proxy War in Yemen and Iraq

1. The Houthis of Yemen

a) Introduction

With attacks on airports and oil production facilities, Ansar Allah (أنصار الله) commonly called the Houthis have in recent years become renowned for their military competence and the ability to resist the might of the Saudi-Arabian Army. The group has the ability to utilize a range of weapons from 1940s tanks to modern drones. For years, they have fought successfully in the Yemeni civil war and carved out their own state in the North of Yemen. The Houthis are an important case study for many reasons: They are fighting in Yemen, which is geopolitically important because it enables Iran to directly strike its enemy Saudi-Arabia, making it a relevant case for a power-based explanation. The Houthis are also the biggest political representatives of the Zaydi Shi'a sect in Yemen and have embraced the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, making them insightful for identity and ideology-based explanations. Additionally, the diplomatic relations between them and Iran are handled through IRGC which can lead to insights about the role of factionalism in Iranian proxy warfare. The war in Yemen was also the second largest conflict in the Middle East, after the Syrian Civil War of the 2010s. The Houthis also represent an insightful and relevant case study because of the independence they maintain through their alliance with remnants of the former Saleh state, and because of their ability to extract taxation, which raises the question about their proxy status.

b) Historical Overview and regional context

To understand the Houthis, one needs a broad understanding of Yemeni history up to the Houthi-Saudi war. Yemen - especially the North - has a millennial history of Shi'a rulers belonging to the Zaydi faith (Albloshi 2016). While this realm had its ups and downs, at times ruling most of the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula, it spent most of its history a vassal to greater powers - the last of which was the Ottoman empire. The South of Yemen had meanwhile

come under British control in the 19th century, the British Empire first took the port of Aden, before gradually expanding its control over the mostly Sunni South of Yemen (Elisabeth Kendall 2021). In 1918, the Imamate became officially independent from the Ottomans and formed the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen (often called the Yemen Imamate). In 1934, Saudi-Arabia waged its first war against Yemen taking the provinces Jizan, Asir, and Najran (Byman 2018).

The Zaydi monarchy ruled the North until 1962 when, after a left-wing republican coup, a civil war broke out. The conflict lasted eight years, seeing Monarchists fight the Republicans for control of the country. It turned into a proxy war because the Monarchists were supported by the Arab monarchies, the UK, Imperial Iran and Israel, while the republicans were supported by the Nasserist Egypt and Soviet Union (Al-Dawsari 2020). The civil war resulted in a Republican victory, the abolishment of the imamate, and a loss of privileges for many Zaydi families (Nevola 2020). The South, then called the Colony of Aden, became independent and in 1967 formed the communist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (Elisabeth Kendall 2021). While both states were left-leaning, the North was ruled by Arab-Socialist Nasserist officers, while the South was Marxist-Leninist with close ties to the Soviet Union.

In 1978, the Zaydi Muslim colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh came to power in North Yemen. Under his rule both countries mostly peacefully unified in 1990 after two wars between North and South in 1972 and 1979, and a civil war in South Yemen in 1986 (Salisbury 2015). Yet, the Socialist Southern elite felt that the power-sharing agreements were not honored, leading to a civil war in 1994. Saleh won this war, also relying on Salafi Islamist forces with experience from the Soviet-Afghan war – or even from Al-Qaeda in the fight against the Southerners (Elisabeth Kendall 2021). In the following years Yemen remained a relatively stable state. Saleh became a true master at keeping the different tribes pacified– coining the term for governing Yemen as “dancing on the head of snakes” (Palik 2018).

In the aftermath of 9/11, he could present himself as a factor of stability before the US, gaining financial and military support (Juneau 2021). In exchange, he allowed the US drones to target supposed al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen (Scahill 2013). Saleh used the US support to solidify his reign against a group that had formed in 1992 founded by one Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, back then called the Believing Youth. The movement had started out as a peaceful and tolerant movement, aiming at strengthening the faith of Zaydi Shi'as and creating a countermovement against the encroaching Wahhabi missionaries, who were trying to convert the population of Northern Yemen to their interpretation of Sunni Islam (Salisbury 2015). In 2004, Yemeni forces tried to arrest Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, which led to the first of six wars between the government of Yemen and the Houthis between 2004 and 2010 (Samaan 2020). Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed on September 10, 2004, making him a martyr for the movement. Badreddin's brother and father took over the movement, which became increasingly proficient militarily in the following years. The Houthis started with sniping at government outposts and small ambushes advancing to combined arms warfare and defeating the regular Yemeni army in open warfare (Stoddard 2020). But it was the so-called Arab spring that really helped the Houthis advance militarily and politically. After protests had happened in most of the Middle East, people took to the streets also in Yemen, demanding for better governance and an end to corruption (Baron 2015). Among the protestors, there was an alliance of Houthis and Southern Separatists. The protests led to President Saleh being ousted from power and for a fleeting time it seemed that Yemen might transition to a more participatory political system, after the autocratic rule of Saleh. But Saudi-Arabia used its influence to make Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi (Schmitz 2014) the new candidate for the presidency, who was then elected by a congress of powerful figures in Yemen as the sole candidate.

He had no domestic power base and was a malleable candidate for the Saudi Kingdom to continue its influence on its southern border. Feeling marginalized at the negotiations table

and being unhappy with the new order, the Houthis once again took up arms against the state and overran large parts of Yemen, even detaining the new government. This was possible because in a Machiavellian move, they had allied themselves with their old adversary Saleh (Al-Akwaa 2017), who still had the loyalty of most of the army and especially the elite Republican Guard. The combined forces of the Houthis and the Yemeni armed forces, loyal to Saleh, were able to secure the control of most of the North and South-West of Yemen. However, Saudi Arabia reacted to this development with an intervention on the side of the official government, which led to a long and protracted war (Dostal 2021). While Saudi-Arabia was able to push the Houthis out of the South of Yemen, the Houthis remained in control of the capital Sana'a and the Zaydi heartlands in the North. The war became a bloody stalemate in which both sides fought to control the oil fields in the Marib province²⁶ and the port of Hodeida (Byman 2018), which gives the Houthi movement access to the Red Sea. These two flashpoints show that the two actors fought to secure stakes in a future post-war settlement: the Houthis want their share over the oil revenue and independent access to the sea which, given their dependency on smuggling for income, makes a lot of sense (Juneau 2021).

In 2017, the former president and Houthi ally Saleh tried to change sides away from the Houthis and ally himself with Saudi-Arabia after the Houthis had largely taken over control of the North and marginalized him, but he was killed after his convoy had been ambushed (Almasmari, Qiblawi, and Clarke 2017). With Saleh's death, the Houthis finalized their control over the North, since the expected large-scale uprising of Saleh supporters did not materialize, both because they were cowed by the Houthis or because disillusioned with their former leader. The civil war in Yemen became more static and frontlines have not significantly shifted in the

²⁶ Marib province has been fiercely contested for many years now, its strategically important for the Houthis for control of the capital and features an oil refinery and the potential for more oil production ("The Marib Front in Yemen's Civil War" 2021)

ensuing years. However, Yemen has suffered under the humanitarian (Byman 2018) and economic cost (Al-Muslimi 2021) of the war.

c) Phases of particular importance

Little is known about the founding phase of the Houthis. The Houthis and their detractors tell their own story of how the movement came to be. It is generally agreed that Badreddin al-Houthi studied some time in Iran and encountered the ideas of the Islamic revolution while there (Al-Dawsari 2022). His father had been one of the founders of the Haq party, and Badreddin won one of the seats the party gained in the 1993 Yemeni elections. After four years in parliament, he decided against running again and instead focused his work on the Believing Youth movement, which eventually would develop into the Houthi movement. It is unknown whether Iran was supporting him in any way, but the likelihood is low²⁷. His movement seems to have focused on revitalizing the Zaydi creed and countering the influence of Wahhabi preachers.

The first phase where the Houthi movement gained any attention from outside of Yemen was when the Yemeni government cracked down on it in 2004. The exact circumstances of why this happened is not clear, but after a short time hundreds of Houthi followers had been arrested, scores killed and finally Badreddin himself was killed. His family took over the movement with his father becoming the spiritual leader, while his brother took over as political leader. The Sa 'dah Wars between Houthis and the government followed: in total, including the one that got Badreddin killed, there would be six wars till 2010.

The Sa 'dah Wars. In March-June 2005 the second war was fought, and the movement became known by the family name of Badreddin's clan – Houthis. In September renewed

²⁷ Documents were captured by pro-Hadi forces that allege Iranian support going back to the 1980s including intelligence support, training and monetary support (Al-Masdar Online 2020). Yet the authenticity of these documents has not been independently verified and without further evidence this claim seems rather spurious.

fighting started that would last till 2006; this time the fighting was mostly with pro-government tribes. In 2007 renewed fighting took place between government soldiers and Houthi forces. Which happened again one year later. The number of six wars can be found in the literature but given that the fighting flared up and down and exact end dates for different wars are not clear it is more reasonable to argue that this was one big conflict, interrupted by phases of tribal mediation that led to more peaceful phases. While these peaceful phases led to an end of intense fighting and the release of prisoners, overall, the development of the conflict was clear. A small group of Houthis that fought with ambush tactics, IEDs²⁸ and that preferred hitting vulnerable targets became bolder in its actions. The Houthis were developing into an efficient insurgency (Stoddard 2020). Still so far it was mostly irregular warfare, and the casualties were measured in a few hundred or thousand on each side.

The next war would be different. The Houthis had developed into a formidable fighting force and the government felt it was time to act to stop the Houthis' expanding influence. In 2009 Yemeni armed forces started operation Scorched Earth (عملية الأرض المحروقة) using all the heavy equipment at their disposal. The war now represented a much more conventional war with Yemeni government forces using the air force and missile attacks to destroy the Houthis' command and control centers, while the Houthis fought as light infantry. It was also in 2009 that Yemen claimed to have captured an Iranian ship carrying weapons for the Houthis (BBC 2009). The US at that time was highly skeptical of any such claims and instead saw no evidence of Iranian involvement rather the Houthis were seen as part of a localized conflict. While American personnel were acutely aware of the possibility of Iranian support, they had seen no evidence and found existing claims to be spurious. (American Embassy Yemen 2009a; 2009b).

²⁸ Improvised-Explosive-Devices, the term for explosives that are built by insurgents for use in unconventional warfare, often using conventional military explosives like mortar or artillery shells that are exploded using wire or radio detonators to ambush enemy vehicles or troops (CAR 2018).

The conflict further escalated when Saudi forces got ambushed at the border, and Houthis voiced accusations that the kingdom was helping the Yemeni forces by letting them attack from their territory. The Saudis, alongside Jordanian and Moroccan forces attacked the Houthis in retaliation in a cross-border raid. Casualties on all sides mounted, before a truce was accepted by the Houthis in February of 2010. The Houthis lost this war, having to accept the government offer for a truce. Against conventional forces, with the capabilities the Saudis possessed, they could not yet win in the open field. Yet, they were not destroyed and lived to fight another day. It is also here that Iran gets more involved in the conflict. Ali Larijani, at the time speaker of the Iranian parliament, had already previously criticized the heavy-handed offensive and the Saudi involvement (IRNA 2009). It is also at this time that the accusation of Iranian involvement really emerged, the Yemeni government claimed to have seized weapons from warehouses and ships, even arresting several Iranian but still failed to present evidence (von Mittelstaedt 2010). A low intensity phase of fighting mostly with other tribes followed in 2010; but the fight saw few casualties and ended again after mediation.

The lack of clear evidence of Iranian involvement in these wars makes it unlikely that there was substantial support. One could argue that the rapid increase in warfighting skills shown by the Houthis could hint at Iranian or Hezbollah trainers, but a natural development of skills and free access to manuals and books on insurgent warfare can also equally explain this (Stoddard 2020). There is further the argument made by some authors that Saleh was intentionally helping the Houthis using them against internal rivals and enemies, especially against rivals in the armed forces, unruly Sunni tribes and the Al-Islah party (Aldeen 2016; Schmitz 2014), giving another explanation for Houthi success.

Overall if Iranian support existed it was not substantial enough to result in hard evidence, meaning that it did not significantly shift the scales on the battlefield. This shows that substantial Iranian support is not a given just because a religious Shi'a group is fighting in a

conflict, contradicting identity-based explanations. The Houthis were at this point mostly fighting the Yemeni government, the relations of the latter with Iran were strained due to the conflict, but still functioning.

A power-based explanation makes sense here since Iranian support at this point would have hurt relations with another state with little gain: it would not have increased the security of Iran nor substantially expanded its power. For an identity-based explanation this is somewhat problematic since the Shi'a Houthis were under attack by the government and fighting against an oppressive force but had to do so by themselves. Iran did not come to their aid in any substantial manner. Factionalism does not apply since Iran seems to not have been involved on any substantial scale, so the IRGC could not have undermined the Foreign Ministry.

Protests in Yemen. The next phase under examination is the so-called Arab spring in Yemen, the ousting of Saleh and the phase up to the civil war. In early 2011 the so-called Arab spring also swept through Yemen. Protests occurred in all major Yemeni cities. The Houthi leadership quickly voiced support for the protests and Houthis supporters joined the protests. But the Houthis did not just rely on the street, rather using the chaos to seize control of cities and villages with the help of their militia. First the remainder of the province of Saada fell followed by the province of al-Jawf. The Houthis at this point were mostly opposed by Sunni tribes after the military and police had left their posts - either deserting or changing sides. At the end of the year Saleh agreed to step down and a transition of power was agreed upon under the auspices of the Gulf-Cooperation-Council (GCC) headed by Saudi-Arabia. This transition led to an election in 2012 with Mansur al-Hadi becoming the new president replacing Saleh. Hadi lacked a domestic powerbase making him an attractive candidate for Saudi-Arabia which wanted a compliant Yemen and a safe southern border. The Houthis were expanding their control throughout this time and were fighting mostly Sunni tribes that were opposing them, who already alleged that Saleh was supporting the Houthis at that time (Al-Dawsari 2020).

It seemed to be a continuation of the previous years; the Houthis would push the borders of the areas under their control until they encountered too fierce resistance before retreating to more defensible lines. At the same time, they were organizing protests against the US and Israel and blaming them for attacks on their gatherings. It is in 2013 that Iranian support becomes evident for the first time when an Iranian shipment of ammunition and weapons is seized (Worth and Chivers 2013). This shipment included Chinese-made portable surface-to-air missiles (MANPADS) that Iran had bought and intended to ship to the Houthis. In September 2014, the Houthis finally overran the capital after five days of fighting, forcing the government into a power-sharing agreement before trying to take over the rest of the country. In March 2015 they had conquered most of the cities in Western and Southern Yemen. This was possible because the Houthis had allied themselves with their former enemy ex-president Saleh, who still maintained the loyalty of most of the armed forces and security apparatus. Together the forces took over most of the country quickly owing to their military superiority. The alliance between Houthis and Saleh meant that at that time the Houthis were not a proxy of Iran because they had too much independence through the alliance to be a proxy.

This takeover and alliance also provided the Houthis with access to the weapons stores of the Yemeni armed forces. While by no means a modern army the Yemeni army had decent stockpiles of mainly soviet equipment ranging from tanks, planes, trucks, APCs and IFVs to more crucially small arms. In response to the takeover the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and a host of other countries opted for an offensive to restore the legitimate Yemeni government under Hadi²⁹. What this phase overall shows is that the Houthis were not necessarily a proxy despite the help from Iran. Rather through their alliance with Saleh they had independence.

²⁹ The alliance includes Saudi-Arabia, UAE, Qatar (till 2017), Morocco (till 2019), Sudan, Senegal alongside the official Yemeni government, aligned tribes and mercenaries. Pakistan was called upon to join but refused its ally Saudi-Arabia.

The beginning of Iranian support shows that Iran was interested in a shift of power to a more favorable situation. This contradicts defensive explanations of Iranian proxy behavior since the involvement in Yemen would ratchet up tensions with other actors in the region - primarily Saudi-Arabia. The Iranian involvement can be explained as supporting a fellow Shi'a group or as an attempt to expand Iranian power in the region. A final judgment on whether it was power or identity or ideology that drove Iranian decision making in this case is not possible without access to the Iranian archives.

Saudi intervention in Yemen. In March 2015, the GCC declared their intervention in Yemen at the side of the ousted government. Operation Decisive Storm began in a classical approach that the Saudis had learnt from their American allies: a barrage of air strikes and missile attacks to destroy enemy command centers, logistic hubs, arms depots. Especially targeted was the former Yemeni Air Force, this operation was successful, the other strikes less so. While the alliance was able to push back the Houthis from the South – the fighting on the ground was mostly performed by Sunni tribesmen and Yemeni soldiers – taking Aden in July 2015, it became clear that a quick military victory was unattainable. The war developed into a stalemate with the Houthis controlling most of the North and West of Yemen, the Southern Separatists the South and the Hadi-led Yemeni government controlling most of the East. The war shifted to one where Yemeni forces supported by mostly Saudi and UAE special and air forces and western mercenaries fought against the Houthis, with both sides deploying large amounts of drones.

It is also during this time that Iranian support and rhetoric becomes clear and gradually scales up. Khamenei even accused the Saudis of genocide (Mukhashaf 2015a). The Iranian foreign ministry became more active in 2015 presenting a peace plan for Yemen. It called for an end to foreign intervention, free access for the delivery of humanitarian goods and a broad

government of national unity, which would have served the Houthi interests immensely. The plan of course went nowhere (DW 2015).

It is also in 2015 that the first news reports that Iranians were on the ground in Yemen appeared (Mukhashaf 2015b). In 2017 an IRGC officer allegedly commanding Houthi troops was killed in a cross-border raid against Saudi-Arabia (Mareb Press 2017), one of several alleged IRGC members killed in 2017 (Koontz and Feierstein 2017). This Iranian deployment of experts to the field to lead troops and organize the Houthis shows that the conflict between Houthis and Saudi-Arabia became more important to Iran. Throughout the years since 2015 Iran increased its weapons delivered to the Houthis substantially: small arms, drones, anti-air and anti-ship missiles were delivered alongside surface-to-surface missiles (Mitzer and Oliemans 2022b).

On 14th of September 2019 a drone attack hit the Saudi Aramco facilities in Eastern Saudi-Arabia causing great damage and disrupting global oil flow. While the US, Saudi-Arabia and the UN investigators determined the attack came from Iran, the Iranians denied and officially the Houthis claimed responsibility (Lederer 2020). There are two possibilities, either Iran conducted the operation and trusted the Houthis enough to take the blame or the Houthis conducted an operation that was so dependent on Iran, that Iran would inevitably get the blame. Either way Iran shows a high level of trust in its proxy and is willing to take great risks to support operations by the Houthis against Saudi-Arabia.

Overall, the time after the Saudi intervention shows a massive upscaling of Iranian support for the Houthis. This support can be linked to the Saudi-intervention. Iran wanted to help the Houthis against the Saudis. This serves Iran's goals if one assumes a power-based explanation. Saudi-Arabia is a regional rival of Iran and by tying down Saudi forces Iran can weaken its foe and expand its influence. It also makes sense if one assumes an ideological explanation, the Saudi campaign was brutal and caused famine in Yemen, threatening many

Yemenis with starvation. From a defensive viewpoint it is a bit more complex, since the support increased tensions with Saudi-Arabia, but it gave Iran a second-strike capability as evident by the missile and drone attacks on Saudi soil, so there is an element of deterrence to the Iranian proxy strategy. But also, the identity-based explanation needs considering: Initially the Saudi goal seems to have been to destroy the Houthis, combined with the fact that the Saudis in years past had sent missionaries to the Houthis to convert them away from the Zaydi Shi'a creed Iran might have felt obliged to help its brethren against the Saudi onslaught. Both identity and power-based explanations have equal merit.

d) Capabilities of the Houthis and Iranian support

To understand the dependency of the Houthis on Iran and thereby see whether they deserve the label of proxy, an analysis of their capabilities is necessary. The Houthis have fielded weapons from the last 70 years. They use T-34/85s and SU-100s from World War II³⁰ to modern Iranian drones (Mitzer and Oliemans 2022a). Their small arms are mostly the omnipresent AK-47s and rocket-propelled-grenade launchers RPGs of Soviet and Chinese manufacture, but also various other weapons. When they allied with Saleh and conquered most of Yemen they captured the stockpiles of the Yemeni army, including tanks, artillery, missiles alongside vast quantities of small arms and even most of the Yemeni air force, although much of the latter was destroyed on the ground during the Saudi intervention.

Yet a lengthy list of tanks, APCs, IFVs and other equipment does not make for capabilities. The question is what capabilities the Houthis have gained over time and what role has Iran played in this. With every of the six wars between the Houthis and the Yemeni government the Houthis became more proficient at warfare. Initially their attacks were small and represented classical guerilla warfare tactics. But even in that early phase the accusation by

³⁰ These were mostly used as artillery after having been captured from the Yemeni government (jwh1975 2018).

the Yemeni government was that Iran was supporting the Houthis. Later-on the Houthis were capable of complex operations and defeating the Yemeni army in open field battles. The speed of this development can be explained by experience gained and deserters switching over from the Yemeni army to the Houthis. Another explanation sees the Houthi approach mirroring Maoist strategies (Stoddard 2020). But it can also be the result of Iran helping the Houthis – either directly or indirectly through Hezbollah, something witnessed after 2015 (Samaan 2020). The problem hereby is that there is simply a lack of evidence. US officials believed that the IRGC were training the Houthis from 2015 onwards (Strobel and Hosenball 2015). Given the expansion of the relationship between the Houthis and Iran after 2015 it can be safely assumed that a military partnership existed before but the impact of that relationship on the military capabilities cannot be assessed. From 2014 onwards the Houthi capabilities expanded exponentially when in alliance with Saleh the Houthis overran most of Western Yemen (Juneau 2021). In this time the Houthis were not a proxy of Iran but an ally because they had a strong ally with Saleh and the military loyal to him.

With the Saudi intervention the situation changed and the official Yemeni government regained some control in the South of Yemen (Darwhich 2018). Also, since 2015 the US has officially accused Iran of supplying the Houthis with drones. On the contrary, previously they had denied reports by Yemen and Saudi-Arabia that Iran was supplying the Houthis. The first open-source intelligence confirmation of Iranian drones being used in Yemen is from 2016 (CAR 2017). Although back then the Houthis claimed to have manufactured these weapons themselves. Iran was also selling fuel on the black market to finance the Houthi. While the Houthis developed the capability to build up some systems needing only certain technological parts to make them work, this still means they need Iran (Lederer 2019).

Overall, the supplies of Iran to the Houthis are extensive and bolstered Houthi capabilities on a large scale. Since 2015 the Houthis have become more dependent on Iranian

support in waging their war, this is evident in the vast number of Iranian weapons deployed by them (Nadimi 2020). The drones especially give the Houthis an air strike capability, while the anti-ship missiles pose a constant threat to shipping around Houthi controlled shores. The Iranian investment in the Houthis make them one of the biggest recipients of Iranian support. While the Houthis according to the UN have access to at least 1.62 billion\$ through the economy under their control – making them financially independent (Almahfali and Root 2020) - the Iranian military supplies still create an operational dependency by the Houthis on Iran.

e) Ideology and identity of the Houthis

The ideology and identity of the Houthis is a complex and interwoven topic, between official statements, statements by their detractors and different schools of thought in academia many extremes of opinion exist. Rather than narrow it down to one definitive answer, this case study will present a range of views with an emphasis on the parts of the ideology that can be firmly established. This will answer the question of whether the Houthis fulfill conditions set by the identity- and ideology-based explanations.

The foundation of the Houthi ideology and identity is the Zaydi creed. The Zaydis are Shi'as but there are differences with the Twelver Shi'as of Iran. These differences must be kept in mind (Parkinson and Gordon 2018). The Zaydis like other branches of Islam split further into different schools, for the Houthis the relevant school of the Zaydis is the Jarudiyah. While usually the Zaydis are seen as close to Sunni Islam in terms of theology, jurisprudence and view of Islamic history – the Jarudiyah is much closer to the Twelver Shi'a branch in these views (Almahfali and Root 2020; Alziady 2021). The Houthis see the Zaydi form of Shi'a Islam as the true form of Islam and believe that Muslims should all convert to it. By doing so the Islamic world would be able to unite and restore its past glory (Albloshi 2016). The enemies of Islam in the view of the Houthis are the Jews, the USA and Israel and the Wahhabis as expressed in their motto called the scream “al-Sarkha” (Albloshi 2016, 152):

“God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse upon the Jews, and Victory to Islam (لموت لأمریکا الموت لإسرائيل اللعنة على اليهود النصر للإسلام)”

This motto was adopted early on and became an essential part of their brand, it is repeated at gatherings, funerals and even in schools (Al-Dawsari 2022). They agree with the anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism of Iran, albeit with a much stronger antisemitic tone that is not found in Iranian statements (Al-Dawsari 2020; Almahfali and Root 2020; Albloshi 2016). The Iranian revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini feature strongly in speeches and are seen as inspirational. Likewise, Khamenei is seen as a leader figure, the Houthi spokesperson even referred to Khamenei’s leadership as the continuation of the leadership of the prophet (Pars Today 2019). The Houthis also have to some extent mirrored Iranian state institutions. They have their institutions that exist in parallel to the official Yemeni republican institutions, which continue to exist, albeit with much reduced power³¹. The Houthis have also embraced the pan-Islamic rhetoric and the ideas of the axis of resistance (Juneau 2021) forming relations with Hezbollah (Levitt 2021). The embracing of the Axis of Resistance by the Houthis also becomes evident in the symbolic but highly publicized act of collecting 300.000\$ for Hezbollah. (Porter 2019). While the sum in the context of the cost of these conflicts is small, its symbolism is important. Given that the scream became a part of the Houthi brand early on (Albloshi 2016) it is safe to assume that the Houthi ideology is genuine and not a way to align more with Iran to get more support. So, the Houthis do align with Iran ideologically, fulfilling a condition set by the identity-based explanation.

A more contentious issue is the question of anti-Sunni views. The Houthi movement also gained a large following through its fight for greater economic participation of the Zaydis which felt marginalized and impoverished by economic policies favoring other groups. While the economic aspects of the conflict will be dealt with later it is important to engage with the

³¹ The Houthis have a so-called supervisory system that puts loyalist supervisors next to civil experts (acaps 2020).

question whether the anti-Sunni sentiment is an expression purely of economic competition or of ideology. Al-Houthi rejected many tenants of the Sunni creed; he also was much more critical of the first caliphs than is common among Zaydis. For Al-Houthi the downfall of Islam began the moment that Ali was deprived of leadership of the community. Disparaging Sunni countries for failing to defeat Israel and seeing Wahhabism as a Western and Jewish scheme to weaken and destroy Islam (Albloshi 2016). The Houthis therefore embrace at least in parts a sectarian ideology that is anti-Sunni. The anti-Sunni views cannot simply be ascribed to economic competition. This sets the Houthis apart from the Islamic Republic of Iran, which does not openly embrace anti-Sunni views.

A much more contentious issue is the question of the imamate and the Hashemites. Descendants of the prophet Muhammad, call themselves Sharifs or Sayeed's and are often referred to as Hashemites. Critics allege that the Houthis want to restore the Zaydi Imamate in Yemen and cement a caste system ruled by Hashemites (Sarhan, Saidin, and Othman 2022). Yet beyond the favoring of their own loyalists, the evidence that the Houthis want to establish a caste system is thin. Another aspect is the imamate. Officially the Houthis do not want to bring back the Imamate of Yemen. But they have de facto established something similar. There is a Zaydi dominated rule in Houthi Yemen in which spiritual and mundane power is concentrated in the hands of one family – the al-Houthi clan (Salisbury 2015). The question cannot be answered definitively, because the Houthis will in all due likelihood never call it an imamate and might not conceptualize it this way themselves, even though it looks increasingly like it. The Houthis have also taken steps that favor the Hashemites in Yemen through taxation (Tsukerman 2020). Nevola (2020), in an anthropological study of a Yemeni village, highlighted the reactionary nostalgia that made the Houthis attractive to some. So there seems to be some merit to the question of the imamate and the Hashemites. Yet to describe the Houthis as purely reactionary misses a lot of their revolutionary rhetoric and political approach.

A last aspect is the geographical and socio-economic identity of the Houthis. Yemen splits roughly into the wealthy and trade oriented coastal areas and the poorer and more agricultural oriented highlands, the Zaydis belong into the latter category. While their simpler lifestyle and ragged nature has often been admired by the coastal Yemenis they are also seen as backward and less sophisticated. The economic deprivation they suffered under previous regimes has been an aspect that worked in their favor in recruiting followers (Dostal 2021). It also plays along well with the revolutionary messages of Imam Khomeini, who called upon the economically-deprived and oppressed – the Mostazafan to lead the revolution. The economic revolutionary message of the Houthis resonates with the Zaydis' situation and identity.

Overall, the Houthis are rooted in their own ideology and identity, which are the product of societal and political developments in Yemen. Yet they also have embraced Iran as an ideological model that they wish to emulate in some respects. They have not converted to Twelver Shi'a Islam and their antisemitism sets them apart from Iranian state ideology. But they are Shi'as, and they share common ideological enemies and while their ideology has reactionary elements, there is a strong revolutionary current that aims at overcoming the status quo in Yemen, the Middle East and the wider world. Thereby they align in identity and ideology with Iran. The Zaydis are for all intents and purposes Shi'as.

Iran has ideologically embraced the Houthis. At a meeting between a Houthi delegation and Supreme Leader, Khamenei referred to the leader of the Houthis Abdel Malik Baradin as a brother and praising the fight of the Houthis against the Saudis and emphasizing their common struggle against the US³². In 2017 Khamenei even went as far as to claim that Zayid Shi'as and Sunnis are defending the Islamic republic with as much fervor as Shi'as (Khamenei 2017).

³² The meeting was in 2018. The notes can be accessed on the website of the supreme leader (leader.ir 2018)

Given that there are almost no Zaydis outside of Yemen makes this an obvious reference to the Houthis.

f) Economic and Geopolitical situation of Yemen

To analyze the power-based explanations it is important to see if Yemen is of economic or geopolitical relevance for Iran and to what extent. Economically Yemen is an underdeveloped country. It was already an underdeveloped country before the war, being in 154th place of the human development index (UNDP 2014). The economic modus operandi for most people is limited agriculture and small-scale production through handcraft (Nevola 2020). Yemen has a limited industrial basis and even its agricultural sector is beset by problems due to dwindling water supplies and a growing population. While education has progressed, it still lags behind its neighboring Arab countries (UNDP 2014). Yet Yemen has natural resources: gas and oil and mineral deposits exist. Yet to this day though these natural resources have only seen limited exploitation. Given the lack of financial means and expertise Yemen depends on foreign companies to exploit its natural wealth and given the tense security situation since 9/11 not much has happened in that regard. In addition to this there is commodity trade especially through the port of Aden.

But the most important source of hard cash injection is foreign aid and subsidies. Southern Yemen was a client state of the Soviet Union, receiving financial aid till the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Yemen since reunification Saleh was able to secure Saudi financial support and US support with the onset of the war on terror in Yemen (Munteanu 2015; Dostal 2021). Additionally, there were remittances of Yemenis living and working abroad that helped the Yemeni state survive. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) have invested a lot in the southern ports of Yemen – especially Aden (Dostal 2021). Overall, economically Yemen has potential but given the lack of infrastructure, especially after the devastation of years of war, it is extremely limited. The economic gain for any party involved is small and does not outweigh

the costs of rebuilding let alone the costs of waging war. An economic argument for Iranian involvement in the war is not valid.

Geopolitically Yemen is much more relevant: through its location at the Bab-el-Mandeb – the gate of tears - the twenty-six kilometers wide entrance to the red sea and thereby the Suez Canal. From Yemen any actor with enough military capability to employ anti-ship missiles and speedboats - abilities the Houthis possess -can seriously harass shipping or stop it outright. Any shipping of oil and liquified gas, which is bound for Europe or the US, has to pass through the red sea and the Suez Canal, if it does not want to take the much longer route around Africa or through the Indian and Pacific Ocean in case of a journey to the US. Approximately 12% of global trade passes through the Suez Canal and 30% of all container traffic, positioning Yemen at a strategic crossroad of world trade (New Zealand Embassy in Cairo 2021). In addition to sitting next to this vital artery of trade; Yemen borders Saudi-Arabia to its north and Oman to its east. The border between both countries is not easy to control and fighting has occasionally happened on Saudi territory even before the conflict escalated with the Saudi-led intervention. A further problem for Saudi-Arabia is the existence of substantial numbers of Zaydis and other Shi'as living across the border in Saudi-Arabia's south-west. Yemen sits at the soft underbelly of Saudi-Arabia and as repeated attacks have shown all major economic and political centers in the Saudi kingdom are within striking distance of missiles and UAVs especially Loitering munition.

The Houthis also enable Iran to have plausible deniability for strikes into Saudi territory, for which the Houthis can take responsibility. Control over Yemen therefore not only enables control over the shipping of oil and gas but enables attacks on the most important places where both are produced. Through the Houthis Iran can build pressure against Saudi-Arabia and weaken its geopolitical rival. There is a strong argument to be made that by supporting the Houthis Iran is not only expanding its sphere of influence but also pushing back the Saudi

influence in the region. So, there is a compelling argument for a power-based explanation that sees Iran expanding its power in Yemen.

g) Relations between the Houthis and Iran

To understand whether factionalism played a role in the Houthi-Iran relationship it is important to analyze how Foreign Ministry and IRGC interacted with the Houthis and the Yemeni state and whether the IRGC took actions by supporting proxies that undermined the official line of the Foreign Ministry. Iran had a working relationship with Yemen before the civil war in 2014. Official Iranian support for the Houthis only emerged with the Saudi intervention in the Yemeni civil war after the So-called Arab spring, culminating with the appointment of a Houthi ambassador to Iran (Alfoneh 2019). Given the widespread Iranian support, the dominant role of the IRGC in Yemen is obvious. The question is whether they used their relationship to sabotage the foreign ministry. In a speech by Medi Taeb³³ he said that President Hassan Rouhani had forbidden supplying surface-to-surface missiles to the Houthis. This happened in order not to endanger the Iran nuclear deal (MEMRI 2017). This shows that the IRGC were not willing to undermine the official foreign policy regarding the nuclear deal.

Regarding relations with Saudi-Arabia, the overall bad relations between Saudi-Arabia and Iran have a multitude of reasons, beyond the obvious geopolitical or identity-based conflicts: In 2015 a large stampede killed many Iranian pilgrims in the kingdom during Hajj. In 2016 Nimr al-Nimr, a Shi'a opposition figure, was executed by Saudi-Arabia (Kane 2018), leading to riots in Iran, during which the Saudi embassy was set ablaze. This led to a final rupture and Saudi-Arabia ended relations with Iran. All these incidents show that while the IRGC could have used the Houthis to worsen the relations with Saudi-Arabia there really was no need since these relations were deteriorating regardless. Overall, the Houthis seem not to

³³ The speech was in front of members of the Ammar foundation, which is headed by Taeb and IRGC personnel, the organization is strongly associated with the IRGC intelligence service led by his brother Hussein (Hamid 2020).

have been used to undermine the policies of the Iranian foreign ministry. There was also no parallel diplomacy as far as can be ascertained, Iran engaged with the Yemeni state, when that fell apart it started engaging with the Houthis. Therefore, I conclude that there seems to be no factionalism at play.

h) Summary

Iran's relations with the Houthis, from their origin till the end of 2019, are a story of an ever-closer bond. Assessing the depth of the initial relationship is hard because Yemen is a warzone, and the clandestine nature of proxy wars makes a definitive assessment almost impossible. Yet there is no doubt the relationship between both sides was profoundly deep in 2019. Iran was openly embracing the Houthis and the Iranian support was more overt than covert. There were no obvious strains in the relationship between both sides. Iran gradually but steadily increased recognition and support for the Houthis, especially in the years following the Saudi intervention. Iran supplied modern drones, ammunition and even personnel to the Houthis to support them in their fight. They are militarily dependent despite the weapon stockpiles they captured or were handed to them by Saleh. The drones Iran delivers to the Houthis enable them to strike deep into the territory of Saudi-Arabia and the UAE; they also helped to turn the tide on the battlefield against the western equipped Saudi forces and their local allies. However, the Houthis are financially independent through taxation and smuggling.

But because of their operational dependency the Houthis are a proxy of Iran. Another aspect is the influence the Iranian support created for the Houthis among the members of the Axis of Resistance integrating them into a network of support, likewise, making them more of a proxy. While there is no clear evidence that Iran was supporting the Houthis before the so-called Arab spring, the rapid development of their combat skills and the rapid expansion of the Iranian support on all levels makes it at least likely that contacts existed and at least a limited form of supply.

To explain the relationship, the power-based, identity-based and factionalism explanations all have their merits for different reasons.

Factionalism. The relationship with the Houthis is dominated by the IRGC, the repeated strikes by the former have undermined any efforts of the foreign ministry of Iran to improve the relations with the Saudis and UAE. Making a case for the Factionalism-explanation, but there were so many factors that had already destroyed trust between both Iran and Saudi-Arabia. This situation makes it doubtful that undermining the Foreign Ministry was the intent of the IRGC support of the Houthis. Factionalism does not explain Iranian support for the Houthis, since supporting the Houthis did not gain the IRGC any new means to influence foreign policy.

Power-based explanations. The power-based explanation for Iranian support for the Houthis makes sense since the Houthis enable Iran to strike at its enemy the Saudi kingdom from its soft underbelly, thereby Iran can weaken its enemy. It also explains the fact that the support for the Houthis really started once Saudi-Arabia openly joined the war, since the Yemeni state was not of great concern for Iran, but Saudi Arabia was. Yet, the amount of investment is disproportionate if the goal is defensive – to bog down Saudi troops. There is no proportionality between defensive intents and the massive expenditure for a large-scale harassment actions, which involve regular combat operations through troops and drones. The Houthis can hold their ground and fire their drones and missiles, but there are some problems for a defensive explanation: first, the plausible deniability factor has worn off, decreasing Iranian security through potential counterstrikes; second, their effect on tying down Saudi forces became limited, especially since the latter switched to using more and more local forces supplemented with mercenaries. This state of affairs limits any defensive power-based explanation. The Houthis have control over a large area but their continued attacks on Saudi-Arabia do not yield more land or power, instead just serve to antagonize their enemies. The

Houthis did give Iran greater influence in the Arab peninsula and made Iran a factor to reckon with in any post-war settlement in Yemen. Thereby the influence and power of Iran increased.

Identity-based explanation. An identity-based explanation better explains this high level of Iranian investment. The Houthis bring the Zaydis close to the Twelver creed of Shi'a Islam: they fight against a hated monarchy and ally of the US; they embrace the ideology of Khomeinism; and they recognize the leadership of Khamenei and are Shi'as. The Iranian support for the Houthis has enabled the latter to not only harass Saudi-Arabia, but to carve out a viable realm in Yemen. With control over oil fields for income and the port of Hodeida for trade, the Houthis have a survivable state of their own. This level of Iranian support points towards Iran wanting to enable the Houthis to rule themselves and to be safe in their home areas and beyond. The Saudi entrance into the war, the brutality of the campaign had the potential to threaten the existence of the Zaydis in Yemen through war and famine. Making a good argument that Iran felt responsible to intervene to protect them. The identity-based explanation though suffers from the fact that Iranian support only really came into play once Saudi-Arabia got involved on a large scale. On the other hand, the threat before that was only against the Houthi movement and not the Zaydis themselves and there were logistical limits. The Houthis had no access to ports so getting substantial amounts of weapons to the Houthis was almost impossible.

Overall, while a factionalist interpretation of Iranian proxy behavior in Yemen can be excluded, both power and identity-based explanations are limited in their ability to explain the Iranian support for the Houthis. Neither the late involvement nor the large scale of the support since 2015 are sufficiently explained by either. Making it necessary to consider a combination of both identity-based and power-based approaches to explain Iranian support for the Houthis.

The empirical findings about the Houthi case are summed up in following tables:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	Iran can fight Saudi-Arabia, an ideological enemy through the Houthis and spread its ideology among them.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	Houthis fully embrace the Iranian ideology and align themselves with it. The Houthis have openly embraced Khomeinism and the Axis of Resistance.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.	The Houthis are Shi'as, albeit of the Zaydi branch. The relationship is deep.
Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	Iran has enabled the Shi'a Houthis to defend themselves and secure their strongholds in the north of Yemen.

Table 7 Identity Findings Houthis

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	Yemen is not directly bordering Iran, nor in its immediate environment, but it is part of the Middle East and partly controls Iran access to the Mediterranean. So, it is only a partially fulfilled hypothesis.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	While Yemen has economic potential, it is an extremely underdeveloped and impoverished state. Iranian economic interests do not suffice to explain Iranian proxy warfare here.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	This hypothesis is only partially fulfilled, the intervention has an ambiguous effect since it creates more hostility by Saudi-Arabia and might drag Iran into a conflict with the kingdom, but it also enables second-strike capabilities against Saudi-Arabia thereby increasing security.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	This hypothesis is fulfilled, the proxy war in Yemen expands and entrenches Iranian influence.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	Does not apply here since the group aligns ideologically.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	The Iranian investment is high, yet it does not correspond to an equally high interest in Yemen. The Houthis have shown themselves to be reliable allies though.

Table 8 Power Findings Houthis

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.	The IRGC did not visibly pursue their own foreign policy through the support of the Houthis.
The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.	While initially this was true, later-on the Iranian foreign policy shifted to a consistent pro-Houthi line.
Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.	The limited economic opportunities in Yemen make this unlikely.

Table 9 Factionalism Findings Houthis

2. Iraq - Da'wa, Badr, SCIRI and PMF

a) Introduction

It is in Iraq that the Islamic Republic of Iran first deployed proxies. Making it one of the most important case studies out of historical reasons alone. But Iraq matters for a multitude of reasons: Iraq borders Iran directly to the West. It is a long border over which Iran was invaded several times, last in the 1980s. Beyond the security aspect Iraq, since 2003 has developed into an important economic partner. Iraq also forms part of the land-route for Iran to reach the Mediterranean. All these reasons make it an insightful case study to test the power-based explanation for Iranian proxy warfare. At the same time Iraq is home to some of the holiest sites of Shi'a Islam and is a Shi'a majority state, yet the Iraqi groups with whom Iran is working have also become infamous for atrocities often based on sectarianism. These reasons make it relevant for testing identity and ideology-based explanations. Lastly the factionalism

explanation will be analyzed through the difference in approach of the Foreign Ministry and the IRGC towards the Iraqi state after the 2003 US invasion toppled Saddam.

b) Historical background

The area of Euphrates and Tigris, nowadays known as Iraq, has been called the cradle of civilization and some have even tried localizing the Garden of Eden here (Guarasci 2015). Yet, in later centuries, it became just a province contested between the Persian and the Roman empires. Only after the Arab conquest did Iraq again become a center of civilization, this time of the new Arab-Islamic empire. Baghdad, its capital, became a true metropolis and a center of science, theology, poetry and philosophy. But Iraq was also the place where the fourth Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib was murdered, where his son Hussein died the martyr's death. Where the fifth imam of the Zaydis Zayd ibn Ali was killed. The 7th, 9th, 10th and 11th imam are buried here, and the 12th imam supposedly went into occultation in the Iraqi town of Samara. Over the centuries, through the presence of Shi'a clergy and places of worship Iraq became more Shiite in nature. The mosques and graves of the imams became elaborate places of worship and pilgrimage.

Politically, Iraq became a backwater again after the Mongol invasion had devastated the remains of the Abbasid caliphate. Starting from the 16th century, Iraq became a front state between the Turkish-Sunni Ottoman and Iranian-Shi'a Safavid empires. This conflict was intensified by the fact that some of the holiest places of Shi'a Islam are in Iraq, namely Karbala and Najaf. The Safavids tried repeatedly to take Iraq from the Ottomans and failed (Simons 1994). The Ottomans in turn lost Iraq during World War I and Iraq became a part of the British Empire before becoming an independent state in 1932. The Iraqi Kingdom would perpetuate the British colonial rule in that the Sunni minority would continue to form the bulk of the elite in the army, bureaucracy, and economy (Nasr 2006). The Iraqi Kingdom would see several

revolts and coups before in 1941 the British army invaded the country to topple a pro-Axis government (Simon 2004). The Iraqi monarchy ended in a communist backed coup in 1958. The years that followed saw a power struggle between Ba'athists and Communists which finally ended when the Ba'athist Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979³⁴ (Simons 1994).

Tensions between Persia³⁵, later renamed Iran, and Iraq had existed from the moment of Iraqi independence in 1932. These tensions would form the foundation of conflict between the two countries in the coming decades: disputes over control of the Shatt al-Arab³⁶ and where the border lies, which affected Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf and income from fees for shipping. The issue of the Shatt al-Arab was temporarily resolved by agreement in 1937, in favor of Iraq. In turn Iraq joined Iran together with Turkey and Afghanistan in the Saadabad pact. Yet, Iran ended that agreement in 1969, the Shah seeing it as too one-sided. Tensions rose and there were even military clashes in 1974/75 over control of the area of the Shatt al-Arab, which showed Iranian superiority in arms (Farrokh 2011). The conflict was temporarily resolved in 1975 with the Algiers agreement that was mediated by the Algerian government between the Shah and Saddam.

The other point of contention was the Iranian province of Khuzestan – or Arabestan as it is called in the Arab world (Farrokh 2011): it is a province mostly inhabited by Sunni Arabs, which had lost their autonomous status under Reza Shah in the 1920s (Bryson 2007). Not long past the Islamic revolution when Saddam was hoping to use the post-revolutionary chaos in Iran and the chaotic state of Iran's armed forces to his advantage. He started a massive invasion

³⁴ Saddam had been the second in command since the early 1970s, but he focused on stabilizing the state, securing his power and implementing his policies before formally taking power (Hashim 2003).

³⁵ Till 1935 the official name of Iran was Persia, in 1935 Reza Shah changed the name to connect Iran with its pre-Islamic heritage.

³⁶ The Shatt al-Arab in Persian Arvand Rud is a river coming from the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers until it flows into the Persian Gulf; it represents Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf. Since the unmarked border between Iran and Iraq runs through it there are disputes

of Iran (Ward 2009) hoping to resolve the issue of the Shatt al-Arab and gain control over Khuzestan.

The Iran-Iraq war began on September 22, 1980, the war would last eight years and see almost a million casualties, and it would rapidly develop into a conflict presented by Iraq as being between Arabs and Persians, while Iran framed it as a fight between believers and infidels, although many also saw a dimension of a fight between Shi'as and Sunnis. The initial Iraqi attack had its element of surprise, but rapidly the Iraqi army bogged down. Iraq failed to take the Iranian oil production center of Abadan. The city Khorramshahr meanwhile was encircled and fell after one and a half months of heavy fighting. The Iraqis had lost momentum and vast numbers of men and material. With that the Iraqi invasion had failed. Iran would go on the counter offensive and in a slow and grinding war push Iraq out of its territory over the next two years. Yet, not satisfied with merely liberating its own land, Iran decided to push on. Rather than limiting itself to ending the war without loss of land the goal now was to topple the Iraqi dictator and free the holy sites of Shiism, dragging the war on for six more years (Farrokh 2011). Even before the war began, Iraq had forced hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Shiites into Iran. This expulsion policy was based on their Iranian ancestry (Rajabi et al. 2017). The policy had been pursued since the 1970s, but now these exiles and thousands of Shiite Iraqi prisoners of war formed a military potential for Iran. Khomeini had called for overthrowing Saddam, hoping for a domino effect of the Islamic revolution, which would topple other monarchies or secular dictatorships in the Muslim world or at least force them into a change of course in their policies (Taremi 2014). When the opportunity emerged to build up a proxy group against Iraq Iran took it.

The Da'wa Party was an organization that had already been formed in the 1950s and had striven for an Islamic state in Iraq. Their most important leader was Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. But there were ideological tensions concerning the idea of Islamic state across the

spectrum of Shi'a Islamists: Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and his followers believed that the power should rest with the Ummah – the people – while Khomeini and his mostly Iranian disciples wanted power to rest with the clergy (Shanahan 2004). This nuance would result in fundamentally different states and represented a major split between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a Islamists. The leader of the movement Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr had been executed in a brutal fashion by the Iraqi state in March 1980 together with his sister (Shanahan 2004). After this execution, the Da'wa party leadership set up its headquarters in Tehran. The Da'wa party started a campaign of terror against Ba'athist Iraq, bombing the Iraqi embassy in Beirut in 1981 and trying to assassinate Saddam in 1982 and 1987. The party also formed its own unit of volunteers that would fight alongside the Iranian armed forces against the Iraqis. Yet, crackdowns in Iraq weakened the Da'wa party so the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) was founded in 1982. SCIRI would coordinate Da'wa and other exiled Shiite parties and organizations to give them a broader appeal and coordinate their work.

The SCIRI organization came under the control of Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim who had fled to Iran in 1980. Al-Hakim belonged to an influential clerical family, and he had embraced the ideas of Khomeini regarding clerical rule. Under his leadership, SCIRI fully embraced Khomeinism and the power of the clergy (Isakhan and Mulherin 2020). To support Iran's war against Iraq, SCIRI also formed a military wing called the Badr Brigade (Ostovar 2016a). The unit was led by IRGC officers and consisted of a few thousands of Iraqis: former prisoners of war, political exiles and those forced out of Iraq since the 1970s.

The Iranian attempts to topple Saddam failed. Iraq, through financial and military help from other Arab countries, fearful of Iran, was able to hold its ground (Rubin 1989). The war finally ended in 1988 with both sides retreating to their respective borders. An important sidenote is that Iraq was also deploying a proxy, namely military units formed from members of the Iranian Islamist-Socialist Mojahedeen-e-Kalb (MEK) (RAND 2009), that had fled to Iraq

after their failure to seize power from Khomeini and his followers, after the revolution against the Shah (Tabatabai 2018).

The Badr Corps, SCIRI and Da'wa would remain active during the following decade, moving across the border to support Shi'a uprisings in Iraq (Jabar 1992). Yet, for the most part they limited themselves to building up organizations in-exile and preparing for the day of their return. The opportunity for that came from an unexpected corner: the US, hoping to destroy the long-term nuisance Saddam Hussein, expand US influence and bring democracy to the Middle East had decided to topple Saddam's regime under the pretext of stopping an alleged Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program (Miller 2011). In a matter of weeks, the Iraqi regime was gone. The US plan for Iraq was to dissolve the army, fire all Baathist party members from the administration and start completely new; to make Iraq a model democracy. The US plan failed for a myriad of reasons. One of which was that Da'wa, SCIRI and Badr returned to Iraq and skillfully infiltrated Iraqi politics, security forces and administration trying to gain control of the country and implement their goal of creating a Shi'a Islamic Republic based on the Iranian model.

After a short time, a civil war erupted in Iraq, that increasingly turned into a sectarian war. The main cause was that Al-Qaeda in Iraq was pursuing a sectarian agenda, even splitting off from the main leadership over its sectarian policy (Hunt 2005). Al-Qaeda in Iraq had prepared for the US invasion under the command of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi even before the invasion, setting up networks and safe-houses (Kirdar 2011). But it was US policies that really gave them a boost. In a misguided attempt to copy the Denazification of post-World War II Germany, the leader of the US administration for occupied Iraq, Paul Bremer, dismissed all civil servants with ties to the Ba'ath party and dissolved the Iraqi army (Pfiffner 2010). Given Iraq's political structure before the war, party membership was often a requirement for state employment and said little about a person's political affiliation, it created a big pool of

disgruntled former state employees, who could be recruited by Al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups, which would resist the US. But Zarqawi went further than just fighting the Americans. He pursued a policy to start a sectarian civil war in Iraq. Under his leadership Al-Qaeda targeted Shi'as - terrorist attacks against Shi'a mosques, bazars or simply just entire neighborhoods with suicide bombers, car bombs or sniper fire ignited sectarian hatred (Fishman 2006). His plan was that Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'as would fight each other and it worked. Mixed neighborhoods fell apart through sectarian hatred. Iran's proxies got involved in this violence, targeting Sunni neighborhoods in retaliation attacks.

But Iran's proxies also now moved in the halls of power. Party members were holding high offices and former militia commanders became respected members of parliament. At the same time Iran's proxies were not the only ones vying for power. Other groups were also competing for power or even forming militias. The Communist Party of Iraq had traditionally been strong among the Shi'as (Ismael 2007). But the strongest contender for dominance among the Shi'a community for Iran's proxies was the nephew of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr founder of the Da'wa movement – Moqtada al-Sadr. His father, like his uncle, had been killed by the Saddam government. After the US invasion Sadr founded the Sadrist movement and their militia the Mahdi army (Bayless 2012). While Iran might have lent the group some support for the most part it stood apart from pro-Iranian proxies by insisting on its independence (Hollingshead 2018). Ideologically, while being Shi'a Islamists, the Sadrists emphasized Iraqi nationalism in their ideology (Williams and Bisbee 2016). The civil war fizzled out when the US allied Sunni tribes in Western Iraq pushed Al-Qaeda out of Iraq. Yet, Iraqi politicians and chief among them Da'wa secretary general and prime minister of Iraq al-Maliki did not want this Sunni force integrated into the Iraqi armed forces. So, by 2013 they had mostly been dissolved (Mansour 2016). Instead, Iraq took a heavy-handed approach against Sunni provinces

demanding more autonomy. This led to repeated clashes since the refusal for autonomy was perceived as primarily aiming at the Sunni Arabs, since the Kurds had gotten their autonomy.

In 2014, having built up strength in the Syrian Civil War and using an underground network of former Baathist intelligence officers, ISIS invaded Iraq and overran much of the country. The Iraqi army proved powerless, to stop the onslaught of the black clad hordes of the Islamic State, resulting in entire Iraqi Army divisions being overrun. In this situation, when the Shi'a holy city of Samarra and the whole of Iraq was being threatened, the Shi'a clergy took it upon themselves to salvage the situation. They called on the men of Iraq to defend the country against the invaders, forming their own units, arming them through connections with the security forces and the rich funds they possessed through their foundations. This way the clergy formed a new army that would defend Iraq against the IS (Manaker 2020).

Iran also deployed the IRGC and volunteer forces to Iraq and was sending weapons (Esfandiary and Tabatabai 2017). There were fears that even Baghdad would be reached by the Islamists, but then the IS was fought to a standstill and was slowly pushed back. In June 2014, the volunteer forces that had been mobilized were formalized under the name Al-Hashd ash-Shab'bi, which translates as the Mobilized People but is usually translated as Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (Heras 2017). It is an alliance of many different groups³⁷. While there are Christian, Yazidi and Sunni groups (Al-Bayati and Abed 2022), the PMF is predominantly Shi'a (Heras 2017). While previously the Shi'a camp in Iraq had been split into many different groups and ideologies, with Iranian influence receding for quite some time (Rahimi 2012), the threat of the Islamic State united many competing factions and gave Iran

³⁷ There is no consensus on the exact number of groups the range goes from 40-67 (Rezaei 2019; Heras 2017). It also depends on which point in time one counts, since groups split, merge or dissolve, while others are newly founded and join the alliance.

new influence. Through the PMF pro-Iranian forces would regain their influence once more. The following years the PMF and the Iraqi army together fought against the Islamic state.

Eventually, Shi'a militias from the South and East of Iraq and Kurdish militias from the North together with the Iraqi Army and an international coalition were able to force ISIS ever further back. In December 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister declared victory over the Islamic State in Iraq.

In Syria, the war would continue and the pro-Iran elements of the PMF would deploy forces to Syria to fight alongside Bashar al-Assad against ISIS and other rebel groups (Heras 2017). In Iraq, meanwhile the PMF militias worked on translating their military glory and prowess into political capital. Many leaders got elected to parliament and worked towards integrating their militias into the Iraqi security forces, securing money and jobs from the state apparatus. The corruption resulting from clientelism, favoritism and other malpractices caused widespread unrest among the population leading to protests by the Iraqi population and in turn violence by PMF groups (Al-Aloosy 2022). The Pro-Iranian stance of many PMF groups made them a prime target of protest, and it fueled Iraqi nationalism among the protesters. It shows that repeatedly Iraqi nationalism comes to the fore as a challenge against Iranian proxy groups, something that will be dealt with more extensively later in this chapter.

c) Important Historical phases

Iraqi Civil War 2003-2010. The first important phase to analyze is the role of Iran's proxies during the Iraqi civil war following the US invasion. Iraqi Shi'as had been liberated from the yoke of Saddam, yet at the same time hundreds of thousands of US troops were now standing at Iran's western border. So, analyzing Iranian proxy policy in this period will be insightful to see what Iran's priorities were. The role of Iran's Iraqi proxies during the Iraqi civil war is multilayered. The most important task they fulfilled was infiltrating the Iraqi state (Felter

and Fishman 2008), especially the security services. This had four effects: first the groups were in a position to stop any hostiles from seizing power in the future through coups by the intelligence services, army or police. Second, they gained access to weapons and equipment, which would strengthen their hard power in the coming power struggle. Third, they gained access to the reformed Iraqi states intelligence network enabling them to gather information about their enemies. Last, it legitimized their role: they were no longer just a militia or terrorist organization but rather they were part of the security forces in the form of soldiers, police and intelligence services (Felter and Fishman 2008). This increased their authority among Iraqis and enabled them to work without the interference of the state. This task was achieved relatively easily.

The Americans were recruiting new personnel for the police and armed forces and so many of Iranian proxies were able to infiltrate the security services. Next the groups wanted to take revenge on former Baathists (Sipress 2003) and fight back against Sunni insurgents targeting Shi'a communities. But there arose another issue, the competition for the support of the Iraqi Shi'a community. Other Shi'as leaders such as Moqtada al-Sadr were likewise vying for power and influence in the new Iraq. His movement had great popularity among the poor, and he had a big following of experienced former military men (Taha 2019).

An important episode in this was when the Mahdi army declared a new state in Najaf in 2004. The Mahdi army stood in competition with the Pro-Iranian militias. The Mahdi army had occupied the imam Ali shrine and there was a real threat that US troops would not only enter the holy place, but that it would turn into a battlefield. Many Shiites feared the potential damage, yet SCIRI stayed silent. Rather than opposing the assault of the Americans the organization waited to see if the fighting could rid it of a potential rival. Instead, it was Marja al-Sistani that arrived and negotiated a peaceful settlement of the crisis, preventing bloodshed in the holy shrine. This shows a willingness of Iran's proxies to even risk damage to a holy place to get rid

of the competition. This shows the importance Iran's proxies assigned to defeating their opposition.

The other and most important task for the Iranian proxies was to tie down US forces in Iraq. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had brought the US in a position that it almost encircled Iran. Iranian leaders needed a way to stop the US from using Iraq as a springboard for attacks against or even an invasion into Iran (Takeyh 2008).

After ending up on George W. Bush's Axis of Evil, there could be little doubt that the US administration was hostile to the Iranian regime. Iran therefore had legitimate reasons to fear a US invasion after the US had toppled Saddam's regime³⁸ (Farhi 2005). This of course meant that Iran, which could not hope to conventionally deter the US needed to find a way to dissuade the US from invading the country. The most feasible strategy to achieve this was bogging down US forces in Iraq. If the US were busy fighting an insurgency in Iraq it would not have the resources and manpower to commit to an invasion of Iran. To this end Iran supported the Iraqi insurgency. Iranian proxies and others would hit US and their allied troops to drive up casualties. The US in 2019 estimated that during operations in Iraq from 2003 to 2011, 17% of all troops were killed by Iranian backed militias - over 600 US soldiers (Brennan 2019). Thousands more were wounded, additional attacks targeted the newly reformed Iraqi army and coalition troops. But it was not just the Iranian backed militias, Iran has been accused of supporting Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army, despite the ideological differences. There have even been accusations that Iran had supplied weapons and equipment to Sunni insurgents (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020).

Post-US Iraq. After US combat operations ended and US troops were pulled out of Iraq, the pressure they could exercise on pro-Iranian forces ceased substantially, the remaining

³⁸ There is a historical precedent. In 1941 after the British had toppled the pro-Axis regime in Iraq, they followed this up with an invasion of Iran together with the Soviet Union.

US troops were mostly employed in training Iraqi forces and in small scale anti-terror operations. The Iraqi prime minister at that time Nouri al-Maliki was the secretary-general of the Da'wa party. The US had stabilized Iraq with the help of a coalition of Sunni tribes called the *Sons of Iraq* (Leenders and Giustozzi 2019). This militia, the brainchild of US general Petraeus, had defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Iran had voiced its hostility to the organization.

With the US gone, Maliki embarked on a policy of dissolving the *Sons of Iraq*. They had been promised integration into the Iraqi security forces, but instead were fired, some even arrested or killed (Wilbanks and Karsh 2010). Combined with ever harsher suppressions on Sunnis culminating in hundreds of deaths when security forces squashed protests in 2012/13 Maliki was creating a perfect breeding ground for the Islamic State invasion. Maliki had the backing of Iran during that time (Vatanka 2014). The problem with this is that supporting a prime minister that was creating hostility among Iraq's biggest minority - the Sunnis - does not make sense if Iran was striving for security and a stable market. The US approach with the *Sons of Iraq* had stabilized the country, going back on that obviously would cause new unrest. If Iran was trying to maximize security, it did not make sense. It did however - in theory - cement the rule of a very pro-Iranian faction. By empowering himself and weakening the Sunnis Iraq's prime minister was strengthening the influence of Iran in the country, at least in the short bit. Given that Maliki was the head of the Da'wa party, Iran supported him, even when the Islamic State had already invaded, Iran was either intent on the suppression of Sunnis or was tolerating it to keep its influence in Iraq.

The fight against the Islamic State 2013-2017. When ISIS/IS overran large parts of Syria and Iraq, Iran's Shi'a militias were presented with an opportunity to make a come-back. The main reason for this was the fact that the Iraqi army had failed. Rather than stopping an enemy that was mostly relying on trucks with no air force or heavy artillery, the Iraqi army was overrun. Even worse, equipment for several divisions, alongside gold reserves and fuel was

captured when Mosul and other cities were overrun. With their failure the Iraq Army had vastly strengthened the Islamic State. During these months, the issue of ghost soldiers,³⁹ corruption and incompetence among the Iraqi Armed Forces came to the forefront. All this revealed the fact that the Iraqi army was simply not ready to defend Iraq.

The militias that would coalesce under the name of the PMF would therefore have to take over part of the task. Initially their task was local defense, filling gaps left by an overwhelmed Iraqi army. PMF militias would defend villages and man checkpoints. But they quickly developed into a substantial fighting force. The PMF would get better training, better equipment and become a professional military force. This opened a new opportunity for renewed Iranian influence. Iran had been losing influence in Iraq for quite some time before the invasion (Rahimi 2012). But now Iran was training up the newly formed militias and gaining new loyalties (Knights 2019). But Iranian support would not stop there. Realizing that the corrupt Iraqi security apparatus would not be able or willing to equip the PMF, Iran stepped in and supplied equipment. This went so far that Iran supplied tanks to its proxies or upgraded their Iraqi tanks to Iranian standards (Bellingcat 2015; Knights and Nadimi 2021).

But while Iran's commitment to its proxies in Iraq in terms of material, personal and presumably finances was substantial, Iran went even further and started helping the Iraqi state, supplying SU-25 ground-attack aircraft to Iraq (NY Times 2014). This shows that Iran was not only interested in strengthening its own proxy and its position in Iraq, but that it saw the need to strengthen the Iraqi state. This highlights the importance Iran assigned to this conflict, since the investment by Iran in the conflict was substantial. The fight against ISIS was not just an opportunity to regain influence but it was a grave security threat for Iran. Iran would support not just the Iraqi state, it would also work with the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan

³⁹ Ghost soldiers describes when corrupt by officers' pocket the wages of soldiers that only exist on paper (Brumfield and Basil 2014).

(Chulov 2014). This approach that aimed at creating as much strength as possible against the Islamic state shows a high level of concern but also realism. Iran would work with all that could help defeat the threat.

The fight against the Islamic State was slow and grinding. After the Islamic State had overrun large parts of Iraq in late 2013 and early 2014 it took till the end of 2017 to push the Islamist back and take territorial control of large parts Iraq back from them. Throughout the years of the war the PMF would become a central force in the fight against ISIS, one of its most important member groups being Kata'ib Hezbollah that had been active since 2003. It took a central role in the PMF, and the leader of Kata'ib Hezbollah - Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis - would even become the leader of the PMF and die alongside General Qassem Soleimani in 2020. Unlike Da'wa and the Sadrists, Kata'ib Hezbollah had no direct political wing, rather it was focused on being a fighting force. Kata'ib Hezbollah in later years would show up repeatedly, attacking American installations and murdering protestors. The Fight against ISIS therefore not only shows that Iran was willing to work with a diversity of groups but that it was pursuing a policy to have militarily capable and fiercely loyal leaders in the PMF.

Confrontation with the US under Donald Trump 2018-2019. After Donald Trump had been elected and became President, he promised to end the Iran Nuclear Deal. In 2018 he withdrew from the JCPOA - negotiated by his predecessor Barack Obama. This move and the following sanctions drastically increased tension with the US. Iraq became a field in which those tensions would express themselves violently. In 2019 tensions further rose when the US labeled the IRGC a terrorist organization. In Iraq meanwhile Iranian proxies in Iraq attacked the US embassy, after a US airstrike had hit compounds of Iranian proxies killing several. The US air strikes had been in retaliation for the death of a US contractor in an attack by the same Iranian proxy groups. The US was accusing the IRGC and Qassem Soleimani of being behind both attacks and of planning further attacks. This led to the US leadership making the decision

to assassinate Qassem Soleimani when he arrived in Iraq for a meeting with the commander of the PMF Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. This strike was executed in early 2020 leading to the death of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. A subsequent retaliatory Iranian missile strike against a US base in Iraq followed. Subsequently followed by the accidental downing of a civilian airliner by the Iranian air defense near Tehran.

This episode is very insightful not only due to its impact on Iran and the U, but because it shows a lot about IRGC foreign policy. Qassem Soleimani was waging an undeclared war against the US in Iraq using proxy forces, the most important being Kata'ib Hezbollah. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani had invested a lot of political capital into getting a deal on the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. The moment Trump ended that deal, Rouhani's legacy was destroyed. Rouhani had repeatedly shown his willingness to negotiate (Toi Staff 2019). The ensuing violence ended any hopes for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. The actions of Qassem Soleimani clearly undermined the civil government. This shows the IRGC using their Iraqi proxies to pursue their own foreign policy and undermining the civil government under Rouhani.

d) Capabilities

The proxy groups initially were completely dependent on Iran for their equipment. When fighting alongside the Iranian Armed Forces during the Iran-Iraq war their equipment was purely Iranian. After the fall of Saddam, Iranian groups that joined the state security forces could use the equipment of the newly formed Iraqi military and police, making many of them more independent or even fully independent. But beyond that, Iran kept supporting its proxies and other groups with equipment and training: this was important to counter anti-insurgency strategies of the Americans. A crucial aspect was the Iranian delivery of Explosively Formed

Penetrators (EFP)⁴⁰(Horton 2020). These became important for insurgents since the Americans were using increasingly better armored vehicles. The initial US invasion had been using a lot of High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV, usually called Humvees), which withstood rifle fire but had no effective protection against the Improvised-Explosive-Devices (IEDs), which were used as mines or bombs on the sides of roads against vehicles. Additionally, the various insurgent groups also used various anti-tank rockets of Soviet and Chinese design used in combat, most famously the Soviet-style RPG-7. The US in response adopted more advanced vehicles better protected against IEDs, these vehicles were classed as Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAP). They were better armored, had greater ground clearance and this way allowed crews to survive IED attacks. Iran countered by providing its proxies with the previously mentioned EFPs (Horton 2020), which could even destroy tanks. These devices had been used before, but Iran started to provide industrially produced high-quality ones to its proxies. They proved quite effective at driving up US casualties in Iraq. This shows that Iran was interested in its proxies efficiently killing American soldiers, highlighting this as part of the strategy pursued in Iraq. But it also shows a dependency of Iranian proxies on Iran for the delivery of such weapons.

But the real test of Iranian support for its groups came when ISIS overran the Iraqi army. Iranian support became crucial. Iraq had many volunteers that were willing to fight but lacked military proficiency. Iran had officers from the IRGC and to a lesser degree the Basiji militias that could train and lead these Iraqi militias that were now forming the PMF. Additionally, Iran would also send volunteers and deploy the IRGC to fight alongside the PMF. Additionally, is the Iranian equipment delivered to its Iraqi proxies. While the militias in part have access to funds and resources of the Iraqi state a lot of their equipment still comes from Iran (Knights and Nadimi 2021).

⁴⁰ EFPs are shaped charges explosives that can destroy a vehicle from greater distance.

In addition to the material dependence there was the role played by the IRGC personnel in training and leading the militias into battle, increasing the overall dependency of the PMF on Iran further. All this shows an operational dependency of the pro-Iranian groups among the PMF and previously among Da'wa and Badr Corps. Iran's proxies were dependent on Iran to provide them with weapons meant to be used in the insurgency against the US, which could not easily be gained through infiltration of the Iraqi army. Further is the role played by the IRGC during the fight against the Islamic State, showing another aspect of the dependency on Iran. Summing up these insights I argue that the pro-Iranian groups of Iraq are correctly labeled as Iranian proxies.

e) Ideology and Identity

Iraq is a majority Shi'a state. So, the identity-based explanation of Iranian proxy war in Iraq makes a lot of sense. But it goes beyond that. As mentioned earlier, Iraq is home to some of the holiest places of Shi'a Islam. Protecting these sites is important for the Iranian leadership out of religious sentiment. Iraq was also the center of Shiite theology before the Iranian city of Qom became much more influential, but Iraq remains a center of Shi'a theology. Therefore, there are religious reasons for Iran to get involved in Iraq and to protect not just fellow Shi'as but holy sites and clerical networks. Iraj Masjidi a commander of the IRGC and of the elite Quds forces even talked about protecting the Shrines of Iraq giving this the same importance as protecting Iran's borders (Quds Online 2016). This shows the relevance of the identity-based explanation for the Iraq case study, the safety of the holy sites of Iraq are of tremendous concern for the IRGC and the Iranian leadership. But beyond the question of identity is the question of ideology, that will be dealt with in the next section.

Ideologically, there was a major rift between Iranian and Iraqi Shi'a Islamists. While Khomeini and some of the Iraqi Shiite Marja's agreed on the need to have Islam play a greater

role in state affairs, there was a fundamental difference in opinion between them. While Khomeini favored and would later implement the rule of the clergy, his Iraqi counterparts favored a rule of the ummah – the community of believers or, more simply put, the people (Shanahan 2004). Khomeini was able to take power during the revolution in Iran, while his Iraqi counterparts were killed, exiled or chose the route of quietism⁴¹. Da'wa, SCIRI, and Badr being hosted by Iran naturally fell-in-line and adopted the Iranian state ideology for themselves. Until 2003, nothing changed.

When the groups could return home to Iraq and started to work to capture the new Iraqi state, issues arose. Many exiles hoped to gain power, but SCIRI and Da'wa had spent decades in exile and had lost much of their domestic power-base and now struggled to gain control. While Moqtada al-Sadr gained widespread popular support. The difference between the pro-Iranian groups and their main competition namely Moqtada al-Sadr's Sadrists and Mahdi Army was that the Sadrists were fiercely nationalistic in addition to their Shi'a Islamism (Williams and Bisbee 2016). For any group that had strong feelings of patriotism towards Iraq, becoming a proxy to Iran was understandably unacceptable. The Mahdi Army prided itself on its ideological independence and being an Iraqi organization first, gaining popularity through that (Williams and Bisbee 2016).

Iran's proxies meanwhile struggled to become as popular: their closeness to Iran made them look like foreign agents to many Iraqis. This difference in ideology needs to be highlighted, to show that rather than being happily accepted by the Shiites of Iraq, Iran struggled to gain a foothold. It also shows the "limit of religion" as Ostovar (2018) called it. Iraqi Shi'as were mostly devout believers, but they were also Iraqis, and these two identities were not mutually exclusive but complemented each other. This issue had already risen during the Iran-

⁴¹ Quietism is the term used to describe the mainstream of Shi'a theology for most of its history which was staying out of politics. Most Ayatollahs and Marja's throughout history did not venture into politics (McEoin 1984).

Iraq war when most Shi'a Iraqi soldiers fought in their army rather than defect to the Iranians despite shared religious identity. But it also shows that rather than engage with just any groups Iran engaged with those groups that were ideologically aligned, showing an important point regarding the identity-based explanation.

An aspect that needs to be analyzed when looking at the ideology of Iran's proxies is anti-Sunni sectarianism. Pro-Iranian groups have repeatedly been involved in ethnic cleansing, torturing and murdering Sunnis (Amnesty International 2014). While Iran does not pursue aggressive anti-Sunni policies at home, the question is whether Iran supported its Iraqi proxies in their anti-Sunni hatred and actions or whether they merely accepted them. Given that these policies were implemented on all levels, going from militiamen to the prime minister, the Iranian leadership was aware of them. The Iranian backed *Da'wa* party secretary, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was at the forefront of implementing sectarian policies. Dissolving the Sunni-dominated *Sons of Iraq* and the heavy-handed approach to Sunni unrest and grievances were a driving factor behind the rise of ISIS (Phillips 2014).

The rise of ISIS posed a real threat to Iran. The actions of an Iranian proxy group, albeit one with much independence, ultimately endangered Iran itself. While Iran had many opportunities to influence its proxies it chose not to do so. Over the exact reasons one can only speculate but given that Iran did not implement any such policies at home an educated guess is possible: Iran tolerated it for power reasons, it was nothing that would make it worth risking the relationship with the proxies over. This explanation is aligning with the power-based explanations, Iran simply did not find the lives of Iraqi Sunnis a high enough price to break its relationship with its proxies. While this explanation aligns with a view that sees Iran as maximizing its influence and power, it contradicts explanations that see Iran as maximizing security.

As mentioned, the anti-Sunni policies decreased security for Iran by strengthening Sunni insurgents. Another explanation comes from the Iran cables, here in leaked information the anti-Sunni violence is described as a policy pursued by the IRGC to secure Iraq and break the resistance against the Shi'a dominated Iraqi state. This served the IRGC by making Iraq a firm ally in the Axis of Resistance but went against the ideas of the Foreign Ministry (Hansen and Henningsen 2022). This last explanation would then make a strong case in favor of a factionalism-based explanation. Importantly there is no evidence that Iran pursued an anti-Sunni policy based on anti-Sunni hatred. The explanation that sees the IRGC behind it argues that they wanted a loyal ally in Iraq and not a multi-religious independent Iraq, but the reasoning behind this can be as much power-based as ideology based. Only the undermining of the Foreign Ministry can be asserted with certainty regarding anti-Sunni policies.

f) Geopolitics and Economy

Iraq has mattered to Iran for thousands of years because it sits next to Iran along its most vulnerable border. Most invaders, from Sumer to Alexander the Great, from the Romans to the Arabs, from the British to finally Saddam Hussein, have come from Iran's western border. While Iran was invaded in the East and North by Mongols, Uzbeks, Afghans, and Soviets, it was in the West where the invasions came that brought the great Persian empires of the Achaemenids and Sassanians down. Another aspect of this border is Iran's oil rich province Khuzestan, placed in the South. Saddam's invasion primarily focused here trying to conquer Abadan. The Iraqi oil minister Mohammad Javad Tondguyan was even captured here in 1980 and died in captivity (AP 1990).

During the invasion of Iraq by the IS there was again a threat to Iran's western border (Quds Online 2016). Iran must therefore control its Western border not just to protect itself from invasion, but to protect the vital oil industry without which the country would collapse

economically. Another aspect is strategic depth: to safeguard its heartland Iran needs friendly neighbors and allies to give it more strategic depth (Vakil 2018; Ahmadian and Mohseni 2019). If an enemy of Iran controls Iraq it puts Iranian cities into the reach of enemy airplanes and especially in range of missile attacks, as was evident during the Iran-Iraq war. An additional threat is the ability for an enemy to spy into Iran through signal intelligence, radar from Iraq and by smuggling agents across the long border⁴². Therefore, the power-based explanation seeing Iraq as vital for Iranian security applies.

Regarding Iran's security another issue is minority separatism. Iran suffers from Arab and Kurdish separatism (Elling 2008). The Arabs of Khuzestan had been striving for autonomy and independence since the early 20th century. Supporting the separatists was one of Iraq's pretexts for the war in 1980. In the same year, Arab separatists from Khuzestan even stormed the Iranian embassy in London taking hostages (Amin 1982). Kurdish struggles for autonomy have been ongoing for more than a century. Kurdish separatism, while not as extensive as in Turkey or Iraq, still plagued Iran since the revolution. Iraq has served as a haven for Kurdish groups from Turkey but also Iran (Majidyar 2017b). A hostile neighbor might use the Kurds to apply pressure on Iran, a tactic Iran had used under the Shah when he supported the Kurds against Iraq to create pressure on Iraq (Reisinezhad 2019).

To protect itself against separatism and to prevent these separatists from gaining safe havens in Iraq, Iran needs a friendly and somewhat stable Iraq. Iran therefore has a strong interest in Iraq to maintain calm and order in its Arab and Kurdish provinces. It needs a friendly Iraq that maintains its own political cohesion so it does not end up balkanized, which would threaten Iran. A preliminary analysis therefore shows that geopolitically Iraq is the most

⁴² That this is of major concern is evident by the fact that Iran accused Azerbaijan of helping Israel by giving it operational bases from which Israel conducts espionage and engages in sabotage and assassinations (Iranian Diplomacy editorial 2012). The Azerbaijan-Iran border is much shorter than the Iran-Iraq border highlighting the threat.

important country for Iran, among all those cases studied for this thesis. At first glance this makes the power-based explanation the obvious choice, but other factors that also touch upon this must be considered to get the full picture for this explanation.

As previously mentioned, many of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites are situated in Iraq. This means a steady stream of pilgrims will travel across the border. In fact, one of the first things that happened as soon as Saddam's regime fell was a massive increase in Iranian pilgrims. While there had been problems with pilgrimage during Saddam's time after the fall of his regime a new danger were terrorist attacks. Iran needed to make sure its pilgrims could travel safely and visit the holy sites without being endangered, as the pilgrimage to Iraq was quite perilous (Al-Jazeera 2003). Iran's proxies would help secure the new state and the pilgrimage routes. A smaller factor is the Iranian minority living in Iraq, many of whom had been expelled and were now returning. A destabilized Iraq or one hostile to Iran might see a new expulsion of Iraqis of Iranian descent or a wave of refugees. Both these things could overwhelm the Iranian state. For domestic stability, therefore, Iran needs a stable and friendly Iraq. But the main issue is the safeguarding of Iran against outside threats: both during Saddam's rule and the US occupation Iran was threatened geopolitically from Iraq. Later, the Islamic state threatened to capture Iraq and endangered Iran. This shows that throughout the period under study Iran had a vital interest in getting involved in Iraq purely from a defensive power-based perspective.

Iraq is also important for Iran to expand its power. Iraq formed the missing piece in the Shi'a crescent⁴³ (Çakmak 2015). By controlling Iraq Iran can expand its power through Syria and Lebanon all the way to the Mediterranean Sea (Milburn 2017). It also enables Iran to develop a land-route to bring weapons to Hezbollah. This would enable Iran to deliver heavier equipment than is currently possible via air route, especially heavier missile launchers, air

⁴³ The other two countries Lebanon being dominated by the Shiite Hezbollah and Syria being ruled by the Alawite Shi'a Clan of Assad.

defense systems and potentially even tanks and other heavy equipment, that Hezbollah does not currently possess thereby connecting the Iranian plateau and the Mediterranean Sea. By controlling Iraq through proxies, Iran gains a vital ally, a springboard for further domination in the Middle East and a vital supply route to its Western allies. Iraq also borders Jordan, Saudi-Arabia and Kuwait. The latter two host sizable Shi'a populations causing considerable headaches for both countries (Gulmohamad 2021; Seliktar 2020). Iran's engagement in Iraq makes a good case for an Iran that wants to expand its power via proxies.

Economically, Iraq is likewise important for Iran, resulting in an insightful case for the economic dimension of the power-based explanation. The previously mentioned land bridge to the Mediterranean makes Iran less dependent on the Persian Gulf for shipping since it represents a potential route for gas and oil pipelines directed at the European market (Shana 2013). Saddam's attacks on Iranian shipping during the Iran-Iraq war had decisively shown the vulnerability of this route – a problem that would increase massively in a potential conflict with Saudi-Arabia or the US. The US invasion also opened opportunities and Iraq became an important market for Iranian products (Yee and Rubin 2023). This aspect is important because, while Iran's economy remains dependent on the oil industry for income, Iran has a large population of well-educated unemployed young people. It therefore needs to develop its industry and service sector, and to develop markets for its products. Iraq represented a unique economic opportunity for Iran because of its proximity. Trade grew and Iranian investment in the billions would become an important factor in Iraq.

The Iranian economic dominance in the Iraqi market led to widespread protests since many Iraqis saw Iran as flooding the market with cheap products. Even agricultural products, from which Iraq should for the most part be independent due to its own strong agricultural sector, were imported from Iran. This went so far that previously imposed bans against Iranian agricultural products were repelled by pro-Iranian political forces (Tarzi 2019). Iraq became

even more critical for Iran when during President Trump's "Maximum Pressure" strategy sanctions were tightened. Iraq became an essential market for Iraqi products and a steady source of hard currency income (Risen 2019). Another crucial factor is that both countries are major exporters of oil. They both work in the same region, this enables them to cooperate to exploit gas and oil fields in border regions, pool technology and skills and align their policies more. Iranian proxies in high places in Iraq enable Iran even to unilaterally exploit these fields (Sarhan 2019), something that has caused considerable unrest in Iraq. Both countries are also members of OPEC, while both countries are not members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This gives Iran an ally when negotiating oil production quotas in the OPEC against the countries of the GCC that are more hostile to Iranian interests (Pradhan 2011).

While the Iraqi market is important for Iran to develop its economy and create jobs for its citizens, it is the land-route that really enables Iran's economy to branch out: to Syria and Lebanon and in the long-run to Europe. Overall, the economic importance of Iraq is a result of the geopolitical importance. Iraq is Iran's neighbor and Iraq can therefore open or block Iran's Western border economically and politically. Proxies in this context play an important role.

By infiltrating the Iraqi state, the proxies enable Iran to gain contracts for its companies (Rashid 2021). This should have become especially relevant in the reconstruction after the war against ISIS. The war had seen far more destruction than previous wars, Mosul for example was 65% destroyed (Zaza et al. 2020). Yet while there is potential Iran does not seem to be massively involved in reconstruction efforts (Alfoneh 2018). Overall, trade has grown with Iraq and is crucial for Iran with almost nine billion dollars' worth of Iranian exports going to Iraq in 2018 (tradingeconomics 2023) making it one of Iran's biggest export markets (Tasnim 2021). But it is important to note that Iran does not dominate the Iraqi market with countries like China and Turkey having greater market shares (Alfoneh 2018). Iranian proxies can help protect Iranian trade going through Iraq and potential pipelines and other Iranian investments from

sabotage and attack and – in theory – can also serve to stabilize Iraq politically and militarily; enabling the Iraqi economy to grow again and netting Iranian investments profits. To summarize, economically and politically Iraq is of vital importance to Iran. Whether one applies a defensive or offensive logic it makes sense for Iran to be involved in Iraq, the same holds true for the economic perspective.

g) IRGC and Foreign Ministry

Initially Iran and Iraq did not have relations; even after the war in 1988 there was no normalization of relations between both countries. This aspect would change with the US invasion of Iraq. The engagement of the Foreign Ministry of Iran and of the IRGC initially was split. While the IRGC was working with the proxy groups, the Foreign Ministry was engaging the official state institutions of Iraq. By supplying proxy groups in Iraq with weapons to kill American soldiers, the IRGC was improving the security of Iran by tying down US forces, but it was also antagonizing the US. Leaked information in the Iran Cables shows that after the fight against the Islamic State began there was tension between the Foreign Ministry and the IRGC regarding Iraq policy. According to Hansen and Henningsen (2022) the split had several aspects: IRGC support for sectarian groups and policies that oppressed Sunnis, what the role of Iraq in the wider Middle East should be and how confrontational Iran should be. The support for sectarian groups is relevant, since it can be assumed this was already an issue before during the Iraqi Civil War.

The IRGC has repeatedly worked with groups that engage in excessive violence against Sunni and while Iran does not engage in such policies at home, the IRGC looked upon the oppression of Sunnis favorably, according to the leaks. One leak puts blame on Qasem Soleimani himself for not restraining the militias and their violence (Hussain 2020). The IRGC wanted to create a Shi'a dominated state loyal to Iran, they feared a more inclusive state would

strengthen Iraqi nationalism and thereby make Iraq an independent actor rather than a close ally of Iran. The Foreign Ministry meanwhile wanted an inclusive Iraq and national reconciliation, so that the Sunnis would stop joining and supporting groups like Al-Qaeda and IS (Hansen and Henningsen 2022). Consequently, there was a competing vision regarding how Iraq should position itself in the Middle East, a proxy state of Iran or an independent actor with good relations with Iran? A related point of contention was that the Foreign Ministry hoped to use Iraq for mediation with Saudi-Arabia. The intensive buildup of proxies by the IRGC was undermining these policies.

Another sector where the IRGC undermined the Foreign Ministry was the confrontation with the US after Trump became president. Repeatedly Iranian proxies in Iraq attacked US installations killing US personnel. This confrontation massively increased tensions at a time when the Foreign Ministry under President Rouhani was still trying to salvage the deal they had negotiated. These increased tensions made any reconciliation with the US impossible, ultimately leading to the death of Qassem Soleimani in early 2020.

All together, these aspects show that the IRGC was pursuing its own Foreign Policy in Iraq, via its proxies. The confrontation with the Foreign Ministry that was trying to resolve these conflicts clearly makes this point. Therefore, Factionalism can be described as a factor in Iranian proxy warfare in Iraq. Overall, the IRGC won the power struggle over the Iraq policies, even supplementing the Foreign Ministry to some extent. For example, from 2017 on, the Ambassador for Iraq was Iraj Masjedi, who had previously served in the Quds Forces working with groups like the Badr Corps during the Iran-Iraq war. This demonstrates that rather than competing with the institutions of the Foreign Ministry the IRGC was usurping them (Majidyar 2017c).

Another question about the IRGC deals with its economic interests. Is the IRGC pursuing its own economic goals in Iraq at least partially through proxies? The IRGC is present in Iraq mainly through its biggest construction company Khatam Al-Anbia. The company has invested many billions of tomans in Iraq (The Times of Israel editorial 2016). Khatam Al-Anbia also tried to set up a joint bank for Syria, Iraq and Iran facilitating business between the three countries (IRNA 2018). Additionally, the head of the company even announced projects in Iraq, Syria and Venezuela (DEFA Press 2022). So, the IRGC has its own economic interests in Iraq that proxies can help pursue and secure. There were even accusations that the IRGC was using Iraq to launder money and bypass US sanctions to finance Quds forces and other IRGC operations (Iran International Newsroom 2023). These aspects all show that the factionalism explanation has its merits in the Iraqi case study.

h) Conclusion

This overview of Iran's oldest proxies showcases the complexity of Iranian proxy warfare. Iraq is politically and economically important for Iran since it represents Iran's vulnerable western flank and a lucrative trading partner. But beyond that, Iraq is a major Shi'a state and home to some of Shiisms holiest sites. Additionally, there is the huge role played by the IRGC in handling Iran's Iraqi proxies, which makes this case study relevant for all three main hypotheses.

Identity-based explanation. In Iraq, Iran was able to fight the Great Satan - the US through its proxies. But beyond that Iraq enabled Iran to bring its ideology to the largest Shi'a majority state of the Arab world. Iranian proxies, which had embraced Khomeinism, walked the halls of power in Baghdad. In Iraq Iran built deep ties with groups that fully embraced the ideology of Khomeinism, the Axis of Resistance and that even helped Iran fight in Syria. That Iran's proxies in Iraq are all Shi'as shows the big role played by religion in this relationship.

Iran actively embraced the Shiite opposition to Saddam and had them fight alongside the Iranian army for eight years. They were also allowed to return to Iran to fight Saddam during uprisings. But for the most part, after the war was over 1988, Iran tried to avoid confrontation with Iraq. The military and geopolitical reality just meant that Iran could not hope to topple Saddam's regime. So, while Iran supported fellow Shi'as this support did not reach suicidal levels and remained on the level of proxy support. After the fall of Saddam Iran got much more involved on the ground, even deploying large amounts of troops in the fight against the Islamic State from 2014 onwards. The Iraqi case study fulfills all hypotheses from the identity-based explanation. It is also important to note that Iran engaged with groups that committed many atrocities while politically stoking the flames of sectarian hatred. While Iran is not openly anti-Sunni or sectarian it nonetheless worked with groups and embraced groups that openly were. Iran also struggled with ideological competition; its proxies had to compete in Iraq's political arena with other Shi'a Islamists. These did not embrace Iran and rather added Iraqi nationalism to their ideology mix, something many Iraqi Shiites found appealing. Showcasing the importance of Shi'a identity and the ideology of Khomeinism for Iranian proxies but also the problems this causes.

Power-based explanation. The power-based explanation is of equal importance. Iraq borders Iran at its most vulnerable border. That Iran would get involved in Iraq after the US invasion was obvious since Iraq is vital for Iran's security but also its strategic interests. Getting involved in Iraq enabled Iran not only to increase its security though but expand its power overall in the Middle East. While its proxies helped tie down US forces, they also gained power in the country, thereby greatly expanding Iranian influence in the Middle East and bringing Iraq closer to the Iranian camp. Iranian influence also netted Iran an important export market right across its border. But there are contradictions to this explanation. The Da'wa party estranged Sunnis from the Iraqi state, weakening it in the process, and Iran's proxies increased the

violence in Iraq. This would finally result in the rise of the Islamic State, which would see a threat to Iran's border arise and cause a massive war in Iraq costing Iran money, material and blood. It is therefore debatable whether Iran's involvement increased security. Working with groups that were so openly sectarian, would inevitably lead to conflict and tensions, endangering the Iraqi market and eventually Iran itself. This is casting doubt on a defensive power-based explanation. From an offensive power-based explanation it can make sense to use those groups most passionately committed to Iran to expand Iran's influence and cementing its control over Iraq. But Iran also showed a willingness to work with a variety of other groups, supporting the Mahdi Army at times to tie down US and coalition forces and working with the Iraqi state and thereby weaken its enemies. Iran was also able to gain a land-route to Syria and Lebanon and build its Shi'a Crescent as some call it. Iran has invested a lot in its proxies, going as far as to send tanks to supply its proxies' firepower and deploy troops alongside them. These relations are also based on overlapping interests. The proxies want to have as much political power as possible to harvest the economic and financial benefits, while Iran wants a reliable partner in Iraq.

Factionalism. The problem with factionalism in this case study is that many things remain vague. What can be assessed is that the IRGC were regularly active in helping its proxies kill American soldiers. The US struggled with proving direct Iranian involvement, but Iranian weapons in the hands of Iranian proxies used to kill US soldiers show at least a willingness on the side of the IRGC to increase tensions with the US. But especially during the civil war in Iraq I would argue that the IRGC was trying to tie down US forces and thereby increase security of Iran. So, while its actions might have undermined the Foreign Ministry this was not the intended goal. Later-on attacks on US compounds created tensions with the US, ultimately leading even to the death of General Major Qassem Soleimani. On these occasions, the IRGC

was clearly willing to undermine the official foreign policy, but more on a broader scale. It was not so much about Iraq but rather about an overall confrontation with the US.

The Iranian engagement with Iraq meanwhile showed a clear split: The Foreign Ministry would engage with official institutions and the IRGC with its proxies. But there was always a dominance of the IRGC also in the official realm that grew stronger over time: Ambassadors coming from the IRGC and IRGC personnel engaging with state functionaries of the Iraqi state. Rather than competing, the IRGC in Iraq has supplemented the Foreign Ministry. Economically the Pasdaran have gained substantial influence in Iraq and their proxies have gained them an economic benefit.

Overall Iranian proxy warfare in Iraq shows the importance of a mixed explanation. Iraq is too important to Iran, and it was inevitable that Iran would get involved. While there is some weakness with defensive power-based explanations Iran has clear economic interests and Iran greatly increased its influence in the Middle East through its engagement. But the way Iran engaged in Iran shows the role of ideology and identity. Because Iran for the most part engaged with groups that, while ideologically loyal to Iran, decreased Iranian security through their attacks on Sunnis and the sectarian policies they pursued. Iran clearly wanted ideologically loyal proxies in Iran and was willing to accept their brutality and sectarianism. Regarding factionalism there is a development where the IRGC pursued their own interests on all levels but gradually rather than competing they took over Iran's policies regarding Iraq. If there was competition between the Foreign Ministry and IRGC it was decided firmly in favor of the latter.

The following tables sum up empirical findings:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	By supporting its proxies in Iraq Iran was able to fight the US and make sure an anti-Iranian regime would not return to power. It also enabled Iran to have its ideologically committed proxies gain influence in Iraq, spreading the ideology of the Islamic revolution. Hypothesis fulfilled.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	Iran's proxies in Iraq are ideologically deeply aligned and they integrate themselves into the Axis of Resistance, but there were difficulties. Some groups broke with Iran because they felt more commitment to Iraq, likewise Iran was not able to gain some influential groups as proxies. Hypothesis mostly fulfilled.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.	Iran's proxies are all Shi'as. Hypothesis fulfilled.
Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	Iran helped its proxies, although it did not try to topple Saddam's regime, after having failed so in the Iran-Iraq war. Partially fulfilled.

Table 10 Identity Findings Iraq

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	Iraq is extremely important for Iran geopolitically through its long border and being historically part of its sphere of influence. Hypothesis fulfilled.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	Economically Iraq is important for Iran and by gaining influence Iran gained an important trade partner and a potential land route to the Mediterranean. Hypothesis fulfilled.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	By supporting its proxies Iraq tied down US troops preventing any US invasion of Iran. Iran also secured control over its Western border. But by supporting groups with sectarian agency, it created instability that threatened Iran. Partially fulfilled.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	This hypothesis is fulfilled, the proxy war expands and entrenches Iranian influence.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	This hypothesis is fulfilled, Iran will even work with non-proxy groups to attack its enemies. Iran even worked with the Iraqi state against ISIS. But Iran mostly focuses its support on those groups committed to Iran.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	Both Iran and its proxies have overlapping interests in dominating Iraq. Hypothesis fulfilled.

Table 11 Power Findings Iraq

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.	The IRGC increased tensions with the US, after the invasion to tie down US forces. Later during the Trump presidency, the IRGC pursued its own foreign policy regarding the US mainly by using Iraqi proxies.
The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.	While the Foreign Ministry engages with the official Iraqi state, the IRGC engage with the proxies, but the IRGC also engage with official institutions, since these are often controlled by Iranian proxies. Partially fulfilled hypothesis.
Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.	The IRGC has developed substantial economic interests in Iraq, which it can secure also through its proxies. Fulfilled hypothesis.

Table 12 Factionalism Findings Iraq

V. Afghanistan

1. Taliban

a) Introduction

The Taliban are not usually considered a proxy for Iran. The two sides have a complex relationship that has changed from hostility to cooperation, leading to debate whether the Taliban could develop into an Iranian proxy (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020). It's important to analyze the relationship between Taliban and Afghanistan in the context of Iran-Afghan relations. While Afghanistan and Iran share a long border and a common history – Herat being part of the Iranian state till the 19th century (Amanat 2003). Iran faced hostile governments in Afghanistan from 1979 onwards – first the communist state, followed by the Taliban till 2001, when the Taliban were ousted by the US with the aid of the Iranian government (Barzegar 2014). But then the US turned against Iran, leading to a situation where after 2003 Iran found itself encircled with US troop presence on all sides. It is during this time that relations between the Taliban and Iran improved. Iran even started delivering weapons to the Taliban (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020), especially EFPs that were effective in driving up NATO casualties (Gohel 2010). Yet the question about the Anti-Shi'a policies of the Taliban remains, thus the question is why Iran engaged with the Taliban, and how this contradicts some of the thesis hypotheses will be insightful. A further question it is if the Taliban were at any point a proxy of Iran during the timeframe under analysis in this thesis.

b) Historical background

Afghanistan and Iran have a deeply intertwined history. Afghanistan was part of Iranian empires and it is both seen as part of Greater Ariana, the area dominated by Persian culture (Barzegar 2014), and the Land of Iran – Iran Zamin (Vatanka 2017), so there is a deep sense of

having a right to be involved on the Iranian part. But Afghanistan was also always a backwater of the Iranian realms.

In the 18th century it was Afghanistan that sealed the end of the Safavid empire when an Afghan invasion led to the downfall of the Safavid monarchy. During the reign of the Durrani empire, part of Iran even was ruled from Afghanistan. Iran had lost control of most of Afghanistan by the 19th century, but Iranian rulers tried to maintain control over Herat (Amanat 2003). But eventually Herat would fall to Afghanistan and the modern borders were established in the 19th century. There were occasional border clashes (Emadi 1995), but both states for the most part co-existed peacefully.

Both states were party to the Saadabad Pact between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan (Kuzmin and Açıkan 2018). While there were some border clashes in the 1950s and 1960s the big change happened in Afghanistan when Daoud Khan, cousin of the King, - staged a coup and abolished the monarchy. Mohammed Reza Shah allegedly considered helping reinstate king Zahir Shah, but finally decided against it (Vatanka 2017).

Under Daoud Khan a modernization program was implemented. But his reign would end in 1978 when a communist coup removed him from power. The new communist rulers of Afghanistan implemented a radical program of reform. Their policies, which saw large social policies targeting the inequality in the country and challenge the traditional elites and especially the religious authorities caused resentment leading to several revolts culminating in a large-scale insurgency. The governments red terror saw thousands killed and antagonized large parts of the country against the government. Seeing that the government of Hafizullah Amin was worsening the situation through its policies and that he might switch into the American camp, the Soviet Union staged a coup. At first the KGB tried to poison Amin, but due to his consumption of Coca Cola the poison became ineffectual (Zhou 2012). Then on December 27, 1979, Soviet Spetsnaz units dressed up as Afghan soldiers stormed the presidential palace and

after a short siege killed Amin, his followers and most of his family. A Soviet intervention in the country followed to quell the uprisings and secure Afghanistan as a Soviet ally or puppet state (Baker 2019). The insurgency against the communist rulers and the Soviets saw support from all over the Islamic world, but also by the USA (Rauta 2021) and China (Hilali 2001) which both hoped to weaken the Soviets.

Iran meanwhile was training and supporting Shi'a mujaheddin⁴⁴ (Tarock 1999), while Pakistan was training the Mujaheddin that were leaning towards Sunni Islamism, especially of the Deobandi and Wahhabi brand (Mahendrarajah 2014). The Soviets would leave in 1989, after suffering many casualties and failing to pacify the country, but the war in Afghanistan would continue. The communist government would continue fighting, till its eventual breakdown in 1992 (Rashid 2010). The mujaheddin meanwhile were not one coherent force with one ideology but rather many different groups split along ethnic, religious and ideological lines: there were monarchists, Maoists, but for the most part they were religiously conservative and fighting for their ethnic group and their own power (Rashid 2010). Iran supported the Shi'as, primarily the Hazaras but also had good ties to Tajik groups even though they were mostly Sunnis (Milani 2006; Fulton and Alfonch 2012).

The civil war saw large scale destruction and massacres, chaos and a complete breakdown of order, out of which the Taliban emerged (Rashid 2010). Their official founding narrative is that bandits or a local warlord abducted two girls and raped them, their parents asking for help at a nearby madrassa and a group of religious students (Taliban), although weakly armed, freed the girls. Then they killed the bandits or in another version hanged the warlord from the barrel of a tank and then took it upon themselves to free the country from banditry, the rule of the warlords and to bring peace and Sharia rule (Rashid 2010; Mahendrarajah 2015; Ibrahimi 2017b).

⁴⁴ The term mujaheddin, meaning those who engage in jihad, was applied to the anti-Soviet insurgents in Afghanistan.

Another explanation is that a coalition of Mullahs with support from Pashtun nobility formed the group to finally get peace, but also to restore Pashtun dominance in Afghanistan and bring Islamic rule (Mahendrarajah 2015; Ibrahimi 2017b). Either way the group was founded in 1994 and almost immediately it got support from the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Khushnam 2020). In 1994 they captured Kandahar and the surrounding area, in 1995 they had taken Herat and all of southern Afghanistan. In spring 1996 Mullah Omar declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) (Ibrahimi 2017b), donning the supposed cloak of the Prophet Muhammad (Rashid 2010). That year also saw the fall of Kabul. Their enemies, most famous among them Ahmad Shah Massoud – a Tajik mujaheddin commander – retreated north. The civil war that had been raging since 1992 entered its last stage in 1996: The Taliban were opposed by the Northern Alliance – officially called the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (Vatanka 2021) – with support from Tajikistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, India, Russia and others (Rashid 2010).

The Taliban meanwhile were allied with Al-Qaeda (Ibrahimi 2017b), got support from Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia and Islamist foundations around the world (Rashid 2010). Gradually the Taliban took over the country. But after 9/11 the US invasion saw their armies destroyed and the rule toppled. The NATO intervention saw the establishment of a new democratic Afghan state. The International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn brought together local powerbrokers and neighboring states of Afghanistan (Carter 2010). The Taliban fled across the border into Pakistan, hiding in the Federally-Administered-Tribal-Areas (FATA), or simply merging back with the civilian population. In the following years, the Taliban prepared to return. They started building networks and began an insurgency against the Western forces, the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan police. Over the years the Taliban became stronger again. Building up parallel structures of governance and judiciary (Murtazashvili 2022). The Taliban also became more proficient at insurgent tactics.

They also got more competition: in 2015 the Islamic state of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) was founded (Abdi 2021). This local offshoot of the Islamic State was formed by disaffected Taliban, but they also saw recruits flock in from all over Central and South Asia. The group emphasized a more radical Islamist vision than the Taliban and fought not only the West but also the Taliban. Their agenda was highly sectarian and anti-Shi'a (Lushenko, Auken, and Stebbins 2019). The group was pushed back and decimated by NATO and Taliban offensives. The latter meanwhile expanded its control and influence. By the end of 2019, the Taliban were on the offensive, while the US was negotiating a deal with the Taliban for an orderly withdraw in Doha in Qatar (Karataş 2021).

c) Phases of Historical significance

The Civil War 1994-2001. From 1979, Afghanistan had been at war, with the downfall of the communist state of Afghanistan in 1992 the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA) was declared (Ibrahimi 2017b). But the new government could not gain control over the country because different warlords were fighting for land, control of the drug trade, ethnic hegemony and different ideological goals. But for the most part it was a Hobbesian war of all against all for power, that saw many warlords big and small fight each other in ever-shifting alliances, while the country and the people suffered. In this in 1994 the Taliban arose. In a blitzkrieg campaign, they had conquered most of the country by 1996. They then assembled part of the Afghan Sunni ulema - mostly Pashtuns from the South and East of the country attended - and declared the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Their leader Mullah Omar was declared Emir. The IEA would be ruled by Sharia with no space for democratic or traditional forms of rule, such as a meeting of the tribal elders – Loya Jirga – or a parliament. Their rule was brutal, women's rights were abolished, including the right to work and education (Ibrahimi 2017b). Leading to a collapse of the education and healthcare system, which was mostly staffed by females. Several massacres of different minorities followed, especially the Shi'a Hazaras were

targeted (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020; Milani 2006). In addition, the Taliban engaged in sexual slavery abducting Tajik and Hazara women during their military campaigns and keeping them as concubines or selling them to brothels in Pakistan (Mahendrarajah 2015; Rashid 2010). Television, Music, Kites, Pigeon breeding and many other activities were banned. Public executions were the norm, as well as corporal punishment and amputations.

Yet the Taliban failed to conquer all the country. In the Northeast, an alliance of warlords - the so-called Northern Alliance - under the leadership of the Tajik warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud was holding out. Support came from India, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran. Qassem Soleimani himself traveled to the North Alliance headquarter meeting with the leadership and assured them of Iranian support (Azizi 2020). Iran was helping with money and weapons, also because the Taliban were persecuting Shi'as, and their brutality caused more refugees to flee to Iran.

In 1998 when they conquered Mazar-I Sharif they even stormed the Iranian consulate and killed several Iranian diplomats and one journalist. In response Iran mobilized: 250.000 Iranian soldiers and revolutionary guards were being prepared to invade Afghanistan and end the Taliban. Cooler heads prevailed and after some negotiations Iran withdrew its forces and the Taliban released several Iranian hostages (Milani 2006). In 2001 Al-Qaeda an ally of the Taliban assassinated the leader of the Northern Alliance Shah Massoud, when Al-Qaeda terrorists, posing as journalists interviewing Massoud, detonated a bomb (Rashid 2010). The attack was supposed to make US retaliation more complicated since it would weaken the Northern Alliance – a plan that failed. During this time there was no proxy relationship between Iran and the Taliban, on the contrary through its support of the Northern Alliance Iran was waging a proxy war against the Taliban, who in turn were supported by Saudi-Arabia and Pakistan – leading observers to call this a proxy war of Iran, Pakistan (Vatanka 2012) and Saudi-Arabia (Tarock 1999).

However, this period is insightful because it shows Iranian grand strategy goals in Afghanistan. Iran wanted to protect its Shi'a brethren, but also to have a plural and friendly Afghanistan (Barzegar 2014; Vatanka 2017; Verma 2021). Iran wanted a government that is inclusive and that would enable Iranian trade to reach central Asia and China through Afghanistan (Verma 2021).

The US invasion and Iran's aid 2001. While Iran was supporting the Northern Alliance, help came from an unexpected actor, the US. The Taliban had been hosting Osama bin Laden and his group Al-Qaeda who in turn was supporting the IAE with financial funds and his brigade 055 of several thousand international fighters who were fighting alongside the Taliban against their enemies (Maloney 2015). Yet unlike the reactionary Taliban Osama bin Laden had far reaching plans. On September 11, 2001, he attacked the United States. In October 2001 in response the US began a war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda – the Global War on Terror.

The US bolstered the Northern Alliance with special forces, intelligence agents, cash and more importantly the firepower of the US air force. But the US was not operating alone, Iran was helping. Qassem Soleimani met US representatives and handed them information on Taliban positions (Azizi 2020). The US gained permission to use Iranian air space to evacuate downed pilots and Iran staged an anti-Taliban uprising in Herat. By December 2001, the Taliban had lost thousands of fighters and were routed across the country. Iran had helped the “Great Satan” to defeat the Taliban. This shows the hostility of Iran against the Taliban at that time, given that Iran was willing to help the US defeat them.

Iran's soft power approach 2002-2007. Following the war, Iran became engaged in Afghanistan on a large scale. At the Bonn conference a central wish of Iran became reality, Afghanistan would become a country in which the different minorities would have representation (Carter 2010). This was especially important regarding the Hazaras and Tajik

clients of Iran. Iran could be happy with the results, if not for the fact that now there was a massive US troop presence on its eastern border and George Bush had just labeled Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil” (Carter 2010).

Regardless of that, Iran engaged in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2007 using its soft power (Kousary and Hansen 2022). Iran invested especially in the Western provinces around Herat and in the Persian-speaking population (Milani 2006), building mosques, schools, and investing in roads and other infrastructure. The goal was to increase Iranian trade and open up routes for Iran to Central Asia and China (Verma 2021). The Iranian strategy at this time seemed to have been to maintain the Afghan state, strengthen it and to entrench Iranian influence there. This strategy was helping Iran achieve its goals much more efficiently than any engagement in proxy conflicts.

The Rise of ISIS and escalating tensions with the US (2015-2019). While the Islamic state is mostly known for its spread in Syria and Iraq, hence the often-used acronym ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – groups sprang up across the globe proclaiming themselves local representatives of the organization and swearing fealty to the caliph. One of the most enduring groups is the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). This group arose in 2015, when Taliban members that were for different reasons unhappy with the current leadership split off and formed ISIS-K. A substantial number of ISIS-K members came from the Pakistani Taliban, but also Uzbek and other Central Asians, as well as volunteers from South Asia including India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. ISIS-K pursued an aggressive strategy to gain territorial control over Eastern Afghanistan, especially trying to encircle the strategically important city of Jalalabad (Lushenko, Auken, and Stebbins 2019). ISIS-K pursued a radical revolutionary Islamist agenda, which was explicitly anti-Shi’a. ISIS-K is credited with many suicide and car bomb attacks on Afghan Shi’as, especially the Hazaras.

ISIS-K not only waged war against the Afghan state and NATO, but also engaged the Taliban in battles (Lushenko, Auken, and Stebbins 2019). Trying to force the Taliban out of regions to expand its territorial control. This led to unofficial alliances between NATO, ANA and the Taliban when operating against ISIS-K. The Taliban launched many offensives to oust ISIS-K. The Taliban also ramped up their outreach to Shi'as and other ethnic minorities in Afghanistan to convey the message that they have changed and that they are leaving their sectarian and chauvinistic policies behind. This helped the Taliban gain greater credibility. But it also is part of the explanation why Iran found the group more acceptable (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020). The Taliban were an alternative to the US-aligned Afghan state and ISIS-K.

Another aspect during this period to consider, it is the increased tensions between the US and Iran. The US made Afghanistan agree to a comprehensive security treaty that would continue US military presence and activity in the country – the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America. Iran was fundamentally opposed to this treaty and demanded a similar treaty to assure that Afghanistan would not tolerate attacks on Iran from its territory. While there were verbal affirmations of such a nature by Afghan leaders no treaty came to be under US pressure (Vatanka 2017). With the election of President Donald Trump as 45th US president the situation further escalated. He cancelled the JCPOA agreement of his predecessor and pursued the so-called maximum pressure strategy (Tabatabai 2019). The increased sanctions and increased military threats, as well as constant airspace violations through US drones further increased Iranian anxiety about its Eastern border (Shane and Sanger 2011). With US presence in both East, West and South Iran found itself increasingly encircled.

To get the US and by extension NATO out of Afghanistan supporting the Taliban made sense. Iran delivered weapons to the Taliban, especially EFPs, but also ammunition, provided safety for Taliban leaders and helped financially (Soufan Center 2019). In Farah province in

2016, Iranian commandos allegedly even took part in operations alongside the Taliban (Verma 2021). This support for the Taliban can be explained by the desire of Iran to increase its security by ousting the hatred US from its borders, and to create pressure on Afghanistan to align itself more with Iranian policy goals.

At the same time was Iran engaging with the Afghan state through official channels and investments. Iran was working with both sides. This enables Iran to not be on the winning side in any post-NATO presence Afghanistan, but it also means Iran builds relations with the Taliban. Should they return to power then Iran wants them to not follow the same path they did in the past. Rather than having a Pakistani and Saudi proxy pursuing sectarian policies and, Iran wants a stable partner to trade with, cooperate with on drug policy and an Afghanistan that does not flood Iran with refugees. The Taliban while not Iran's favorite is better than ISIS-K which Iran sees as a big threat; the Taliban also push back against US presence in the country. Lastly have the Taliban promised to respect Shi'as and ethnic minorities. Therefore, supporting the Taliban made sense from a power-based perspective that wants to secure Iran against ISIS and the US, but without contradicting Iranian responsibility to protect fellow Shi'as, since the Taliban were promising to not persecute minorities like in the 1990s.

d) Capabilities

The Taliban have had different capabilities at different times. During the civil war phase from 1994-2001 the Taliban operated as a conventional armed force, using mostly infantry equipped with variety of rifles, RPGs, mortars and relying mostly on technicals⁴⁵ and trucks for mobility. But beyond that there were captured tanks, IFVs, APCs and artillery. In addition, the Taliban captured several helicopters and planes (Rashid 2010). Most of the heavy equipment was captured from warlords who in turn had captured it from the communist army of

⁴⁵ The official term is non-standard tactical vehicle (NSTV), these are civilian vehicles often Toyota pickups that have been modified into a light fighting vehicle.

Afghanistan, while ammunition and smaller arms were acquired from Pakistan or the international arms market. All the heavy equipment was lost and thousands of Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters died when the US invasion began in October 2001. Retreating across the border and becoming an insurgency, the Taliban maintained mostly their small arms and explosives. The weapons they would wage their war with over the next few years. During their insurgency phase the Taliban relied on small arms, mortars, rockets and explosives. Of great importance to the Taliban were EFPs that could be used against vehicles of Western Forces, especially HMMWVs used by the Americans, but also the various vehicles used by the allied British, French and German Forces as well as ANA vehicles, this caused NATO to introduce MRAPs to protect its troops.

Iran has been accused of giving EFPs to the Taliban in an effort to weaken the US in Afghanistan and to hasten its departure. Another important weapon for the Taliban were vehicle-born-improvised-explosive-devices (VBIEDs) – car bombs. While car bombs are used for conventional terror attacks, ISIS has developed a new variant, where either armored vehicle are used, or vehicles are up armored, making VBIEDs much more deadly on the battlefield. These VBIEDs were used with great efficiency against ANA and Afghan Police outposts, leading to many casualties. But the Taliban are not only a military force, in addition to their war-fighting capabilities, the Taliban offer services to the population under their control: mainly Sharia justice and order. The Taliban claim to be incorruptible servants of Islamic law. They impose Sharia law, and their judges offer a parallel justice system to the one by the Afghan state. The latter is suffering due to corruption, staff shortages and ethnic favoritism. The Taliban are also trying to gain favor by fighting against banditry, abductions and extortion - all prevalent problems in Afghanistan (Mahendrarajah 2014).

e) Ideology and identity

The Taliban are for the most part Sunni Pashtuns. While Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and have traditionally held power through the monarchy, they only comprise 42-53% of the Afghan population, with some writers estimating their numbers to be as low as 30% (Qazi 2011). The Pashtuns speak Pashto, which is the second language in Afghanistan next to Dari, the local Farsi dialect (Verma 2021). Which most Afghans speak aside from the Pashtuns and the Uzbeks. Ideologically the Taliban have two pillars: Islamism and Pashtun chauvinism (Ibrahimi 2017b; Mahendrarajah 2015). The Islamism of the Taliban is a peculiar case.

The Taliban's Islamism is inspired by the Deobandi movement found in the Indian subcontinent and especially Pakistan, where the ideology has grown massively in the last few decades (Basit 2013). The other inspiration is Saudi Wahhabism (Mahendrarajah 2014). After the Siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, a new agreement was reached between the Saudi monarchy and the Wahhabi ulema, that saw a massive state-funded campaign to spread Wahhabi Islam to the world (Trofimov 2008). While missionaries were sent to non-Islamic countries the main thrust of the effort was to spread this Saudi version of Islam across the Islamic world – a prime target being Pakistan, where dictator Zia ul-Haq was pursuing an Islamization policy⁴⁶ (Mahendrarajah 2014). The Soviet war in Afghanistan was a bloody affair, which saw streams of refugees fleeing across the border into neighboring Afghanistan.

Saudi funded madrassas would offer shelter, food, education and indoctrination to many Afghan orphans and sons of poor families (Mahendrarajah 2014), that were struggling to survive in the refugee camps in border regions. In these madrassas the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam was taught, together with Deobandi Islamism. This formed the ideological backbone

⁴⁶ See Pakistan case study for more information on this.

of the Taliban ideology. Their ideology is Islamist, but its ideological-territorial claim is primarily centered on Afghanistan. While in the 1990s the Taliban supported Islamist movements in Central Asia and from the 2000s onwards the Taliban supported their Pakistani sub-organization and there was also the support for Al-Qaeda with its global agenda, the Taliban themselves have always had limited engagements outside of Afghanistan (Rashid 2010). Their support for Al-Qaeda can be explained by the fact that Osama Bin Laden was helping their movement financially and his brigade 055 was a valuable help during the civil war, while their support for other Islamist groups attacking their neighbors was limited. The Taliban's Islamist ideology is extremely strict, forbidding music, prostitution, movies, alcohol, kites, pigeon breeding and completely bans women from all public spaces, education and the labor market. But they do not work towards a global caliphate like the Islamic State does. The Taliban Islamism is localized and does not threaten Iran directly (Sheikh 2016).

The other aspect of Taliban ideology is Pashtun chauvinism. The communist coup in the 1970s ended centuries of Pashtu dominance in Afghanistan. Instead, Tajik now played a bigger role in Afghan politics. The civil war in the 1990s was initially dominated by Tajik and Uzbek warlords, before the Taliban arose as the force representing the Pashtuns. The Taliban blend their Islamism with traditional Pashtun ideas and values (Rashid 2010). Their movement is almost exclusively Pashtun and aims for Pashtun hegemony in Afghanistan. Their Pashtun chauvinism expresses itself as a form of cultural-ethnic chauvinism internally (Ibrahimi 2017b), and in support for Pashtun separatism in Pakistan (Sheikh 2016), especially by the Taliban's implicit support for the Pakistani Taliban. Given the lack of Pashtuns in Iran there is no conflict here. While there is a debate about whether the Taliban are Pashtun nationalists, with some authors highlighting the fact that the Taliban have attacked Pashtun nationalists, there is a consensus that the Taliban are clearly Pashtun dominated and during their rule they filled all positions of power in Afghanistan with Pashtuns and made Pashtu the dominant language of

office and rule, while this role had previously been filled by the Farsi dialect of Dari (Ibrahimi 2017b).

Another aspect the Taliban have been noted for is their anti-Hazara and anti-Shi'a policies. In the 1990s when they first gained power the Taliban committed several mass murders of Shi'as, especially Hazaras (Tarock 1999). This is a complex topic since there are overlapping issues. The Hazaras are a minority in Afghanistan living mostly to the West of Kabul in the center of Afghanistan in a mountainous region known as Hazarajat (Milani 2006). They are mostly Shi'a Muslims and some even speak their own Farsi dialect called Hazaragi. The Hazaras are said to be the descendants of the Mongol invaders that settled in the region when Afghanistan was conquered in the Mongol storm of the 13th century. In the last two hundred years they have been repeatedly persecuted by Afghan rulers and saw numerous massacres occur (Ibrahimi 2017a).

The Taliban have persecuted the Hazaras for resisting their rule, as previous Afghan rulers have done so. While these attacks have been legitimized by religious reasons, there was always an ethnic element to them (Rashid 2010). But after the US invasion the Taliban toned down their anti-Shi'a rhetoric and became less hostile to Hazaras. The 2010s saw the Taliban actively disavow anti-Shi'a sectarianism. They recruited Hazaras into their ranks to fight the Islamic State in Khorasan (Kousary and Hansen 2022). The extreme Anti-Shi'a stance of ISIS-K made it easy for the Taliban to garner support also among the Shi'as. This shows that the Taliban are Sunni Islamists with a localized outlook, they had anti-Shi'a views in the past but have at least for the time under consideration for this thesis disavowed them.

The Taliban have no natural connection points to Iran, their Islamism is Sunni and much more radical than the one promoted by the IRI. Their past aggression towards Afghan Shi'as also makes them an unlikely alliance partner. Although it must be mentioned that they have

ideologically distanced themselves from sectarianism and they have fought the Islamic state in Afghanistan, thereby fighting a clearly anti-Shi'a group.

f) Geopolitics and economics

The main issues regarding Afghanistan for Iran are fear of support for ethnic separatists fighting the Iranian state in Baluchistan (Solhdoost and Pargoo 2022), a potential base for anti-Shi'a terrorists of ISIS (Lushenko, Auken, and Stebbins 2019), drug and weapon smuggling (Verma 2021), strategic encirclement from the East (Yazdani and Hussain 2006), economic issues, especially regarding the river Helmand river (Goes et al. 2016) and Afghanistan's potential as a trade partner but also as a land-route into central Asia and onwards into China (Tarock 1999). Lastly is the issue of refugees, millions of Afghans have fled the civil war and terror into neighboring Iran, causing tensions and costs (Solhdoost and Pargoo 2022).

Afghanistan, like Iran and Pakistan is home to Baluchis, and it has served as a haven for Baluchi separatists that fight the Pakistani but especially the Iranian state. It is in Iranian interest that this is stopped (Haqqani 2020), a stable and strong Afghan state is necessary for Iran to enforce this and stop separatists using Afghanistan to strike into Iran (Barzegar 2014). The next big concern for Iran is the local brand of ISIS – Islamic State of Khorasan (Lushenko, Auken, and Stebbins 2019). This group like its Syrian-Iraqi main branch is fiercely anti-Shi'a and due to its territorial claims on Iran, not only an ideological enemy but a geopolitical threat.

ISIS-K has committed various terrorist attacks and would pose a potential danger to Iran itself, should it gain territorial control in Afghanistan. The Taliban have repeatedly fought ISIS-K and have shown their ability to suppress the group. Moreover, the Taliban have no territorial claim on Iran. Next is the aspect of strategic encirclement. With the US invasion of Afghanistan, followed by the US invasion of Iraq and US bases being built in Central Asia, Iran was encircled – the US was already present in Turkey and the Arab Peninsula. In a military confrontation with the already much stronger US this would create massive problems for the defense of Iran,

spreading scare resources ever thinner. This also enabled the CIA to spy into Iran from the East using Afghan bases, these bases could also be used to launch drones that violate Iranian air space to gather information – especially on the Iran nuclear program.

It was in Iranian interest that the US leaves Afghanistan, so that Iran has to worry less about its Eastern border. The next issue is drugs and weapons smuggling, with a strong emphasis on the former. Iran has millions of drug addicts and with drugs come crime and violence by addicts trying to finance their addictions, additionally thousands of law enforcement officers and soldiers have been killed in the last decades fighting the War on Drugs (Barzegar 2014; Solhdoost and Pargoo 2022; Verma 2021). Iran has long been fighting against drug smuggling and Afghanistan as the world center of opium production is a big problem in this regard, since Opium is turned into Heroin, which floods Iran. The cheap and addictive drug not only causes costs due to policing costs, but also causes economic damage and derives the Iranian economy of potential labor force in addition to its huge social damage.

Lastly are the economic relations. Afghanistan is a huge potential market for Iran (Barzegar 2014). In trading geography is always relevant and Afghanistan as a land-locked country is dependent on its neighbors for trade and for access to the world seas. Given Afghanistan's fast population growth since 1979, Iran has a big potential market in its neighbor. It needs a friendly government there that is open to Iranian trade and investments. Iran needs to develop the markets in its neighborhood.

There is another issue, namely the river Helmand. The river originates in the Hindukush mountains and terminates in the Sistan Basin, most importantly Lake Hamun in Iran. This has repeatedly led to conflicts between Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan wants to use as much water as possible for agriculture and electricity production in its own land, while Iran, wants as much water as possible going into Lake Hamun, to maintain the eco-system there and use the water for its own agriculture. This conflict has been going on for decades. While there have

been compromises, no definitive agreement was ever reached. This leads to ongoing tension and insecurity, since draught and climate change will lead to years where there is far less water flowing down the Helmand, endangering agriculture in Iran (Goes et al. 2016).

Another aspect for Iran is Afghanistan strategic position. It enables an Iranian land route to the three stan-countries of Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It would also enable Iran to trade with China without having to rely on Pakistan or the sea route. While trade in goods would benefit the Iranian economy a lot of investment in the Afghan road network would be necessary, in addition since Afghanistan lacks a railway network, such a thing would have to be built first. A far more lucrative idea is to build pipelines to China and pump gas and oil there. But this would require a stable Afghanistan, that can protect and maintain these pipelines.

Another important concept is the trade relations with India. India, Iran and Afghanistan were developing the port of Chahbar in South-Eastern Iran (Rafique 2016). Now all Afghan sea trade goes via the port in Karachi/Quetta, this makes Afghanistan dependent on Pakistan and the trade route through the Hindukush is notoriously dangerous. A trade route through Iran would strengthen Iran and would also help Iran foster trade with India and Central Asia in tandem with Afghanistan. The problem of course is that by supporting the Taliban Iran is subverting these economic goals. On the one hand does Iranian support create hostility and mistrust on the Afghan side, it also just damages the Afghan market and trade routes. The economic arguments only make sense if Iran assumed a return of the Taliban and wants to secure its investment and the Afghan market, regardless of who controls Afghanistan.

There is also the issue of Afghan refugees in Iran. The brutality of the communist state and then the Soviet army led to a flight of millions of Afghans into the two neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran. While some refugees moved on, many stayed. The civil war in the 1990s, the US invasion and the Taliban insurgency created further waves of refugees and while in recent years many Afghans have used Iran just as a stage on their way to Turkey and

then Europe, many Afghans still flee to Iran itself. Here they are faced with economic insecurity and racism (Ruhani et al. 2023). Iran for the most part wants to return the Afghan refugees and wants a stable Afghanistan, so it gains control over migration from Afghanistan into Iran. While some Iranians are in favor of using the Afghan refugees as cheap labor (Afshani and Shiri-Mohammadabad 2023) and the Afghan refugees might offset declining numbers of children being born in Iran by Iranian women, overall, the focus of Iranian policy makers is to get rid of the Afghan refugees.

Concluding, Afghanistan is essential for Iranian security. The most appropriate explanation for the Iran-Taliban relationship seems that the Taliban can provide the security Iran wants against ISIS-K. By supporting the Taliban, Iran is also building good relations with the opposition, should the Afghan government fall, which it did in summer 2021, after the timespan under study for this thesis.

g) IRGC and Foreign ministry

While initially there seems to have been a convergence of foreign policy by the IRGC and the Foreign Ministry, a split emerged after 2007 (Carter 2010). Both the Foreign Ministry and the IRGC were supporting the Northern Alliance, although it seems the IRGC was more relevant here since it was mostly about military support, with diplomacy having a much smaller role. Both supported the US invasion of Afghanistan. In the aftermath, the Foreign Ministry and its soft power approach seemed to have been the driving force behind Iran's Afghan policy for a few years (Kousary and Hansen 2022). Iran invested in Afghanistan engaging with the state. But Iran could never fully gain what it wanted from Afghanistan, because the US opposed of too close ties between Afghanistan and Iran. After 2007 Iran started reaching out to the Taliban, but this was a limited policy and there is no evidence that the IRGC and the Foreign Ministry were diverting in their goals (Carter 2010). This changed with the rise of ISIS and the increased tension with the US (Lushenko, Auken, and Stebbins 2019; Vatanka 2017).

The IRGC seems to have steadily increased support for the Taliban, while the Foreign Ministry kept engaging with the Afghan state, increasingly irritated at the support the Taliban were receiving from Iran (Tanha 2015). Statements by then foreign minister Zarif, speak of an increasing parallel foreign policy pursued by the IRGC in their Afghan foreign policy (Najafizada 2020). While the Foreign Ministry for the most part kept engaging with the official Afghan state (Najafizada 2020), the IRGC increasingly worked with the Taliban. This must be seen in the context of increased tensions with the US. Qassem Soleimani pursued a strategy to challenge the US increasingly and pursue a more aggressive foreign policy (Azizi 2020). At the same time was the corrupt and increasingly unpopular Afghan state (Murtazashvili 2022) incapable of dealing with the arising threat of ISIS-K (Furlan 2018). Moreover, the presence of NATO made building up proxies like in Syria and Iraq not a feasible strategy. While the IRGC does not seem to have had any substantial economic goals in Afghanistan, there seems to have been one identifiable goal beyond fighting the US and ISIS-K: to recruit Afghans to fight in Syria (Jamal 2018). The Liwa Fatemiyoun, which will be the next case study was recruited from Afghan refugees in Iran, but also Shi'as Hazaras in Afghanistan, but this was not related to the Taliban policy.

h) Conclusion

The Taliban are not a proxy of Iran. The group is and was not operationally dependent on Iran. Through taxies they levy, support from Pakistan and donations of supporters and their presence in the Afghan-Pakistani border area result in them having ample access to weapons and explosives and fighters. The Iran-Taliban relationship is therefore better explained as an alliance between a state and an armed non-state actor. Regardless of this, it is an insightful case. Initially the Taliban were Iran's enemies, to such an extent that Iran was supporting their enemies of the Northern Alliance and even went as far as to support the US invasion of Afghanistan. Yet in later years the geopolitical situation changed and so the Taliban claimed to

have. Iran warmed to the group and started engaging with them and finally supporting them with weapons, money and personal. The goal being to fight ISIS-K and the US.

Identity-based explanation. The initial relationship between Taliban and Iran fits with the identity-based explanation. The Taliban were anti-Shi'a, so Iran supported their enemies in the form of the Northern Alliance, thereby waging a proxy war with Saudi-Arabia and Pakistan over influence in Afghanistan. While the Taliban are ideologically different from Iran, they claimed to have learnt from their mistakes and gave up sectarianism and to respect the rights of minorities. While the relations between Taliban and Iran are not close, and the ideological differences exist, they seem to have stopped their attacks on minorities. The Taliban are also fighting the ideological enemies of Iran most importantly ISIS-K and the US. But overall identity-based explanations while not necessarily contradicted by this, do not sufficiently explain Iran's Taliban policy.

Power-Based explanations. Iran has been engaging both with the Afghan state and the Taliban in the later years under study for this thesis. Iran has an interest in a secure eastern border and wants a stable Afghanistan. It also wants to develop the Afghan market and protect its investments. In addition, it needs Afghan cooperation on topics such as drug smuggling, water rights and the return of refugees. By supporting the Taliban Iran is seemingly undermining these policy goals. The support for the Taliban weakens the Afghan state and damages the Afghan market and endangers Iranian investments. But this is only one side of the medal. Iran is also making sure that when the West pulls out of Afghanistan and the Taliban will play a bigger role, that they are on friendly terms with Iran. A hostile Taliban regime in Kabul could easily result in a situation like in the 1990s, seeing new waves of refugees fleeing to Iran, and even the prospect of an Afghan Iranian war. Therefore, Iran was playing both sides at least from 2014 onwards. This can be explained by two aspects, the first is that the US strongly controlled the Afghan state. Iran fearing encirclement and not wanting US forces and

intelligence services on its border would be a given with the Afghan state, which even refused a trade treaty with Iran under US pressure. Pressuring the Afghan state by supporting the Taliban and thereby even gaining friendly relations with the Taliban should they retake power, made sense from a power-based perspective. The other aspect is that the Afghan state increasingly provide incompetent.

The rise of ISIS-K threatened another Iraq debacle, with the fanatical group overrunning the corrupt and incompetent ANA. The Taliban proved a force that could push back ISIS efficiently – besides NATO. By supporting the Taliban Iran was able to fight both its enemies ISIS-K and the US. Iran was also securing its investments for future shifts in power.

Factionalism explanation. Factionalism initially did not play a role in Afghanistan. The Taliban were enemies of Iran and both Foreign Ministry and IRGC worked against them. In later years this changed. The Taliban received support from the IRGC and while the Foreign Ministry kept engaging with the Afghan state, the IRGC pursued its own Foreign Policy via the Taliban. While the motives do not seem to have been economic, the IRGC clearly wanted the Taliban to force NATO out of Afghanistan and also have a reliable partner fighting ISIS-K. A proxy war like in Iraq or Syria seems not to have been considered and so the Taliban received support in the form of weapons, money and allegedly even personnel from the IRGC.

While the support for the Taliban does not disprove the identity-based explanation. The Iranian saw them as a changed group and the Taliban themselves proclaimed to no longer pursue sectarian policies. The Iranian support for the Taliban does show that it is not all about ideology. The Taliban do not ideologically align with Iran, except in a shared hostility to the West and ISIS-K. The support for the Taliban helped Iran secure its eastern border and to be involved in any future Afghan order. Factionalism seems also to have played a role in Iranian support for the Taliban, given statements by then Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif to that effect, in that the IRGC supported the Taliban, while the Foreign Ministry kept engaging with the Afghan state.

Preliminary findings are listed in the following tables:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	By supporting the Taliban, Iran is able to fight back against the US and ISIS-K. But the Taliban are ideologically different do not share in the IRI ideology. Hypothesis partially proven.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	The Taliban are not ideologically aligned, the relations are also not that deep. It is rather a convenient alliance. Still the Taliban help Iran fight ISIS-K and the US. Hypothesis disproven.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.	The Taliban are Deobandi-Wahhabi Sunnis, the relationship is not that deep. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	Initially Iran was supporting the enemies of the Taliban when they were anti-Shi'a. The support for the Taliban only really started when the ended the sectarian agenda and fought the anti-Shi'a ISIS-K. Hypothesis partially proven.

Table 13 Identity Findings Taliban

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	Afghanistan is of vital importance to Iran. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	Iran has strong economic interests in Afghanistan. Hypothesis proven.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	By weakening the US and NATO and possibly forcing them out of Afghanistan and by fighting ISIS-K the Taliban increase Iranian security. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	Iran hopes to secure its influence and prevent a return of the 1990s situation. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	The Taliban were initially Iran's enemies. But they proved quite useful against the US and ISIS-K. Despite being ideologically not aligned Iran supported them. Hypothesis proven.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	Both the Taliban and Iran have overlapping interests in getting rid of the Americans. The Taliban also proved reliable in fighting ISIS-K. Hypothesis proven.

Table 14 Power Findings Taliban

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
<p>In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.</p>	<p>The IRGC seems to have pursued their own policy by supporting the Taliban, while the Foreign Ministry kept engaging with the Afghan state, leading to frustration on behalf of the Foreign Ministry. Hypothesis proven.</p>
<p>The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.</p>	<p>The IRGC engaged with the Taliban, the Foreign Ministry with the Afghan state. Hypothesis proven.</p>
<p>Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.</p>	<p>Economic goals seem to have played no greater role in the IRGC engagement with the Taliban.</p>

Table 15 Factionalism Findings Taliban

2. Liwa Fatemiyoun

a) Introduction

Liwa Fatemiyoun (لِوَاءَ الْفَاتِمِيَّوْنَ), the literal translation is banner of Fatima or brigade of Fatima⁴⁷. Liwa Fatemiyoun is the first case study for this thesis that can be interpreted as a contractual or coerced proxy, according to the definitions of Major Amos Fox (2021; 2020). But Liwa Fatemiyoun is insightful for another reason: its structure, make-up and area and modus of operations. Liwa Fatemiyoun is primarily recruited from Afghan refugees living in Iran, from the Hazara minority (Schneider 2018). It is deployed to Syria, where it fights along Bashar Al-Assads forces. The unit in its name and propaganda invokes a religious mission – protecting the shrine of Fatima in Syria (Quds Online 2016), making it insightful for the identity-based explanations. The Liwa Fatemiyoun is also directly commanded by the IRGC, making it potentially insightful regarding factionalism.

b) Historical Background

Afghans have been serving in the Iranian armed forces for centuries (Farrokh 2011). In the history of the Islamic Republic, they first show up during the Iran-Iraq war, when Afghan volunteers fought in the Iranian armed forces, especially the IRGC, against the Iraqi invasion (DEFA Press 2016).

Iran was sponsoring militias that were fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan. But Afghans would not see service in the Iranian armed forces in any relevant numbers in the 1990s and 2000s. It is only when the so-called Arab Spring in Syria escalated into a fully-fledged civil war that the situation changed. Bashar al-Assad had many security forces under his command: the army, police and intelligence forces. But the longer the civil war went the more his

⁴⁷ While the term Fatemiyoun brigade is also used, it should be noted that at one point some reports suggested that up to 20.000 soldiers were making up the unit meaning it would be more correct to talk of a Fatemiyoun division or even a small corps in terms of size.

manpower wilted away. Desertion either to the rebels or just soldiers fleeing the country became common place, and casualty rates rose at the same time drastically (Leenders and Giustozzi 2019). Iranian casualties and those of Hezbollah, who were operating alongside Assads forces, were also rising (Pollak 2016; Azizi and Vazirian 2022). Iran therefore mobilized forces from Iraq to its large refugee population of Afghans as a solution to solve Assads manpower problem. The first Afghans reportedly fought in Syria in 2012 (Azizi and Vazirian 2022), with the Liwa Fatemiyoun being founded in 2013. From this time on Liwa Fatemiyoun became involved in several of the most crucial battles of the Syrian Civil War.

c) Phases of historical significance

The founding phase 2013-2014. Initially some Afghans served in the primarily Iraqi unit of Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas (Azizi and Vazirian 2022). But in 2013 the Afghans were grouped into their own unit and the Liwa Fatemiyoun was born (Schneider 2018). Initially they were among a host of Iraqi and Syrian groups that operated alongside IRGC officers who would train and command them. The plan was to stabilize the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad with as little involvement as possible on Iran's part. While Iran had decided to get involved in the Syrian Civil War, after some deliberations, there was a clear hesitancy to get too much involved (Tabatabai 2019). So Liwa Fatemiyoun operated alongside groups from Iraq, but also Hezbollah.

The operations were mainly aimed at stabilizing government control over areas under threat. From the little information available it seems the group initially funded itself. The Afghans that were making up the initial cadre seem to have been genuine volunteers that served alongside Iraqi volunteers. Their origin is often traced back to the Afghan volunteer brigade during the Iran-Iraq war – the Abuzar Brigade (Azizi and Vazirian 2022; DEFA Press 2016; Verma 2021). Given the available information, it seems that contrary to an Iran's grand plan

by, the IRGC rather seized the chance, using the limited number of Afghan volunteers serving in Syria and developing them into a unit of their own.

While Iran supplemented Liwa Fatemiyoun with Afghans recruited from among the refugee population, recruits from Afghanistan and even allegedly criminals (Karataş 2021), the initial momentum seems to have come from Afghans themselves wishing to serve in Syria. This is important when considering later developments. Since this event chain would - if true - put agency in the hands of those initial Afghan volunteers and means that Iran was not initially pursuing any grander plans with Liwa Fatemiyoun, except taking the opportunity to gain an additional militia for the Syrian Civil War.

Fighting alongside Russia, 2015-2017. Despite Hezbollah joining the fight, and the deployment of an increasing number of IRGC personnel (Kausch 2017; Voller 2022), by 2015 the Assad regime was losing the war. Iran could not stem the tide of the Syrian rebels and the rising Islamic State. So, Iran turned to the other ally of Assad – Russia (Azizi 2020). Qassem Soleimani himself traveled to Russia to make his case. Iran’s attempts were successful, and President Putin declared a Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War on the side of the government of Assad. The Russian Air Force (VVS), Russian navy (VMF) and special forces would supplement the depleted forces of Assad (Karagiannis 2021). Through air attacks and naval missile strikes, Assad forces could intensify the siege of cities like Aleppo and Homs (Azizi and Vazirian 2022).

Liwa Fatemiyoun, by this time having grown to a division size of 20.000 men, was an instrumental addition to the Russian firepower (Azizi and Vazirian 2022). While Russia brought air and sea power, it only deployed small numbers of ground troops. Yet the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) of Assad was equally depleted. So, the combined forces needed ground troops to assault positions and to retake cities and villages. This is where Liwa Fatemiyoun, among other Iranian proxy groups, would play its role. While its role in fighting was important and helped to stave

off attacks on many shrines and Shi'a holy places, primarily it fulfilled the role of infantry involved in hard fighting, at times also being deployed as a fire brigade to close gaps in the government lines and hold critical positions (Azizi and Vazirian 2022).

There is also something of note. Russia was sending lots of equipment to Syria, especially modern T-90 tanks. These tanks were supposed to become the new standard tank of the Russian armed forces since the end of the Cold War, but high costs meant that Russian needed to look for export partners to increase production in order to lower costs to a level that would make a mass introduction in the Russian Armed Forces feasible. The T-90 was primarily given to Iranian militias fighting alongside Assads forces (White and McHenry 2020). That Iran's militias got access and training on these modern tanks shows the vital role they played in the government offensives. White and McHenry (2020) argued that this deployment was intended to show-off the T-90 and gain more customers. Iran and Russia were also negotiating about a major arms sale at that time, including the sale of T-90 tanks (Mehr News Agency 2015). So, Russia sending some to Syria where they could be assessed in combat by Liwa Fatemiyoun and other Iranian proxies and IRGC officers, makes sense. But it also shows the high level of trust Iran has in Liwa Fatemiyoun and the crucial role it played in improving relations with Russia. The deal later fell through, and Iran announced they would produce their own tank, the Karrar (Beckhusen 2016).

If Iran really pursued the plan to produce such tanks the Liwa Fatemiyoun members who operated the T-90s would be of great value due to their knowledge of the T-90. This shows a high level of importance of Liwa Fatemiyoun for Iran. Liwa Fatemiyoun was also working as a door opener with Russia to improve Russian-Iranian relations. By using Liwa Fatemiyoun to stabilize the government of Assad and operating alongside Russian forces, Iran was presenting itself as a potential reliable ally to Russia. The importance of Liwa Fatemiyoun in Syria raised the importance of Iran for Russia, since Russia was hesitant to deploy large numbers of ground

troops to Syria. In this way Liwa Fatemiyoun furthered Iranian interests in improved relations with Russia and enabling future arms cooperation.

Demobilization 2017-2019. When Iran declared victory over ISIS in 2017, the question arose about the future of Liwa Fatemiyoun. Iran scaled down recruitment and decreased the number of fighters in Liwa Fatemiyoun (Azizi and Vazirian 2022). A few thousand would remain, although some authors suggest a number of only roughly a thousand (Jamal 2018). Liwa Fatemiyoun was not deployed to Afghanistan, even though ISIS-K was targeting Shi'as there (Vatanka 2017). It was not deployed to Yemen, although it was a constant rumor that this would happen (Karataş 2021). Rather, Liwa Fatemiyoun remains stationed in Syria, albeit in small size.

So, while Liwa Fatemiyoun can in part be considered a contractual proxy, it is not deployed like Russian Wagner group to other conflict zones (Rauta 2019); it remains firmly tied to the Syrian theater. This is insightful because it aligns with its founding history. Rather than being part of some great Iranian plan, it seems the group is just part of the Iranian attempts to stabilize the government of Assad. Once that is achieved it was scaled down like other groups and does garrison duties. It is not an attempt to create an Afghan Hezbollah, it is not an attempt to create an Iranian Wagner, rather it was an opportunity for Iran to gain more fighters for the Syrian Civil War.

d) Capabilities

Liwa Fatemiyoun has experience in fighting conventional battles, especially sieges, but also in conducting anti-insurgency operations (Azizi and Vazirian 2022). While at times it reached division size or beyond, it does not seem to have organic capabilities to operate on its own. It does not even seem to own any artillery, instead Liwa Fatemiyoun seems to operate mostly as a light infantry auxiliary force.

While the units have seen some deployment of tanks, among them Russian T-90s delivered to the Assad regime as part of Russia's intervention in the conflict, the unit lacks other capabilities (White and McHenry 2020). The unit also received training by Russian officers, which increases its capabilities further. The unit, through its operations, has produced a large pool of veterans that have seen some training, and many have seen combat and gained experience (Jamal 2018).

The unit is almost completely dependent on Iran for equipment and for officers. While there were commanders and subcommanders that were Afghan, many officers are from the IRGC. This highlights the auxiliary character of the unit again. Liwa Fatemiyoun does not run a welfare state, or other social services, it is a purely military formation. The structure of the force enables Iran to employ it anywhere it needs a reliable force. Given cultural and language barriers, the members of Liwa Fatemiyoun are also less likely to desert or change sides. This could make Liwa Fatemiyoun a highly capable force for Iranian power projection, with a long-term potential to become an Iranian *Légion Étrangère* of efficient but also disposable fighters.

e) Ideology and identity

The identity of the fighters is Shi'a Afghan. The Hazaras recruited for the most part are refugees that have lived in Iran, often as illegal immigrants. Some have been coerced to join to avoid prison sentences, while others were promised residence permits or even citizenship for themselves and their families, in addition are the extremely high salaries in comparison what Afghan refugees can make normally in Iran. This distinguishes Liwa Fatemiyoun members from members of most other Iranian proxy groups that their primary motivation is material or social gain or coercion.

Another part of their identity is Shiism. The members of Liwa Fatemiyoun are for the most part Twelver Shi'as⁴⁸ and get ideologically indoctrinated to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. They use Shi'a symbols like flags and rhetoric about martyrdom and fighting the cause of the family of Ali in their propaganda. Their official task is to defend the shrine of Fatima and members of the unit visit the shrine when they arrive in Syria and before they depart again. Liwa Fatemiyoun can therefore be considered fully committed and ideologically aligned. While there is a mixture of motives, many of which are material, there is no competing ideology like nationalism or ideological deviation like antisemitism.

The deployment to Syria is a more complex topic regarding identity and ideology. Syria is officially an Arab Socialist Republic, its secular with a Sunni Arab majority and a large portion of minorities: Christians, Druze, Kurds and Shi'a Alawis. The Alawis are a Shi'a sect that was only recognized in the second half of the 20th century as Shi'a. Yet the Assad family clan that rules Syria belongs to the group and Hafiz al-Assad, the father of current president Bashar al-Assad, has implemented a system whereby Alawis control all levers of power in Syria, being overrepresented in the security and intelligence services, as well as having control over the army. Accordingly, Syria under Hafiz al-Assad aligned itself with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and both sides have cooperated ever since. Syria also forms part of the Shi'a crescent. While the Syrian state of Bashar al-Assad is not a Shi'a theocracy, it is nonetheless ruled by Shi'as. Also, many holy places of Shi'as are located in Syria, making an argument for the identity-based explanations.

An argument against ideology-based explanations is the fact that Bashar al-Assad is a secular dictator. By supporting him the Islamic Republic is betraying a core ideological tenant – the support for the oppressed against the oppressors. The support for Assad then also created

⁴⁸ Since most members are Hazaras, who are mostly Shi'as. Some members might be Sunnis or Ismailis but there is no information on any significant numbers of non-Shi'as.

hostility from the Arab street against Iran. The Iranian leadership attempted to circumvent this criticism by painting the rebellion as instigated by the West and Zionists to destroy the anti-Israeli Syrian state. By connecting the support for Assad with the Iranian support for Palestine, the Iranian narrative attempted to ideologically justify the intervention. While this can be dismissed as propaganda to legitimize realpolitik, there is an aspect that works in favor of ideology-based explanations. If Assad's state would fall, a rapprochement between Syria and Israel might be a distant but possible future scenario. It would also complicate Iran supplying Hezbollah. So, if Assads Syria would fall, it would weaken Iran's ability to wage war against Israel, this.

f) Geopolitics and economics

Since till now Liwa Fatemiyoun has only been deployed to Syria, this is the area in which its role has to be analyzed, to understand the geopolitical and economic implications of this case of Iranian proxy warfare. Liwa Fatemiyoun forms one of several proxy groups Iran has deployed in Syria (Solomon 2013). This deployment has not only stabilized the regime of Bashar al-Assad, an important Iranian state ally, but it has also garnered Iran influence in the country through its deployment of militias (Hatahet 2019). This control over militias, which operate independently of the Syrian state, gives the IRGC the option to strike at Israel from a third front (the other two being the previously mentioned Lebanon and Palestine) (Jamal 2018). In addition, it enables Iran theoretically to strike at Turkey and Jordan, from another country than Iraq, if a conflict between these countries and Iran ever arises. The potential threat to Israel via the Golan Heights increases Iranian deterrence power (Seliktar 2020; Rezaei 2019). It led to hundreds of Israeli air strikes in Syria on Iranian affiliated targets (Gross 2018). The Israeli response shows a clear concern over the Iranian buildup of military power and an attempt to destroy the Iranian ability to strike Israel from Syria. This shows that Israel takes the threat seriously. This Iranian buildup can be interpreted in two ways:

First, it serves the previously mentioned deterrence. Iran wants to build up the ability to strike *back* at Israel. Syria has been a long-term ally of Iran and Syria has been massively weakened by the civil war. This interpretation sees Iranian behavior as mostly defensive. Iran has a massively weakened ally, the deployment of militias like Liwa Fatemiyoun does not alter the geopolitical situation of the Middle East since it just restores some of the military power in Syria. The deployment therefore serves the purpose to stabilize Iran's ally and offer second-strike deterrence. Syria is also essential as an important supply route for Hezbollah. So, if Assad's Syria falls, so would Iran's ability to wage war against Israel from the North, because Iran could no longer reliably supply Hezbollah with weapons. Even more threatening would be a Sunni dominated Syria that once again gets involved in Lebanese affair, to the detriment of Hezbollah's hegemony there, thereby massively weakening Iranian influence in the Levant.

Second, the deployment of Liwa Fatemiyoun can be interpreted as expanding Iranian power. Syria was an ally since the Iran-Iraq War (Barzegar 2008), but it is doubtful if Syria would have launched attacks from its territory if Iran were attacked. On the contrary Syria was negotiating with Israel in the 2000s for an agreement similar to the Egyptian Israeli peace treaty (Ali 2019). Syria was an Iranian ally, but it was still pursuing its own foreign policy and did not have an Iranian military presence on its territory. Therefore, the deployment and permanence of militias like the Liwa Fatemiyoun changes the equation in the Middle East and expands Iranian power further. Syria is now much closer aligned to Iran and the dependency on Iran makes some call Syria itself a proxy of Iran (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020). The deployment of Iranian armed forces and Iranian proxies to Syria greatly expands Iranian power.

Then there is the economic argument. Through its militias Iran was also able to exercise more influence in Syria and gain economic influence. This economic influence means that Iranian companies get contracts in the reconstruction of the country, market access to the heavily sanctioned Syrian market (Hatahet 2019). Iranian arms deliveries to Syria serve Iran in

strengthening its ally, but they open the door for future arms contracts to maintain them and supply them with ammo and spare parts.

In addition are the Russian arms deliveries to the Syrian armed forces. These as mentioned also end up in the hands of Iranian proxies like Hezbollah but also Liwa Fatemiyoun, which means that Iran gets some access to modern weapons and equipment. This not only strengthens Iran, but also helps Iran get better insights into modern combat abilities and the necessities of warfare in the 21st century. By fighting alongside Russia in Syria and having its proxies also trained by Russians Iran and its proxies gains knowledge and abilities to conduct modern warfare in the Russian way (Pollak 2016). This strengthens Iran's own military capabilities. This leads to another point. Iran is strengthening its relationship with Russia through its engagement in Syria. By stabilizing the Russian ally Assad, Iran is improving its relationship with Russia. Liwa Fatemiyoun played a crucial role in this since the Russian intervention lacked a strong ground force component, Liwa Fatemiyoun and other Iran-affiliated militias were able to fill this role and help Russia turn the tide in the Syrian Civil War in favor of Bashar al-Assad.

g) IRGC and Foreign ministry

The foreign ministry does not engage with Liwa Fatemiyoun, while the IRGC is the one in charge of its entire operation. With the Syrian state of Bashar al-Assad both IRGC and Foreign Ministry engage. Yet through their engagement with the military and other militias fighting on the government side, the IRGC has far greater influence in Syria. The Liwa Fatemiyoun gives the IRGC a tool to pursue its foreign policy goals in Syria independently of the Foreign Ministry, due to Syrian dependence on Iran and the size of the unit even to some extent independently of the Syrian state. Because Liwa Fatemiyoun is not a proxy bound to this theatre of operations it enables Iran to theoretically redeploy them to other conflict areas and have them operate there. Given the sensitivity of the Iranian leadership to high casualties of the

IRGC, this enables Iran and more importantly the IRGC to project hard power abroad. The Liwa Fatemiyoun has the potential to become a contractual proxy for power projection the same vein the Wagner PMC was for Russia for many years.

Given that the majority of fighters are Afghans and the unstable security situation in Afghanistan and high birthrates mean that there will be a steady flow of Afghans into Iran. The IRGC basically has a pool of disposable manpower to use via the Liwa Fatemiyoun, to pursue its own foreign policy. If it chooses to do so. So far this has not happened and the Liwa Fatemiyoun at the end of 2019 was a downsized unit deployed to Syria. Liwa Fatemiyoun and other divisions also greatly expand IRGC influence economically in Syria, with the IRGC construction conglomerate Khatam al-Anbiya expanding operations there (DEFA Press 2022). While the increased influence helps Iran in general it is the IRGC and its companies that benefit the most from the involvement in the Syrian Civil War.

h) Conclusion

Liwa Fatemiyoun is for the most part a contractual proxy of Iran. Most of its members are serving in the unit to gain residence permits, citizenship or just make money, some even try to evade a lengthy prison sentence. The group is a purely military formation and while it grew to division size at the height of the Syrian Civil War, it did not remain so, and Iran scaled down in size after the end of the main hostilities in Syria. The group was also not developed by Iran into an Afghan proxy or deployed to other battlefields. This fact in combination with the founding going in part back to Afghan volunteers serving in Syria highlights the opportunistic use of Iran of the group for the Syrian Civil War. Iran did not force the founding, it happened because there was potential. Iran then capitalized on the opportunity and turned Liwa Fatemiyoun into a capable and sizable force for its needs. But there is no evidence of a grand plan with this group visible.

Identity-based explanation. Liwa Fatemiyoun is deployed to Syria a Shi'a ally of Iran. It helps stabilize the regime of Assad and protect important shrines as well as the Shi'a, and especially Alawi Shi'a, population from Sunni Islamist forces. This makes sense from an identity-based explanation, the sectarian nature of the Syrian Civil War and the involvement of ISIS clearly posed a danger to Syria's Shi'as, so an identity-based explanation makes sense. Ideology based explanations on the other hand are more complicated. Assad is a secular dictator oppressing a religiously conservative majority. The decision to support him regardless not only weakened Iranian influence it also stood in stark contrast to an essential tenet of Khomeinist ideology. Iran tried to circumvent this by arguing that the revolution and civil war were instigated by Israel and the West and therefore illegitimate, since they aimed at toppling an Arab bulwark against Zionism. At the same time would a fall of the Assad government mean that Iran can no longer supply Hezbollah via the Syrian route and thereby weaken Iran's ability to wage war against Israel. But overall, the ideological argument is weak, because by supporting Assad Iran was intensifying the flames of sectarian hatred and the violence of the regime helped Sunni Islamist groups like ISIS become stronger. Syria is also the ideological opposite of Iran, being a secular Arab dictatorship.

Power-based explanations. Assad is an important ally of Iran. Through Liwa Fatemiyoun Iran can stabilize its ally and expand its power in Syria or at least offset some of the Syrian weakness because of the Civil War. Liwa Fatemiyoun also enables Iran to gain economic benefits in Syria. Liwa Fatemiyoun would also offer the potential to be developed into a disposable tool of Iranian power projection, but this has not happened, either because it is not possible or desirable. From 2015 onwards Liwa Fatemiyoun also helped Iran to strengthen ties with Russia, which had also gotten involved in the Syrian Civil War. Iran's militias helped form the ground element to supplement the Russian Air campaign against the Syrian rebels. While this was not originally intended it was a useful side effect. Overall, the deployment of

Liwa Fatemiyoun makes sense from a power-based perspective. Syria is an important ally to Iran, and it is a crucial supply route for Hezbollah. If Syria would fall Iran would lose a lot of influence in the levant. Therefore, making a strong case for defensive and offensive power-based explanations, since Iran did not only save its ally but actually expand power in Syria, although it's again hard to assess whether that was the intention or just a beneficial side effect. Iran also benefited from its intervention through gaining greater access to the Syrian market and securing lucrative offers to work in the reconstruction of the country.

Factionalism. There is little doubt that Liwa Fatemiyoun is among the tools that help the IRGC dominate Iran's Syria policy. But there is no evidence that Foreign Ministry and IRGC differed on their Syria policy, once it was decided to intervene on the side of Bashar al-Assad. Both the Foreign Ministry and the IRGC engaged with the Syrian state, the IRGC engaged with the Liwa Fatemiyoun, but since the organization was under its command that was to be expected.

Overall, the power-based explanation best explains Iran's involvement in the Syrian Civil War via Liwa Fatemiyoun. The unit, while ideologically aligned, served no higher ideological purpose on its own. The intervention in Syria was more motivated by concerns about the ally Assad and by extension Hezbollah than ideological commitments to Syria. Liwa Fatemiyoun while a contractual proxy has never developed into the kind of mercenary organization that is deployed across the Iranian proxy spectrum some commentators expected it to be. Neither was it turned into an Afghan Hezbollah. Rather it's a unit that formed in the Syrian context and stayed in the Syrian context. Factionalism meanwhile seems to have played no role in this proxy deployment.

Findings about Liwa Fatemiyoun are summarized in the tables below:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	Through Liwa Fatemiyoun enabled Iran to spread its ideology among Afghans, although this seems to have been a lesser motive. It enabled Iran to fight Sunni Islamists in Syria more efficiently. Hypothesis proven.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	Liwa Fatemiyoun is ideologically fully aligned. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.	The group is Shi'a. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	Iran is supporting the Alawi Shi'as of Syria with Liwa Fatemiyoun. Hypothesis proven.

Table 16 Identity Findings Liwa Fatemiyoun

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	Syria is an important ally to Iran and an important land route to Lebanon. It is in the sphere of Iranian influence. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	Through Liwa Fatemiyoun Iran was defending its ally and expanded its influence in Syria. Hypothesis proven.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	By engaging in Syria Iran was securing an ally, but it was also creating hostility towards Iran. The hypothesis is partially proven, partially disproven.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	This happened in Syria. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	Hypothesis does not apply.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	Liwa Fatemiyoun is in part coerced in part motivated through material designs. But does not have any coherent interests as an organization. Hypothesis does not apply

Table 17 Power Findings Liwa Fatemiyoun

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
<p>In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.</p>	<p>No such cases could be found. Hypothesis does not apply.</p>
<p>The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.</p>	<p>The Foreign Ministry does not engage with Liwa Fatemiyoun, but the IRGC engages with the Syrian state. Hypothesis disproven.</p>
<p>Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.</p>	<p>The IRGC expanded its economic influence in Syria, also with the help of militias like Liwa Fatemiyoun. Hypothesis proven.</p>

Table 18 Factionalism Findings Liwa Fatemiyoun

VI. Beyond the Middle East

1. Islamic Movement in Nigeria

a) Introduction

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (الحركة الاسلامية في نيجيريا) in the literature often called the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, or short IMN, is a Shi'a organization in Nigeria. It was founded by Sheik Ibrahim Zakzaky, and it is the main facilitator of Shi'a Islam in Nigeria. While Shi'a Islam was virtually non-existent before 1979 in Nigeria by now its estimated to have 3-17 million followers in the country (Zenn 2019; Uche 2019; Tangaza 2019; Obasi 2015). The IMN has ties to Iran but is no engaged in any form of armed resistance. It therefore represents an insightful case for several reasons: First, it is a case in which the ideas of Khomeinism not only took root, but they took root among a Sunni population, spreading not only the ideas of the Islamic Revolution but the Shi'a creed itself. The group also has faced persecution by the Nigerian state. Which makes it an insightful case for identity-based explanations. Second, Nigeria's economy has substantially grown since 1979, even overtaking South-Africa in the 2010s. Nigeria is also culturally and politically a dominant force in Western Africa, making it a relevant case study for power-based explanations. The third reason is that the IMN is not acting as an armed militia, making it a negative case study in which no proxy warfare happens. The insights, why the IMN does no act as an armed proxy for Iran, will be insightful for the entire thesis.

b) History

The history of Islam in what is now Nigeria begins in the 11th century when Muslim traders entered the region, bringing their religion with them. Islam spread through the years, becoming state religion in several kingdoms. When the British colonized the region, the South became Christianized, while the North remained Muslim (Isa and Adam 2017). This also caused

an imbalance since the Christian missionaries built churches in the South while the North fell behind in education and economic development. Nigeria eventually became independent in 1960, becoming the Federation of Nigeria. The state remained a republic till a military coup in 1966. In the 1950s there was an Islamic revival when groups like the Nigerian branch of the Muslim brotherhood started spreading in the country, especially the Islamic north of Nigeria.

Sheik Ibrahim Zakzaky, born in 1953, grew up in this environment, studying at the Ahmadu Bello University he became active in the Islamic Student Union. He rose to the rank of secretary-general of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (Zenn 2013). When Khomeini declared the Islamic Revolution, Zakzaky became inspired. He traveled to Iran and on his return in the 1980s founded an organization called the Muslim brothers, also known as Yan Uwa Musulmi or Yan Brothers in Nigeria (Isa and Adam 2017). His movement initially imitated Khomeini, in that it emphasized its Pan-Islamic nature (Hayatu et al. 2017). The goal was not so much to spread Shi'a Islam but rather to create an Islamic Awareness and overthrow secular and western domination and political systems. Protests organized by Zakzaky back then were against capitalism and communism and against the Nigerian state, reflecting Khomeini's slogan about where the IRI located itself ideologically in the Cold War (imam-khomeini.ir 2017). Zakzaky's goal was the implementation of Sharia in Nigeria. When Nigeria returned to become more democratic the IMN in-turn started protesting against the secular constitution, even burning it at events. This political rhetoric had a broad appeal and gave him many followers. In the 1990s the movement became more Shi'a leading to several groups splitting off. In 1994 at last he openly declared himself a Shi'a.

c) Phases of Historical Importance

1990s till 2014, the IMN becomes Shi'a and grows. It was in 1994 that Sheik Zakzaky made his movement explicitly Shi'a (Isa and Adam 2017). Previously it had been decidedly

more pan-Islamic. This open conversion and shift in the movement to open Shi'a promotion caused a rift. Some of the people that left the IMN in those years would later become founding members of Boko Haram and other Salafi terrorist organizations. This coincided with Saudi-Arabia bringing in funding to various countries, including Nigeria to spread its Wahhabi form of Islam. A major split off from the IMN was the Revival of Islam (JTI) movement. Ideologically being Salafist in orientation, it competed with the Shi'as of the IMN and the traditional Sufi authorities.

Yet Zakzaky kept pursuing his course and built up his movement. It kept growing, eventually becoming millions of members strong. The interesting fact is that Iran does not seem to have engaged with the movement in any meaningful way during those two and a half decades. There is no evidence that they funded his organization in any meaningful way or supported it with missionaries. It was a genuine grass roots movement that spread Shi'a Islam among the Sunnis of Nigeria. On the other hand, why would Iran involve itself? Sheik Zakzaky was ideologically committed to the ideas of the Islamic Revolution. He was building a successful Shi'a movement in Nigeria. Iran could not gain anything more by supporting him, it would only fuel his critics, nor was there any need. Zakzaky was arrested from time to time but overall, his movement was not persecuted. Iran was not involved because there was no reason to get involved neither for ideological, power or economy reasons.

2014-2019, persecution of the IMN. In the 2010s the pressure by the government on the IMN increased. This increase in pressure has several reasons. The first reason was the increase in Islamist activity in general, especially by the movement of Boko Haram, which started fighting the Nigerian state in 2009 (Zenn 2019; Obasi 2015). This made all Islamic movements suspicious. The IMN, with its anti-western pro-Iranian ideology, became a victim of the increased government paranoia about terrorist and separatist groups (Agbonifo and Aghedo 2012). But it is also during that time that Iranian proxy wars in the Middle East

increased. This made the fear that the IMN would become an armed Iranian proxy not completely irrational (Ersozoglu 2021). The IMN also increasingly saw itself in confrontation with other Islamic movements that had better ties to the security apparatus and the government and were using these contacts to increase pressure on the IMN. In addition, many Sunnis in Nigeria were becoming hostile towards the Shi'a IMN. Another reason alleged by the IMN is that the US, Israel and especially Saudi-Arabia were behind the persecution of the IMN (Gray and Adeakin 2019). Given Saudi interests in Nigeria and the IMN criticism of the Saudi war in Yemen and statements by Saudi leaders about the IMN there might be some merit to this though (Gray and Adeakin 2019). No matter what the cause, the tensions increased and then exploded into violence.

On July 25, 2014, in Zaria Nigerian soldiers opened fire on IMN members holding a Quds day protests, twenty-five died and the event became known as Zaria Quds-Day Massacre. Later during a raid on a Hussainiya⁴⁹ three sons of Zakzaky and other IMN members were killed (Adeniji and Egielewa 2020). The next year in December a renewed clash happened, when IMN members were blocking a street, for a protest, that was being passed by the convoy of the army chief of Nigeria Tukur Buratai. The clash was presented by the Nigerian Army as an assassination attempt by the IMN on Buratai's life. In retaliation the army started an operation against the IMN that saw more than a thousand deaths (Uche 2019) and what would become known as the Zaria Massacre. Sheik Zakzaky was once again arrested and the IMN claimed that the attack was the work of Saudi-Arabia (freezak 2018). This violence against the IMN put the group into a more global spotlight, Iranian government media gave the group increasing attention (IRNA 2015) and the Iranian government publicly criticized the killings (Tehran Times 2015). Zakzaky's daughters even became public ambassadors of the IMN to the Islamic

⁴⁹ A Hussainiya is a place of gathering for Shi'as for ceremonies especially those associated with the mourning of Hussein during the month of Muharram.

Republic. Over the next few years global protests of Shi'as, especially in Iran (Radio Farda 2019b), demanded the release of Zakzaky, also because his health was deteriorating.

The Iranian state even got directly involved, with the Foreign Ministry asking for his release and permission to travel for medical treatment (Tehran Times 2019b). The Iranian state through its formal institutions engaged increasingly with the IMN and the movement was praised for its ideological commitment (ABNA 2018), it was even praised in publication in the Quarterly Scientific Journal on Islamic Revolution Research published by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Zamani Mahjoub and Adabi Firoozjaee 2021). This increased Iranian attention of course also brought renewed accusations that the IMN was Iranian funded as part of an emerging Iranian proxy network in Africa (Szakola and Losh 2020; Hilton 2020), but so far, no substantial evidence for this has been presented. There have been Iranian weapons seized in Africa (Adeniji and Egielewa 2020; Szakola and Losh 2020) and arrests been made (News Wires 2010), but nothing that shows any effort by the IMN to become an armed group and the group emphasizes its non-violent, non-terrorist nature (islamicmovement.org 2018). Iran has also shown no intention to arm the IMN, despite the persecution they suffer. The Iranian state only intervenes through diplomatic channels and by publicly highlighting the plight of the IMN throughout this time. This shows an Iranian engagement on behalf of the persecuted Shi'as but no military support or engagement in any form of proxy war.

d) Capabilities

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria does not maintain a fighting force. On the contrary, it is quite outspoken about its non-violent approach. There have been accusations that the IMN is training up a militia with the help of Hezbollah (Alami 2018), but in the timespan covered by this thesis no militia has formed, and no military activities have been observed. The IMN has an organization called "The Guards" (Hurras), which is a uniformed wing, and they guard IMN

events. But while they are getting trained, being uniformed and organized as a military formation, they do not carry weapons openly or have engaged in combat operations. But they do show the potential of the IMN to become a military force. The Guards are modeled after the IRGC and could be developed into a Hezbollah style militia but so far this has not happened (Zenn 2013).

The Nigerian government meanwhile has accused IMN repeatedly of terrorism and assassination attempts but has not produced any hard evidence. Therefore, it can be concluded that the IMN does not possess any noteworthy military might. Yet the IMN stages large scale protests that regularly result in the death of its followers at the hands of the security forces. The IMN so far has been building up a social infrastructure that supports its members and supporters, but also spreads its message. It is running more than three hundred schools and is trying to emulate the welfare state that Hezbollah provides for its followers (Gray and Adeakin 2019). Therefore, it can be argued that while lacking military capabilities the IMN instead has social strategic depth. Iranian financial support might be important here, since this infrastructure allows the IMN to stage the protests but also provide for its followers and create an attractive movement, but so far there has been no evidence presented that shows any such Iranian support.

Potential Iranian support is hard to assess. The smuggling of weapons into Nigeria (Middle East and the Islamic World Working Group 2021) the training of Nigerian operatives by Hezbollah (Alami 2018), all point towards some small-scale Iranian military support for the IMN and the Nigerian government voiced these accusations (Bankole 2019), but it has provided precious little evidence of any direct Iranian support for the group or any build-up of military capabilities. The IMN seems so far to be able to finance its operations with donations. It is likely though that Iran has given the IMN access to funding through its network of foundations. Zakzaky visited Lebanon and Iran at different occasions, that one of his daughters was invited to a Palestine conference and other events shows that Iran was embracing the IMN into its

network. Members of the IMN also study in Qom in Iran, thereby strengthening clerical networks with Iran. This means that the IMN at the moment is not a proxy of Iran since it is not dependent on Iran to function. This situation might change if the IMN chooses to embrace violence in the future.

e) Ideology and Identity

The IMN's identity is Twelver Shi'a Muslim. Sheik Ibrahim Zakzaky became a Shi'a sometime after visiting Iran and the movement and the story of Shi'a Islam in Nigeria begins with him. He visited after the Islamic Revolution and was greatly inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini. The IMN has embraced Hezbollah, the Palestinian cause, Assad, the Houthis and mourned for Qasem Soleimani (freezak 2020). It has embraced the ideology of Khomeinism, referencing its support for the oppressed. In doing so the IMN interweaves its own oppression through the Nigerian state with the oppression of Palestinians and others in the Iranian orbit (freezak 2020). But it does not simply just make statements about these issues. The IMN regularly holds big demonstrations in support of the Palestinian resistance, anti-Zionism is a core pillar of its ideology. Ideologically it also embraces Iranian theological concepts of Jihad that emphasize permissibility of defensive use of violence (Gray and Adeakin 2019). While this should not be interpreted as pacifism, it means the IMN does not engage in open conflict. On the contrary, it emphasizes its non-violent approach (Elbinawi 2017). This approach is a decision by the leader Ibrahim Zakzaky. While he steers his movement in a confrontational manner, so far it has not engaged in the violence of Hezbollah or other Iranian proxy groups, also not in the form of terrorism that the Islamic State or Boko Haram and other Salafi Islamist groups in Nigeria have pursued. Instead, the IMN emphasizes martyrdom (Ojakovo 2022) and juxtaposes its own righteous cause against the Nigerian state that can only use violence to enforce itself.

Something of note is that the IMN emphasizes its pan-Islamic identity, an ideology that was championed by Khomeini, who advocated the Islamic Revolution as being for all Muslims. The IMN in its founding years downplayed the role of Shi'a Islam and instead focused on the pan-Islamic message. Zakzaky praising Hassan al-Banna the founder of the Muslim brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb which he saw as almost on the same level as Khomeini in the level of reverence (Zenn 2013). The IMN and Zakzaky also revere Usman Dan Fodio, an Islamic teacher who founded the Sokoto Caliphate and conquered much of Northern Nigeria establishing an Islamic Caliphate there. While being Sunni he is nonetheless revered by the IMN for his renewal of faith and implementation of Islamic rule. This also gives them greater credibility in Nigeria since it connects them with local history and authority. Fodio is the name patron for the IMN schools called Fudiyya. This way they also increase the prestige of their schools and emphasize the Pan-Islamic nature of their movement. They IMN and Zakzaky also try to keep cordial relationships with the local Sufi authorities (Isa and Adam 2017).

Ideologically the IMN is fully aligned with Iran, its website features Khamenei's and Khomeini's portraits on one side and that of Sheik Ibrahim Zakzaky on the other. Identity-wise, the group does not emphasize any local identity but thoroughly emphasizes their religious identity. That means that it is a fully pro-Iranian Shi'a group, with no other ideological attachments. There is a strong personality cult around Sheik Zakzaky but that is not contradicting commitment to Iran and Khomeinism.

Over the years groups have split off from Zakzaky mostly Sunnis who disagreed with the Shi'a identity, but there have also been Shi'a groups splitting off: i.e., the Rasulul A'azam Foundation (RAAF) split off, pursuing religious education and teaching rather than confrontational politics. Being more focused on religious doctrine and theology, the RAAF is much less confrontational. Religiously they orient themselves towards Ayatollahs from Lebanon and Iraq such as Ayatollah Fadlallah and al-Sistani for inspiration and emulation rather

than Khomeini and Khamenei. They also run a school called Baqirul Ulum, which is run by Nur Dass who can claim religious authority, through support from Iranian Shi'a clergy, thereby posing a challenge to Al-Zakzaky, who lacks such authority.

Another group centers around the Ahlul Bait Institute. While the Ahlul Bait Institute has ties to Iran, the Rasulul A'zam foundation is much more independently minded and theologically independent from Iran. This shows that even in Nigeria where Zakzaky virtually created Shi'a Islam, there is ideological competition among Shi'as. The clear ideological commitment to Khomeinism therefore needs to be emphasized as something that distinguishes the IMN from other Shi'a groups (Zenn 2013). While being critical of the IMN and Zakzaky's lack of religious authority, both movements are also much smaller movements (Isa and Adam 2017). It is therefore unlikely that either group could present a good tool for Iran to leverage influence over Shi'as in Nigeria. If Iran wants to build a proxy in Nigeria, they will have to work with the IMN. The IMN, through its ideological commitment and identity, fulfills all the conditions set by identity-based explanations. The relationship is also more or less official, showing that the relationship is sufficiently deep.

f) Geopolitics and Economy

Nigeria is not in the traditional orbit of Iranian influence or interest. Nigeria is also not relevant for Iranian security. Nigeria is a sizable country and has the biggest economy of Africa. Through its movie industry - dubbed Nollywood – which has a wide range in Africa, the country also has a substantial soft-power. It also has a growing population that will see it potentially reach more than a billion people before the end of the 21st century (Whiting 2019).

Nigeria has important economic potential for Iran. Iran needs markets for its products and services and Iran needs to develop these markets. Therefore, Nigeria forms part of a wider Africa strategy that Iran is pursuing since the 2000s (Chimarizeni 2017). While African markets

are not as big or bountiful as Asian or Western markets there is immense growth potential and less friction over politics or human rights records. Making Nigeria an important future market for Iran. Iran pursued a dedicated Africa strategy under Ahmadinejad, which was not continued by Rouhani, but picked up again by Raisi (Lob 2022). Through the IMN Iran can gain potentially more influence in Nigeria and develop trade ties and find customers interested in buying Iranian products and trading with Iranian companies. On the other hand, Iranian support for the IMN creates hostility from the Nigerian state. This is an argument against power-based explanations that see the economic aspect of Iranian proxy warfare as important. But the relationship between Iran and the IMN also enables to negotiate with the Nigerian government from a position of strength using the support for the IMN as a pressure point and as a bargaining chip to gain concessions in the economic sphere (Gray and Adeakin 2019). There are interests on both sides to increase trade and develop the economic relationship (Essen 2016; Kingsley 2015).

There is also the black-market economy. Iran has been caught smuggling weapons to rebels in Senegal (Zenn 2013) through its advantageous position Nigeria and especially pro-Iranian movements like IMN can serve as a hub for smuggling operations in Western Africa. Thereby facilitating the financing of Iran's extensive proxy network. Iran's allies Hezbollah and Syria meanwhile are heavily involved in drug smuggling, using African produce to smuggle products to the Arab world and the West, but also to launder money (Allamudin 2021). So far Hezbollah has used the local Lebanese expat community for this, but a pro-Iranian proxy group might help with this as well in the future. Overall while geopolitically not relevant for Iran, economically there is an argument for Iranian involvement in Nigeria, albeit one that plays the long game.

There is of course also the other side. Nigeria is one of Israel's allies in Africa. By building up a group that lobbies against Israel, Iran can weaken the Israeli influence. There is

also the matter of retaliation for potential Israeli or US attacks on Iran. Zakzaky has declared there will be consequences felt in Nigeria should Iran be attacked (Zenn 2013). By having groups that would strike at Israeli and American interest in retaliation for any attack on Iranian soil, Iran is building up its deterrence. The IMN can potentially serve to facilitate such deterrence.

g) IRGC and Foreign ministry

While there are allegations that the IRGC is training IMN operatives, either directly or indirectly via Hezbollah (Alami 2018), not much evidence has surfaced. The IRGC does not seem to be overly involved with the IMN. Azizi (2020) argues that it was the IRGC under Soleimani that build a relationship between Iran and the IMN, but beyond that their direct involvement is limited. The Nigerian government has alleged that the IRGC are helping the IMN and that the IMN is involved in terrorist activities but did not provide any evidence. General Soleimani met a female IMN representative – Jumai Karoofi that was being treated in an Iranian hospital (Azizi 2020). Although this allegedly happened in the context of Soleimani building his prestige up for a potential run as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Foreign Ministry of Iran meanwhile has engaged repeatedly with the IMN. In 2019 the Iranian Foreign Ministry pressured Nigeria to release Zakzaky for medical treatment and criticized the Nigerian government for cracking down on protests (Tehran Times 2019a). Iran hosted the daughters of Zakzaky⁵⁰ (ahl-ul-bayt.ir 2019). They were invited to meet Ayatollah Ramazani, the secretary general of the Ahl-ul-Bayt World Assembly⁵¹. This increased their standing as representatives of their father and represented an official embracing of Zakzaky

⁵⁰ In February 2020 one of them would attend an event next to Qassem Soleimani's daughter Zainab (temi 2020). Showing the close relationship between IMN and Soleimani.

⁵¹ The Ahl-ul Bayt World Assembly is a foundation founded by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other clerics in 1990 to help Shi'as globally. It is a tool of Iranian soft power.

through the Iranian state. It further increased Sheik Zakzaky's standing with other Shi'as. What this shows is that the Islamic Movement in Nigeria is embraced by the Iranian state.

There is no secrecy about them having a relationship. Iranian politicians and spokespeople openly support the rights of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria to protest, and they advocate on behalf of Sheik Zakzaky. This engagement is also insightful because it shows that Iran acts consistent with the explanation, that sees Iran as having a responsibility to protect fellow Shi'as. At the moment there is no systematic persecution of Shi'as in Nigeria, aside from clashes with the government and the incarceration of Zakzaky, Shi'as are not persecuted. Therefore, Iran is more engaged in using diplomacy and public statements to support them in their rights and to strife for their security, this could be a potential explanation for why Iran is not engaged in proxy warfare: it is just not an efficient way to help the Shi'as of Nigeria. The diplomatic route is at the moment a more efficient way. Economically the IMN might be useful for the IRGC and the Hezbollah smuggling network. It is possible that there will be some help by the IMN for smuggling, but there is no evidence.

h) Conclusion

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria is an insightful case because it is not an Iranian proxy. First, they are not operating as an armed group, while their protests can at times be violent; how much of that violence is the result of state overreaction is hard to assess. But the fact remains they do not maintain armed troops. Secondly, they are not dependent on Iran. They are fiercely loyal to Iran, but the group is not a proxy. The question of why they have not developed into a proxy is therefore insightful for this thesis.

Identity-based explanation: The IMN has fully embraced Khomeinism. They are Twelver Shi'as, with most having converted from Sunni Islam, but many members these days also being born into the movement. It was through Zakzaky after returning from Iran that Shi'a Islam really came to Nigeria and even though there is no consensus on the numbers there is

now a substantial Shi'a presence in the country, primarily due to his workings. There are few places where Khomeinism has had such an impact and created so many new followers like in Nigeria. Yet the IMN faces persecution by the state. IMN members are killed and imprisoned, including the leader of the IMN Zakzaky. Despite this Iran does not seem to support the IMN with arms. Yet one reason for this is that the IMN does not want to engage in warfare. The IMN, while engaging in sometimes violent demonstrations pursues a peaceful strategy for change and influence. Iran meanwhile is not just sanding by; the Foreign Ministry and foundations are employed to support the IMN and Zakzaky. Iran is working to help the IMN, which shows that Iran sees itself as having a responsibility to protect. The way is just not violent in this case. The IMN meanwhile embraced the Axis of Resistance and all its members, it made the Palestinian cause a center piece of its ideology. Therefore, the IMN is ideologically fully aligned. But as part of its ideology, it pursues a mostly peaceful strategy of growth.

Power-based explanation: Nigeria has a lot of Potential for Iran. Trading with Africa could enable Iran to develop markets for its products and services. With both countries being strongly involved in the oil-exporting business there is potential for sharing knowledge and expertise. Nigeria is also politically important in Africa. The problem is that the IMN is creating a level of hostility by the official government against Iran. The IMN could potentially be a pressure point used in negotiations to gain Iran greater market access. But overall Nigeria is far away from Iran, legal trade is limited, and Iran's interests are likewise limited. There is some interest in illicit trading, Hezbollah has been heavily involved in drug smuggling in recent years to finance its operations and Africa is an important hub for smuggling drugs into the Arab World but also into Europe. Explaining Iranian engagement with the IMN purely with realpolitik does not make sense, since it would be an extensive investment of political capital for little gain.

Factionalism: Factionalism does not seem a factor in the relationship between IMN and Iran. While there was some engagement between Soleimani and the IMN, there is no

information available to suggest there is a deeper relationship between IRGC and IMN. This can be explained by the fact that the IMN is non-violent and therefore has no need for extensive training on weapons and tactics that the IRGC usually offers proxies. The Foreign Ministry meanwhile engages with both the Nigerian state and the IMN. It is also active in supporting the IMN and pushing for their rights and security.

The case of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria shows something important about proxy wars in general: the agency of the proxy matters. The IMN has all the potential to become an armed proxy. There are militias, terrorist groups and other actors that are operating on Nigerian soil, showing that the state is weak enough for this to happen. Iran's and Hezbollah's extensive smuggling networks would also probably find a way to supply the IMN with weapons. But under the leadership of Zakzaky the IMN has embraced a path of mostly non-violent activism. The reason the IMN is not an armed proxy of Iran is because they do not want to be. They are ideologically completely aligned, and their commitment seems as deep as that of Hezbollah, but they are pursuing a different strategy. There is now millions of pro-Iranian Shiites in Nigeria, giving Iran a substantial influence in the country which shows this strategy to be working in the long term.

Empirical findings about IMN are listed below:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	Iran is not involved in proxy warfare, but the IMN enables Iran to spread its ideology and even its religion in Nigeria on a large scale. Hypothesis partially proven.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	The IMN has fully embraced Khomeinism, the Axis of Resistance. They perceive themselves as part of the Iranian struggle. But they focus heavily on Pan-Islamism and try to maintain good relations with other Islamic groups and venerate local Islamic heroes of the past. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.	The IMN are Twelver Shi'as. Their relationship is hard to assess, due to lack of large-scale support, but seems to be deep enough for official recognition. Hypothesis proven.
Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	Iran does not help the IMN through proxy wars but helps politically. Hypothesis partially disproven.

Table 19 Identity Findings IMN

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	There is no proxy warfare, but Nigeria is also not that important to Iran. Proving the hypothesis.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	Almost no economic interest, lot of potential but no substantial influence gained through the IMN so far. Hypothesis disproven.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	Engaging with the IMN risks making Nigeria hostile to Iran, which could decrease Iranian security, because it makes Nigeria more open to the overtures of Iran's enemies. There is potential to use the IMN for pressure but that remains speculative. Hypothesis disproven.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	Iran has gained some influence through the IMN. Hypothesis partially proven.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	Hypothesis does not apply, since the IMN is ideologically aligned.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	IMN has its goals primarily ideologically, while Iran has limited power/economic based goals. They do not align in any obvious way. Hypothesis does not apply.

Table 20 Power Findings IMN

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.	The IRGC does not seem to use the IMN for any foreign policy of its own. But due to the IMN's non-violent nature this might be a result of a lack of potential. Hypothesis does not apply.
The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.	The Foreign Ministry has engagements with both the state and the IMN. Hypothesis disproven.
Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.	The IMN might be useful for Hezbollah smuggling and thereby help Iran. Hypothesis potentially proven (lack of evidence but high probability)

Table 21 Factionalism Findings Pakistan

2. Pakistan

a) Introduction

Pakistan is an interesting case. It borders Iran in the South-East at the unruly province of Baluchistan. Pakistan is home to a substantial Shi'a minority, which faces persecution at times at the hands of the Sunni majority. The question of why Iran is not engaged in proxy warfare in Pakistan is therefore very insightful. Pakistan represents an important negative case. Pakistan is an unstable state, that while militarily strong and engaged in proxy itself is weak at enforcing its order internally. Many militias, terrorist groups and other armed actors operate on its territory (Staniland 2015), making a proxy warfare in Pakistan possible, according to the conditions set for this thesis – a weak state and insufficient support for the state.

The existence of various armed groups including the Pakistani Taliban Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Basit 2013) and Baluchistan Separatists (Karim 2017) show that operations of an Iranian proxy would be possible. In addition, there have been phases where proxy engagement could be expected, yet nothing happened in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution and the 1990s. In recent years there has been the Liwa Zainebiyoun regiment that is deployed in Syria and while it has increased tensions in Pakistan and the option of turning this brigade into a proxy might exist, it has not happened in the timeframe of this thesis (Karim 2023). So, the question of why Iran is not engaged in proxy warfare in Pakistan will give meaningful insights for this thesis.

b) Historical overview and Context

Islam arrived in Pakistan in the eighth century. Shi'a Islam arrived allegedly also around this time with Shi'as fleeing persecution by the Umayyads seeking sanctuary at the fringes of the Islamic World. In the following centuries waves of Islamic conquerors would subjugate most of India with the province of Sind becoming increasingly islamized. In the 19th century

the idea rose that the Muslims of India were their own nation independent of the Hindus, both of which at this point were subjects of Britain as part of the British Raj. Pakistan became a reality achieving statehood as a dominion in 1947 and ever since has seen conflicts with India, in the beginning populations of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus migrated while religious and ethnic conflicts led to mass atrocities (Baixas 2019), later-on the conflict became focused on the disputed province of Kashmir (Jahanbani 2020). In addition, there has been ethnic separatism mainly in Baluchistan and the Pashtoon areas along the Durand Line, but, most importantly, in what was then East Pakistan and is now known as Bangladesh, where an independence movement successfully split off from Pakistan. The independence war saw a genocide with millions of deaths in an attempt by the Pakistani state to curb the separatism. But an intervention of India led to a humiliating Pakistani defeat.

Pakistan also suffered under constant interference by the military in political affairs, leading to several coups. The most impactful was the military dictatorship of Zia ul-Haq who embarked on a policy of Islamization. This led to tensions with the minorities, especially Shi'as who did not want to be forced under a Sunni version of Sharia. Pakistan also became heavily involved in the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan becoming the main supply and training hub for the Afghan resistance, the Mujaheddin (Tarock 1999).

The relations with Iran were for the most part good. During the Pahlavi era both states had good relations, helped by a mutual alliance with the US. After the Islamic revolution there were tensions but both states found a modus operandi. Beyond that both states had shared interests in getting rid of the Soviets in Afghanistan. Relations worsened between Pakistan and Iran in the 1990s when they were supporting competing factions in the civil war in Afghanistan, with Iran supporting the Northern Alliance (Haqqani 2020) and Pakistan the Taliban (Milani 2006). Both Pakistan and Iran struggle with Baluchi separatism in the South-East and South-

West respectively (Tehran Times 2018). But despite differences over Afghanistan, especially in the 1990s, both states have maintained working relations.

c) Phases of historical significance

The impact of the Iranian revolution on Pakistan. When the Iranian revolution happened, it also changed the situation in Pakistan. Zia ul-Haq had become dictator of Pakistan in 1978 and had embarked on a campaign to Islamize the country. This caused tensions with the Shi'as who did not want to be forced under Sunni Sharia law. This led to protests and political parties aligned with Iran forming that pressured the government to implement changes, so that Shi'as would be instead covered by their appropriate Shi'a Sharia laws. Yet while the religious minority of the Ahmadis saw increasing persecution and in 1984 were banned from calling themselves Muslims, Shi'as did not face such persecution in that time. At the same time the revolution in Iran was inspiring Islamists in Pakistan (Icaufman 1979).

In Saudi-Arabia meanwhile Wahabis, under the leadership of a self-declared Mahdi⁵², occupied the holy district in Mecca and started a battle with Saudi security forces, leading to a month-long siege. Khomeini in a radio speech blamed the US for the attack on Islam's holiest site (Trofimov 2008). This led Pakistani Sunni Islamist students to attack the US embassy in Islamabad killing employees, taking hostages and setting the building on fire. The Pakistani army restored order quickly (Trofimov 2008), but it showed the impact that Khomeini had even on Sunnis.

Zia ul-Haq meanwhile was seen as an American ally by Iran, and through Pakistan's previous good relations with the Shah as a part of a hostile regime. His image was even trampled

⁵² The Mahdi is a mythological figure in Islam, most prominent in Shi'a Islam. He will appear at the end of times. The title has been appropriated by different leaders through the centuries.

at a parade in 1979, where he was present having invited himself to the event (Nasr 2006). Despite this, Pakistan recognized the new government quickly and engaged with it.

The relations between both sides at this time are complicated. Khomeini and Zia ul-Haq both emphasized pan-Islamic ideals in their relationship, with both men sending each other greetings and messages of peace (al-Khomeini 2008). While Khomeini emphasized the pan-Islamic nature of the Iranian-Pakistani relations, Zia praised Khomeini as an Islamic symbol (Iranian embassy Pakistan 2014). Yet after a few years the relations deteriorated, according to Vali Nasr (2006) Khomeini also chided Zia that while Zia was allied to the US, Khomeini was allied to “the” superpower - Allah (Nasr 2006, 162).

Overall, in this phase Pakistan did not pose a threat to Iran. While aligned with the US there was no large-scale US presence of troops; Pakistan was also not allied to Israel. They were neighbors with a working relationship. Ideologically the Pakistani state was on a path towards becoming more Islamic. While living in a Sunni majority country, Shi’as were not massively discriminated.

Pakistan’s Shi’as were mobilizing to gain their own Sharia law, and Khomeini increasingly became a figure of emulation (Vatanka 2012). The Shi’as in Pakistan also seemed to have been unsure what the Islamic Revolution initially meant for them and what to make of Khomeini’s authority (Fuchs 2019). But while this shows a mixed image of relations there were no actions taken by either side to undermine mutual relations. Pakistan was not seen as an ideological enemy. This all shows that Iran was neither ideologically nor because of security concerns interested in engaging in proxy warfare in Pakistan in the aftermath of the revolution.

The Sectarianism of the 1980s and 1990s. Despite their initial good relations there were tensions between Iran and Pakistan. The regime of Zia ul-Haq saw a rise of Sunni Islamist groups that attacked Shi’as and other religious minorities. At least several hundred Shi’as died in attacks (Nasr 2000). The 1990s saw an intense campaigns of shootings, bombings and

murders where Shi'a and Sunnis targeted each other. The bloodiest highlight was in 1988 when Sunni Islamists massacred hundreds of Shi'as in the town of Gilgit (Hunzai 2013), with support from the Pakistani government. Khomeini had also issued a Fatwa in 1986 that Iran must protect Pakistan's Shi'as (Vatanka 2012). Khomeini allegedly threatened Zia that he would do away with him as he had with the Shah if the latter would not protect the Shi'as (Nasr 2006, 138).

In the end the Shi'as in Pakistan got their own religious law. The increased tensions between Iran and Pakistan continued into the 1990s and have been called a proxy war between Iran and Saudi-Arabia (Ahmar 2008). Although the information available is too sparse to really make a definitive assessment, given that the fighting was mostly small scale, at least in how the Shi'as were operating, it is doubtful if an operational dependency can be attested. According to Vali Nasr (2006, 167-168) Iranian support for the Shi'as was financial and stopped because the Shi'as could not win the fight and an escalation would have seen even more bloodshed, because Iran could not match Saudi funding. Contrary, Vatanka (2012) argues that Iran was engaged in a proxy conflict in Afghanistan and feared that an expansion of that proxy conflict to Pakistan could endanger Iran itself. Given that Iran has successfully build up proxies, despite limited financial means, the latter explanation seems more reasonable. Iran also built up its soft-power influence in Pakistan with the local Shi'a population, an important tool hereby is the Imamia Student's Organization (ISO) (Haqqani 2020), that helps Iran expand its influence and especially the authority of Khamenei among Pakistani Shi'as (Vatanka 2012).

Overall Iran seemed to not be interested in engaging in a full-fledged proxy war in Pakistan. The increasing violence especially during the 1990s and the failure of Iran to properly support the Pakistani Shi'as led to internal criticism (Vatanka 2012). But Iran seems to have focused its military support on Afghanistan and instead relied on soft-power approaches in Pakistan. This challenges identity-based explanations because Iran clearly did not fulfill its obligations to protect fellow Shi'as. This behavior is more consistent with power-based

explanations: starting a full proxy war in Pakistan would have endangered Iran itself. The proxy policies in Pakistan in the 1990s seem to align with the general toning down of revolutionary export rhetoric and a more realist approach to foreign policy by Iran.

Liwa Zainebiyoun and the Syrian Civil War (2013-2019). When the so-called Arab Spring escalated into a civil war in Syria, Iran started deploying more of its proxy network to fight there. The Liwa Fatemiyoun were mostly recruited from Afghan refugees living in Iran. Iran was reaching out across the Middle East and beyond to recruit volunteers to fight in Syria especially to secure the religious shrines and protect them from iconoclastic terror groups like ISIS (Karim 2023). Pakistani Shi'as who suffered under persecution by Sunni Islamists volunteered to fight in Syria. Initially Pakistanis served in the Liwa Fatemiyoun, but in 2015 it was decided to incorporate them into their own unit. Like Liwa Fatemiyoun, Liwa Zainebiyoun is mostly under the command of IRGC officers, but there were also officers of Pakistani origin. Haj Haidar was the brigade commander, a Pakistani Shi'a from Parachinar, he died in 2017 (Azizi and Vazirian 2022).

Unlike Liwa Fatemiyoun which was recruited primarily from Hazaras, Zainebiyoun seems to have diverse ethnic make-up including Pashtuns, Baltis and Turis. Although some of them seem to have been recruited from the Pakistani community in Iran, there was an ongoing recruitment effort in Pakistan (Karim 2023), especially in Parachinar, a Shi'a majority city in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan (Karim 2017). Just like Liwa Fatemiyoun the unit has not been deployed to Pakistan, so it is not a Pakistani proxy. But there have been terrorist attacks against Shi'as in Pakistan in retaliation for the operations of Liwa Zainebiyoun in Syria (Azizi and Vazirian 2022). Pakistani Sunnis meanwhile joined the Islamic State to fight against Assad, the Iraqi state and the international coalition. So, the sectarian conflicts of Pakistan were continued to be fought in Syria and Iraq.

While Liwa Zainebiyoun is not deployed to Pakistan as a force, it provides military training to Pakistanis. Anyway, Liwa Zainebiyoun seems to have been solely focused on Syria. Iran did not try to make it a Pakistani proxy in the timeframe under analysis. This shows that Iran is unwilling to commit to a proxy war in Pakistan.

d) Capabilities

The sectarian violence of the 1980s and especially 1990s, is sometimes described as a proxy war between Saudi-Arabia and Iran. Both sides are alleged to have supported different sides in a campaign of sectarian killings and bombings between Sunnis and Shi'as (Ahmar 2008). Yet the capabilities that the Shi'a groups targeting Sunnis used were rather limited: explosives, pistols, knives etc. The tactics employed consisted of murders, suicide bombers, car bombs, abductions etc. (Rafiq 2014), this means there was a limited need for material. While Iran might have provided some form of material, training and intelligence, it would not have been a necessity to give these groups capabilities for the attacks they conducted. Shi'as living in the Pakistani tribal areas have access to arms, the same way as others in the tribal areas have. The capabilities were overall low though, there was enough only for small scale skirmishes and terror attacks. This shows that even if Iran supported the groups, there was no operational dependency.

With the formation of Liwa Zainebiyoun a new potential Pakistani proxy arose. This group has fought in a conventional style in the Syrian Civil War but also taken part in anti-insurgency operations. While it is hard to give definitive numbers it is assessed that several thousand Pakistanis have served in the unit over time (Azizi and Vazirian 2022). The unit could form the foundation for a future proxy being capable of conventional fighting in the style of Hezbollah, and the potential of Liwa Fatemiyoun as a proxy in Pakistan is discussed in the literature (Karim 2023) but so far it has not happened.

So far not attempts have been made to turn the Liwa Zainebiyoun into an actual Pakistani proxy. Iran does have a soft-power network in Pakistan giving it influence (Vatanka 2012). It has also local networks of supporters that it can use for intelligence operations, for example freeing abducted Iranian diplomats or to arrest Baluchi separatists (Haqqani 2020). This also shows that Iran has deep networks of operatives in Pakistan that would enable Iran to smuggle trainers and weapons into the country if Iran or the IRGC wanted to. So, while Iran has influence in Pakistan and functioning networks, it does not have proxies and therefore no proxy capabilities.

e) Ideology and identity

Given that there are no Iranian proxies in Pakistan there is no ideology to analyze. But the ideas of the Iranian revolution have resonated in Pakistan. That Iran was able to recruit Pakistanis to its cause volunteering to fight in Syria, shows the appeal of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. Identity wise, while many religious minorities are present in Pakistan, including other Shi'a sects, the most relevant one for this thesis are the millions of Twelver Shiites, making up 10-15% of the population (Ahmar 2008; Azizi and Vazirian 2022). Given that this minority has seen attacks and thousands of deaths since 1979, there is a challenge to the identity-based viewpoint, that Iran should be feel a responsibility to protect and support these millions of Shi'as. Iran instead is not engaged in proxy war to help them. Iran is trying to spread its ideology in Pakistan and garner acceptance of Khamenei as a religious authority figure (Rieck 2016). But Iran is not engaged in proxy warfare.

Pakistan despite its many problems is not a failed state yet and it has an appeal also to its Shi'a citizens. So, the lack of proxy engagement might also be explained through a desire on part of the Shi'as to have stability and not destabilize the state (Rieck 2016) by engaging recklessly in open proxy warfare. Pro-Iranian organizations while present do not have the mass appeal they have in other countries. The Imamia Student Organization have just several

thousand members (Haqqani 2020; Vatanka 2012), in a country of 223 million in 2019. There is also no political party closely affiliated with Iran that can competes successfully at national elections. Iran is not able to ideologically penetrate Pakistan as deeply as it does in other countries.

f) Geopolitics and economics

Pakistan is a direct neighbor of Iran, bordering Iran's restless Sistan and Baluchistan province. The two countries have long-running deep ties that connect them. There were even ideas of a confederation of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1960s (Dupree 1963). Since its founding Pakistan has strived for good relations with Iran. During the Shah era both countries were allies of the US, being founding members of the Baghdad pact, renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), after a coup in Baghdad saw Iraq leave the alliance. CENTO would be dissolved in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when Iran announced it would leave the alliance. Pakistan remained a staunch US ally, becoming an important partner of the US in the War on Terror. Despite this, both countries tried to maintain amicable relations, yet these were fraught with tensions because of the war in Afghanistan and the Pakistani-US alliance. But on a state level both countries continued to cooperate.

While there was some tension after the revolution, Pakistan quickly recognized the new government. During the Iran-Iraq war Pakistan remained neutral but more pro-Iranian during the Iran-Iraq war. Pakistan helped improve relations between Iran and China (Alam 2004), this led to the deliveries of Chinese Silkworm anti-ship missiles that were crucial during the so-called tanker war (Gill 1998) a part of the Iran-Iraq War. Both countries cooperated when they supported the insurgency against the Soviets, with Iran supporting Shi'a groups (Milani 2006; Fulton and Alfoneh 2012; Akbarzadeh and Ibrahim 2020). After the Soviets withdrawal, both sides competed for influence. Pakistan wants control over Afghanistan via its proxies, the Taliban, to gain strategic depth vis-a-vie its enemy India (Alam 2004). Iran meanwhile strives

for a stable Afghanistan, in which Shi'as, Tajiks and other minorities get a share of the power, previously having supported the Northern Alliance and the Hazaras (Fulton and Alfoneh 2012; Tarock 1999).

This competition, considered by some scholars as a proxy war (Vatanka 2012), deteriorated the relationship between both states. With 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan the situation shifted, both countries took part in the Bonn conference supporting the new Afghan state. While invited to intervene in Yemen by Saudi-Arabia, Pakistan declined the offer (Karim 2017; Rafique 2016). On the other side Iran has good relations with India and tries to steadily improve them (Akbarzadeh 2015; Karim 2017), while Pakistan sees India as its mortal enemy and regularly fights with it in small border skirmishes to full-blown wars.

The main issue between Pakistan and Iran is security. Security plays a significant role in Iranian thinking about Pakistan. In 1971 after a gruesome genocide and Indian intervention Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan. This split up, which fundamentally questioned the Two-Nation-Theory that Islam was the connecting identity of India's Muslims and the foundation of the Pakistani state, caused concern in Iran. The fear was that (West-)Pakistan with ethnic unrest in Sindh and Baluchistan might break apart next. This instability would severely threaten Iran due to the potential of fighting, proliferation of weapons and increased separatism on the Iranian side of the border. Other groups that might want to split off from Pakistan would be the Pashtuns that mostly inhabit the Federally-Administered-Tribal-Areas (FATA) in Pakistan's North-West. These concerns regarding Pakistan remained the same after the birth of the Islamic Republic. The Afghan Civil War saw millions of refugees flee to Iran- a breakup of Pakistan would be even worse.

Another issue is that Pakistan is nowadays in possession of nuclear weapons. In such a chaotic scenario, this would pose an existential threat to Iran. So, Iran has a fundamental interest in the continued stability of the Pakistani state, due to its own security concerns.

Another security concern is separatism in Baluchistan. Both Iran and Pakistan, together with Afghanistan, control parts of the areas where the Baluchis live. The areas have been notoriously hard to rule⁵³. Iran only gained complete control over the area in the 1990s, the operations being led by Qassem Soleimani (Azizi 2020). To this day drug smuggling and attacks by separatists remain an issue. In the 1980s the US even proposed to Pakistan to train Baluchis in Pakistan that would then fight Iran (Alam 2004). This shows that Iran needs Pakistan on friendly terms to keep its South-Eastern border under control. Iran has repeatedly accused the US of supporting the Baluchi separatists' groups, especially Jundallah, that is Sunni Islamist in ideology and has fully embraced anti-Shi'a separatism. Pakistan is instrumental for Iranian security. If Pakistan becomes a haven for Baluchi separatists, then Iran will have to fight a serious insurgency in its South-East. But given that Pakistan is also struggling with Baluchi separatism there is grounds for cooperation. Both countries developed this cooperation (Majidiyar 2017d) and in 2019 an agreement for a joint-border force was agreed (DW 2019). Additionally, Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan and Pakistan's Baluchistan province have been declared twin provinces (Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). This initiative aims at strengthening ties. The hope is by cooperation and development to curb separatism or at least better fight back against it.

All this all shows that Iran has a strong incentive not to start proxy warfare in Pakistan in order not to endanger its own security, by creating unrest. Iran might have an incentive though, to have a pressure point against Pakistan. Should a Pakistani government decide to support Baluchi separatists Iran would need to be able exert pressure against Pakistan, which does not involve open confrontation. So, there is reasons for Iran to engage in proxy warfare but also against them in terms of Iranian security.

⁵³ Baluchistan-Sistan province is the Iranian province in the South-East of Iran, its mostly inhabited by Baluchis. They are mostly Sunni Muslims, with a Hindu minority. Since the 1940s Balochis have been fighting against Iran and Pakistan to form their own state.

A field of close cooperation between both countries is the nuclear field. Iran expressed concern when India tested its nuclear weapons, but embraced Pakistan when Pakistan performed their tests. The language the Iranian leadership was using was one of Pan-Islamic solidarity. But beyond that, Iran used the network of Abdul Qadeer Khan to strengthen its own nuclear network. The network included China indirectly, with Chinese nuclear technology provided to Pakistan finding its way to Iran (Alam 2004). This trade, which happened with the permission of Pakistan's military and intelligence elite, saw Iran make substantial gains in terms of nuclear technology and pursue its alleged nuclear weapons program. Pakistan often performs an important middle-man role in the Chinese Iranian relations, with Pakistan acquiring technology, which it then passes on to Iran.

Lastly it is the economic aspect. Pakistan is a trade partner for Iran. Especially during the Iran-Iraq war Pakistan was important and Pakistan is a trade partner for Iran with increasing significance. Both countries have signed several trade agreements (commerce.gov.pk 2005) and Pakistan is an important importer of Iranian iron ore, that is smelted into steel in Pakistani steel mills (Rafique 2016). Trade between both countries is in the hundreds of millions of dollars (BR Web Desk 2019). While trade is small, given that there is compatibility as in the case of iron and geographic proximity, there is immense potential and both countries strive to use it. But with limited success so far.

In Summary Pakistan is essential for Iranian security because it borders Iran in critical points. Both Pakistan and Iran struggle with the Baluchi separatism, although Iran must fear that Pakistan might use those separatists against it, like the US allegedly did. So, Iran does not want to antagonize Pakistan too much on other fronts. Yet Iran might be incentivized to maintain an option for proxy wars to have a pressure point should a hostile regime arise in Pakistan that would actively support Baluchi separatism.

There are close economic ties between both countries and there is cooperation in defense and nuclear programs. This might highlight some of the reasons why Iran is not more active in supporting any groups in Pakistan, since Iran wants to keep these relations working. Another compelling argument against Iranian proxy wars is that Pakistan is an unstable state. A breakup could see serious threats to Iran arise in terms of refugees flooding the country, insurgents gaining access to better weapons and nuclear weapons getting into the hands of Salafi groups that might use them against Iran in a fit of sectarian hatred. Both countries have supported different sides in Afghanistan in the past and might do so again in the future, leading to a potential proxy war in Afghanistan as in the 1990s. There is also the issue of Iran's relations with India that are close but cause consternation in Pakistan, which fears being encircled (Alam 2004). But overall Iran and Pakistan have working relations, and the security arguments make a strong case why Iran is not engaged in proxy war in Pakistan.

g) IRGC and Foreign ministry

Iran and Pakistan have working foreign relations. Due to common security concerns, shared economic interests and cooperation in science and other fields. The Iranian foreign ministry engages with the Pakistani state. Yet the IRGC also intervenes in foreign policy. After a terrorist attack that killed two dozen IRGC members Major General Mohammad-Ali Jafari threatened an IRGC operation in Pakistan if it would not do its "duty" and fight terrorists, the existence of which he blamed on "regional and extra-regional intelligence services" (Siddique 2019). That the IRGC is willing to openly threaten Pakistan shows a high level of dissatisfaction with how Pakistan tolerates terrorist groups that attack Iran and a high level of independence mindedness on the part of the IRGC commander. But the IRGC works, together with the Artesh and the border guards, also with Pakistan in fighting smuggling and against common enemies, showing a more complex picture of Pakistani-Iranian relations. One example was in 2017 when Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour visited Pakistan to work with Pakistan to free ten

Iranian border guards that had been abducted and smuggled across the border (Tehran Times 2018). So, both IRGC and Foreign Ministry engage with their respective counterparts in the Pakistani state. With Liwa Zainebiyoun meanwhile, the IRGC is the main conduit of engagement. But this is to be expected since the Brigade operates in Syria under IRGC command. Overall, the engagement with the Pakistani state and the lack of clear proxy operations in Pakistani do not give any indications of factionalism.

h) Conclusion

Pakistan is a significant case study because Iran is not engaged in any real form of proxy warfare. The Pakistani state is not strong enough to enforce its constitutional ban on militias (Constitution of Pakistan 1974), Iran could engage in proxy warfare if it wanted to. But it does not. This poses a challenge to the identity-based explanation.

Identity-based explanation. Pakistani Shi'as do face attacks, especially through suicide bombers and murders. Since the 1980s there has been an increase in sectarian violence that targets Shi'as and other minorities. But the Iranian state, limited financial support and alleged threats aside, has not decided to engage in proxy warfare in Pakistan to protect fellow Shi'as. Intervening in Pakistan would also enable Iran to fight Islamists, especially Deobandi Sunni Islamists closely aligned with the Saudi Wahhabis. While there have been Shi'as in Pakistan that aligned with Iran, this has not resulted in the creation of proxy groups in Pakistan. Liwa Zainebiyoun might eventually develop into an Iranian proxy in Pakistan but so far it has not, and its operations are limited to Syria. Despite having a large Shi'a population Iran has not developed a successful proxy relationship. If Iran sees a responsibility to protect towards Pakistani Shi'as it has not acted upon it. The identity-based explanation is disproven in the Pakistani case. Iran does not engage in proxy war to help the Shi'as of Pakistan.

Power-based explanations. Pakistan is of political significance for Iran, due to the shared border and concern about Baluchistan. But Pakistan also poses a potential threat to Iran.

It outnumbers Iran in population and has a sizable military in addition to nuclear weapons. Pakistan also has experience in utilizing Sunni terrorists against a state through its prolonged proxy war against India.

Not engaging in proxy warfare in Pakistan arguably increases Iranian security, since it does not create a hostile Pakistan that would threaten Iran from the East. A weakened Pakistan would also endanger Iran and see millions of refugees flooding the country; thus, destabilizing Pakistan is simply not in Iranian interests.

Economically Pakistan has some potential for Iran, but the relationship has remained on the potential level for many years now. The areas that are dominated by Shi'as are also quite remote and so even if Iran were able to form a proxy military in Parachinar it would not yield Iran any economic benefits. Iranian influence in Pakistan would probably be diminished by engaging in proxy warfare in Pakistan. So far Pakistan and Iran have a working relationship and Pakistan has not opposed Iranian foreign policy in the Middle East. Iran was willing to work with Pakistani Shi'as when it needed manpower for the Syrian Civil War. Yet it had no interests in a proxy war in Pakistan and so did not develop such relations with any Pakistani groups.

Factionalism. While the IRGC is concerned with Pakistan and especially the security situation in the South-East of Iran, it has not engaged in any known foreign policy subversion of its own. The IRGC works with its partners in the military, while the Foreign Ministry engages with its counterparts. The Liwa Fatemiyoun engages with the IRGC, but they are 100% under the control of the IRGC and also rather small.

In summary the Pakistani case study challenges the identity-based explanation of Iranian proxy policy. Iran does not protect the Shi'as of Pakistan. This makes sense from a power-based explanation though, while factionalism plays no role in Pakistan.

General findings are listed in the following tables:

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.	Iran has Sunni Islamist enemies in Pakistan but does not engage them via proxies. Hypothesis disproven.
Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).	There were and are groups that align ideologically with Iran, but Iran has not developed them into proxies. Hypothesis disproven.
Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.	There are fellow Shi'as, but Iran has not developed proxy relations.
Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.	The Shi'as of Pakistan face acute persecution, tolerated by the state. But Iran has not engaged in large scale proxy war to help them defend themselves against this. Hypothesis disproven.

Table 22 Identity Findings Pakistan

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	Pakistan is of importance to Iran. It borders Iran and there are shared security concerns about Baluchistan. There is also a shared interest in a stable Afghanistan, albeit with different visions for the country.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	Engaging in proxy warfare in Pakistan would not increase Iranian economic influence or secure it. Hypothesis proven.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	Engaging in proxy warfare would decrease Iranian security massively. It would endanger the Iranian state with a hostile neighbor with access to US weapons and good relations with Saudi-Arabia on its Eastern border. Hypothesis proven
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	Engaging in proxy warfare here would decrease Iranian influence.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	Iran uses Pakistani Shi'as in Syria but has not build up a proxy in Pakistan since it does not serve its interests. Hypothesis proven.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	Iran has no strong interests in proxy warfare in Pakistan and is not engaged in such. Hypothesis proven.

Table 23 Power Findings Pakistan

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.	IRGC does not seem to engage in parallel Foreign Policy via proxies. Hypothesis does not apply.
The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.	The IRGC is engaged with its military counterparts and the Liwa Zainebiyoun but not the Pakistani Foreign Ministry. The Iranian Foreign Ministry engages with its counterparts. Hypothesis does not really apply.
Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.	The IRGC does not seem to have economic interests in Pakistan. Hypothesis does not apply.

Table 24 Factionalism Findings Pakistan

VII. Conclusion

1. General Observations

Over the course of eight case studies meaningful insights have been gained to test the three main hypotheses and respective sub-hypotheses and gain insights by comparing the different cases. Some general observations on Iranian proxy warfare shall be discussed, since these insights give a better understanding of Iranian proxy warfare in general. First, Iranian proxy warfare in the timeframe of this thesis is limited to the Middle East. The IMN case study showed a potential for Iranian proxy warfare on the African continent and there is potential in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but for the timeframe under investigation for this thesis, Iran seems content to limit itself to the Middle East. This is in line with its status as a regional power and a country with limited financial and military means. This limitation poses a problem in understanding the motivation behind Iranian proxy warfare because the geopolitically relevant area overlaps with the area where most Shi'as and Palestinians can be found. But past Iranian engagement in Bosnia and small-scale engagement in Pakistan shows that Iran is willing to engage beyond the Middle East.

Next is the fact that Iranian proxy warfare is opportunistic. Cooperation with PLO members, working with the Taliban and reconciling with Hamas and PIJ all show a willingness to work with groups that are ideologically and in their geopolitically goals different from Iran. But all these groups had one crucial aspect: they were an available force in a theater of operations where Iran wanted to engage in proxy warfare. This will be discussed in greater length below when Iran's proxy relations are discussed. But it must be noted, that if an opportunity arises Iran will take it. Be it working with the Taliban to fight ISIS-K or work with the PLO and Hamas to fight Israel. Another aspect that shows Iranian opportunism is the fact that Iran so far has not started wars: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan are all cases where Iran engaged in already ongoing conflicts. This shows that Iran is not

necessarily interested in conflict but uses existing conflicts opportunistically for its own goals. This can be interpreted in two ways; Iran is not seeking conflict or Iran is not capable of building up a proxy enough to start a conflict successfully. Given the long list of Iranian actions and of Iranian proxy conflicts that antagonized the US, Israel and Saudi-Arabia it is not reasonable to describe Iranian proxy behavior as conflict averse on the contrary Iran uses conflict extensively to further its foreign policy goals. Therefore, the fact that Iran has not initiated conflicts through its proxies indicates that Iran is not capable of doing so or sees the risk involved as too great. On the other hand, the constant involvement in proxy wars already poses a risk, so risk aversion is also an unconvincing argument. This makes the only sensible explanation that Iran is not capable of just building up a proxy and causing a civil war in a country.

Another crucial aspect is that Iran often works with groups it did not create: the Houthis, PIJ and Hamas, a slew of Iraqi groups, the Taliban and one might even argue Liwa Fatemiyoun were all founded by local actors. Even Hezbollah had its roots in Islamic Amal. This is important since it shows that agency is often with local actors rather than Iran. It also means that Iran is not an unstoppable force if local grievances are addressed early.

While Iran was able to mold groups and influence them, especially in the Iraq and Lebanon cases, these groups had been founded before they engaged with Iran, sometimes decades before. In the Houthi case the initial grievance was with Wahhabi missionaries sent by Saudi-Arabia and lack of economic development. Iran might be considered skilled at appealing to local actors, its ideological framework might appeal to Shi'as across the Middle East, but Iran cannot conjure up proxy groups out of thin air, but in almost all cases had to work with local already existing groups. This shows that when analyzing Iranian proxy warfare and the actions of Iranian proxies, the agency of the proxies must be considered and given greater importance. Iran's proxies have their own agendas, goals and can initiate operations without Iran. They might grow dependent on Iran; they might ideologically align closely and follow

Iranian orders, but they are not mere pawns and exist in a local context with their own history of grievances that caused them to become armed political actors in the first place.

The negative case studies in comparison

The two negative case studies shall be discussed here quickly, to see how they compare to the other cases. By comparison it will be analyzed why Iran is not involved in proxy warfare here. Through the comparison further insights will be gained to analyze the validity of the three explanations. In addition, further explanations that have been worked out through the case studies will be added to analyze why a negative case study does not contradict one of the hypotheses or why it does so.

Nigeria. The Nigerian case study is so significant because it highlights the potential soft-power and appeal of Khomeinist ideology, adapted to the local context and spread by a charismatic leader figure. With the Islamic Movement in Nigeria Iran has everything it needs to create a proxy. But creating a proxy in Nigeria out of the IMN would just endanger them without gaining anything. Its leader has been arrested many times since he founded his movement, and it has kept growing regardless. Iran would create an enemy out of the Nigerian state for little gain and the movement would not gain anything. Yet the more important aspect is that Sheik Zakzaky has no interest in being a militia leader. Rather his way is that of missionary activity and public protests. While his movement faces attacks from Wahhabi terrorists and brutal crackdowns from the government, it has grown to have millions of members. So, while Shi'as face persecution, it is a far cry from the massacres Shi'as faced in Lebanon or the brutality of the Saudi campaign against the Houthis. Therefore, Shi'as of Nigeria cannot be considered as being existentially threatened, when compared to other cases. They face violence and discrimination but on a small scale.

Geopolitically it also does not make sense for Iran to intervene in Nigeria, the gains are minimal compared to cases like Yemen or Iraq. So, the negative Nigerian case study can be

explained away by local actors not wanting to be armed actors, the local Shi'a community not facing a serious enough threat – it is growing in fact – and Nigeria not being geopolitically relevant for Iran.

Pakistan. Contrary to Nigeria, Pakistan can be considered geopolitically relevant for Iran due to the shared border and the problem of separatism and drug smuggling across the south-eastern border in Baluchistan-Sistan. Iran allegedly supported groups in the 1990s, but the support was on a small scale, too small to really constitute a proxy relationship. The Shi'as in Pakistan have faced attacks over the last few decades, with thousands being killed. Yet Iran is not engaged in proxy warfare. There is an argument from a power-based perspective, that Iran does not want the nuclear Power Pakistan as an enemy, but Iran was willing to support the enemies of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Taliban being a proxy of Pakistan. So, some level of antagonization was acceptable for Iran. Training up Pakistani Shi'as to help them protect themselves, should therefore not have antagonized Pakistan too much.

Vali Nasr has argued that it was the financial means of Saudi-Arabia and the inability to fight back against the Sunni majority that led to the end of Iranian support for Pakistani Shi'as fighting a low-level insurgency (Nasr 2006). This argument is problematic. While the financial argument might be true for the 1990s and the phase of economic reconstruction after the war, considering the other cases in this study and especially the Yemeni case study, the financial argument does not stand up to scrutiny. In Yemen Iran supported the Houthis in a direct war against Saudi-Arabia and they persevered. Iran has since the 1980s build up Hezbollah despite Saudi-Arabia trying to weaken Iranian influence in Lebanon. Saudi-Arabia also could not financially outcompete Iran in Iraq, Palestine or Syria. Iran was able to thwart its financially stronger adversary in several instances. Iran has also in the past backed Shi'as and other minority groups that stood against bigger foes. Iran supported the Northern Alliance made-up of Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks against the Pashtun Taliban, despite the Pashtun being the

biggest ethnic group of Afghanistan. Iran supported Hezbollah despite Shi'as being a minority in Lebanon. So, in comparison both explanations have problems.

A better explanation offered by Vatanka (2012), and that aligns well with insights gained from other case studies is the lack of appeal. While some Shi'as feel attracted to the Iranian ideas and ideology, many others do not. Some Pakistani Shi'as, especially from the tribal areas served in the Liwa Zainebiyoun unit. But there is no evidence for widespread pro-Iranian sentiments. On the contrary, Pakistani Shi'a political and religious leaders emphasize their commitment to the Pakistani state (Fuchs 2020). Sectarian violence is seen as a big problem by Pakistani Shi'as but Shi'as do not face an existential threat. Especially when compared to cases such as Iraq or Lebanon during the civil wars, especially during the invasion of ISIS. So far Shi'as are still part of Pakistani society and are members of state institutions. A compelling argument can therefore be made, that it is again local factors that are the main reason there is no Iranian proxy warfare in Pakistan: There is neither a need for Iran to intervene in Pakistan via proxy, nor a local desire.

2. Identity-based explanations

The identity-based explanation, of the two main hypotheses proposed in this thesis to explain Iranian proxy warfare has many arguments in favor of it, and many cases have proven the hypothesis completely or at least mostly correct. Yet there have been some exceptions, all of this will be discussed below. Each sub-hypothesis will be discussed in light of the results produced in the empirical chapters; the result of the latter will be also compared to each other to achieve definitive answers regarding the validity of the hypotheses.

Sub-Hypothesis 1.1

“Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.”

Iran intervened in Lebanon where Hezbollah fought Israel and its respective proxies, it intervened in Iraq where Iran’s proxies fought the Americans and later the Islamic State, and it intervened in Syria to fight the Syrian opposition and the Islamic State via various proxy groups. Iran is working with different groups in Palestine to fight Israel including Hamas, PIJ and Sabireen Movement, but Iran was also willing to work with PLO members. In most existing conflicts over the Middle East, Iran has gotten involved and in all of them it was able to fight enemies that Iran defines as ideological enemies. It supported the Taliban that were fighting ISIS-K and NATO. So, the sub-hypothesis is partially proven. If Iran can fight its ideological enemies in a conflict, it will do so. But it has to be noted that most, if not all, of Iran’s geopolitical enemies in a sense are also ideological enemies, so there is an overlap. Which means that it alone does not prove the identity-based hypothesis overall. It is also important to note that as mentioned Iran will involve itself in conflicts, but it does not seem to initiate them.

The spreading of ideology aspect is an interesting side factor. When building up proxies it seems Iran strives to create ideologically closely aligned Shi’a groups. As was the case with Hezbollah and the Iraqi proxies, where Iran pushed its ideas of Islamic rule on the Iraqi groups that had previously been ideologically divergent such as in the Badr movement. Iran also worked with the Sabireen movement in Palestine, helping the group that was Shi’a and much more closely aligned with Iran. So there seems to be a policy of spreading the ideology of the Islamic revolution among Iran’s proxies, whenever possible. Given that Iran has the best relationships with those groups that align most closely this makes sense. But overall spreading of ideology seems to be of secondary priority for Iranian proxy behavior considerations.

Sub-Hypothesis 1.2

“Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi’a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).”

Empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis. Iran has developed its most successful proxy relationships with fellow Shi’as that are closely aligned ideologically. Be it the Houthis, Hezbollah or various Iraqi proxy groups. The proxy relationships between these groups and Iran have been called the “cultural model” of proxies by Amos Fox (2020), whereby the cultural alignment of proxies with their sponsor creates a deep bond. The Iranian case highlights that this is accurate, but that ideology can play an equally important part in this. Iran has had tumultuous relations with Afghan and Iraqi proxies that aligned religiously but not ideologically (Ostovar 2018). The case studies analyzed for this thesis show that for Iran, to develop its deepest and most successful relationships, a politicized Shi’a identity is a requirement. Neither with Hamas or PIJ did Iran develop a relationship as deep as with the Houthis or Hezbollah. The Taliban received support from Iran, but they got limited supplies compared to the Houthis who received large shipments of drones and missiles. The ideological alignment is an important aspect, while groups might add ideology, like the Houthis with their antisemitism, there is no ideological competition to the values of Khomeinism. The Iraqi Mahdi army and Hamas have nationalism – Iraqi and Palestinian respectively – that prevents these groups from aligning themselves completely with Iran, when compared to completely aligned groups like the Sabireen movement or Kata’ib Hezbollah.

The Iranian case study shows the relevance of the cultural model of proxies but also highlights the importance of ideology to understand strong and stable proxy relationships between proxy and sponsor.

Sub-Hypothesis 1.3

“Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi’as.”

Empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis. While a shared Shi’a identity is no guarantee for a working proxy relationship it is a precondition for a deep, lasting and successful proxy relationship. The tumultuous relationship between Hamas, PIJ and Iran also shows this to be true. Iran is more than willing to engage with Sunnis, but the relationships that develop out of this are not as deep as those with fellow Shi’as. Connecting to sub-hypothesis 1.2 a Sunni group that has a very deep proxy relationship with Iran can be hypothesized, but according to the insights gained by this thesis the group would have to embrace Iran, Khomeinism and the Axis of Resistance fully, something that even PIJ did not do.

Sub-Hypothesis 1.4

“Iran will support Shi’as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.”

This hypothesis is the most problematic one. Iran helped fellow Shi’as and Palestinians in conflict situations. It helped the Shi’as of Lebanon during the civil war with the founding and buildup of Hezbollah, which became a potent military and political force that secured them against the other ethnic groups and foreign actors like Israel. Hezbollah would also intervene in the Lebanese Civil War on the side of Palestinians, protecting them even from the fellow Shi’a, albeit secular, organization Amal. In Iraq Iran would get involved via its proxies as soon as Saddam was toppled. But here is the main issue with this hypothesis. Iran did not actively help

uprisings against Saddam in the 1990s; it allowed its proxies to operate in Iraq but did not pursue an active policy of regime change. Iran also only really got involved in Yemen when the Saudis intervened. Iran also did not build up a Pakistani proxy that protected Pakistani Shi'as against terror attacks. In the case of Iraq Iran got involved as soon as it was possible. In Yemen there was no real threat to the Zaydis, even the president was one, till the so-called Arab spring and the Saudi intervention in the country. The Saudis, who previously had sent missionaries to eradicate the Zaydi faith, were a different caliber of a threat to the Zaydis, than the Yemeni government had been.

In Pakistan while Shi'as have suffered terror attacks, the Pakistani state is still working, by trying to create a proxy in Pakistan Iran would greatly increase hostility towards Shi'as in the country. There also seems to be little desire on the part of Pakistani Shi'as to get involved with Iran. In the case of Nigeria while the government is brutal in its handling of the IMN, the leader of the IMN Sheik Zakzaky has no interest in a violent uprising and a potential proxy war. The Taliban meanwhile that had previously persecuted Shi'as received Iranian support, but only after they had announced ideological changes and had sworn off sectarianism. Iran had been hostile to them and supported the Northern Alliance against them in the 1990s when they persecuted Shi'as. In conclusion there have been no counterfactual cases among the ones studied for this thesis. So, empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis, with the caveat that it applies to situations of open conflict where Iran can then proceed to use the chaos and breakdown of central order to build up proxy groups or deploy existing ones.

Overview Identity-based explanation

“Iranian decision to support a proxy war is the result of ideology and identity. Iran chooses to get involved when it sees a responsibility to help fellow Shi’as or Palestinians because the Iranian leadership identifies with them. Additionally Iranian proxy warfare is the translation of Iran’s revolutionary ideology into policy and must therefore serve the ideas and the spread of the revolution.”

The hypothesis is correct and applies in the cases studied for this thesis. Iran has repeatedly shown its commitment to help fellow Shi’as be it in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen or Iraq. In addition, Iran has supported the Palestinian cause with a broad support for groups like Hamas and PIJ. Ideology plays a big role in Iranian proxy warfare, making an enemy out of Israel and the US. Past cooperation with both Israel during the Iran-Iraq war and the US during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan show that Iran is capable of cooperating with both countries. But Iran chooses its enemies based on ideology and according to said ideology the US and Israel are the enemies of Iran. But it is willing to work with groups that do not embrace its’ ideology like Hamas or the Taliban and while Iranian rhetoric features ideas like fighting corruption and standing with the oppressed prominently, the close relationship with the PMF and Hezbollah that both have a stranglehold over their respective countries shows that supporting its Shi’a allies is more important than values that are preached in Friday sermons in Tehran. Iran also deployed its proxy network to support Bashar al-Assads oppressive regime in Syria.

Identity-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
<p>Iran will intervene in a country or conflict via proxy war if this enables Iran to fight its ideological enemies and spread its ideology among the supported group of people.</p>	<p>Iran invests a lot of resources to fight Israel, a declared ideological enemy. The amounts invested in Hezbollah and Palestinian groups is disproportionate to the problem Israel poses for Iran, geopolitically, and can only be explained through Iran's ideological commitments. Iran will invest into proxies if it can fight its ideological enemies, this hypothesis is proven. Iran will also strive to spread its ideology among the populations where its proxies operate, as evident by Hezbollah, the Iraqi groups and the Sabireen movement. Although this is a secondary concern. This hypothesis is partially proven.</p>
<p>Successful and deep proxy relations are built when groups align ideologically with Iran. Either through a politicized Shi'a identity or an adherence to Khomeinist ideology; integrating themselves in a broader movement to resist Israel, the USA and Wahhabism (Axis of Resistance).</p>	<p>This hypothesis is proven. The deepest relations exist between proxies that are fully committed to a politicized Shi'a identity and the ideology of Khomeinism: Hezbollah, the Houthis and several of the Iraqi groups that operate as part of the PMF. All of them are integrated into the Axis of resistance. Relations with groups that do not share that commitment are shallower.</p>
<p>Iran will develop the deepest proxy relationships with fellow Shi'as.</p>	<p>This hypothesis is proven, the deepest relations exist with fellow Shi'as, although as noted above, the deciding factor is ideology, not religion. A Sunni group that fully commits to Khomeinism and the Axis of resistance might exist in the future and disprove this hypothesis.</p>
<p>Iran will support Shi'as and Palestinians through proxy war to help them protect themselves and gain control in the area where they reside to secure themselves.</p>	<p>Hypothesis proven. In the case of Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, Iraq and Yemen Iran supported groups so that they could achieve control and secure themselves. In the negative case studies of Pakistan and Nigeria this has not happened. But the deciding factor hereby are local actors that have no desire to engage in open conflict with their states.</p>

Table 25 Overview Identity-based explanation

3. Power-based explanations

Sub-Hypothesis 2.1

Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.

Empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis, although less so for explanations that see Iranian behavior as defensive or reactive. Iran is engaged in proxy war in Iraq, it was engaged in Afghanistan in the 1990s and was supporting the Taliban by the end of the timeframe of this thesis in 2019. Iran was also having its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, a traditional area of importance to Iran and has proxies deployed in Syria - its ally since the 1980s, since the civil war there started. Further is the deployment of proxies in Yemen, while not traditionally a field of Iranian influence, Yemen's geopolitical importance made the country important for Iran. Through Iranian support for the Palestinian groups Iran has become a central player in the Middle East and no peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians is possible if Iran does not agree. So, Iran is gaining more influence in new areas and is increasing its geopolitical importance in the Middle East overall.

Sub-Hypothesis 2.2

Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.

Empirical evidence is not consistent with this hypothesis. There is no direct correlation between Iranian proxy warfare and economic interests. On the contrary Iran has proxies in Palestine and Yemen which are underdeveloped regions with Iran having no real option to exploit markets or resources in the timeframe of this thesis. Economic considerations can play

a role, but this role is best explained in the context of continued investment in proxy groups rather than as a core reason for proxy involvement. That Iran has also not exploited its newly found influence in Syria extensively via groups such as Liwa Fatemiyoun shows that economic considerations do not play a decisive role for proxy wars. Iran has increased its economic influence in Iraq, but the way the proxies acted endangered that market. As mentioned in other locations Iran deployed its proxies the economic gains are minimal. This is especially true if one sees the huge investment Iran makes economically, politically and militarily.

Sub-Hypothesis 2.3

Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.

Empirical evidence is not consistent with this hypothesis. While security does play a crucial role in Iranian proxy warfare Iranian proxy wars have decreased the security of the Iranian state repeatedly. The first case is Palestine: Iran and Israel had a good relationship during the Pahlavi era, but even during the Iran-Iraq war both sides cooperated against Saddam Hussein and the coalition of Arab states supporting him. By supporting Palestinian groups and Hezbollah against Israel, Iran was creating an enemy. That Israel is an enemy of Iran makes sense from an ideological viewpoint, but it decreases the security of Iran. Likewise attacking the US and Saudi-Arabia via proxies in Yemen and Iraq decreases Iranian security.

Iran's proxies have tied down US forces in Iraq, and the support for the Taliban likewise tied down US forces and was working towards the expulsion of the US from Afghanistan. But this tying down of enemy forces comes at the cost of increasing hostility to Iran by the US. In addition is the violence by the Iraqi proxies against Sunnis that created more hostility towards Shi'as and in part also led to the rise of ISIS and thereby contributed to a direct threat to the

Iranian homeland. Iranian engagement in proxy warfare decreases the security of the Iranian state. It gives Iran more strategic depth and second-strike capabilities. But these come at the cost of a much more hostile neighborhood than if Iran would not involve itself in proxy warfare especially on that scale and intensity. The proxies can help mediate this situation, Hamas, PIJ and Hezbollah give Iran second-strike capabilities against Israel, but the very reason Iran needs these capabilities is Iranian proxy warfare against Israel. Proxy warfare is not serving Iranian security, its decreasing it in total sum.

Sub-Hypothesis 2.4

Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.

Empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis. Iran has expanded its influence in Yemen, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq and has entrenched and expanded its influence in Syria. In all cases of Iranian proxy warfare Iran has achieved this. Even in the negative case of Nigeria one can argue that by engaging with the IMN, the prospect of a potential proxy war gave Iran more influence in negotiations with Nigeria. The question is how this sub-hypothesis stands in relationship with the previously mentioned identity-based explanations and the following factionalism-based explanations.

Sub-Hypothesis 2.5

Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.

Empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis. Iran has worked with the PLO in the case of Palestine and cooperated with different Iraqi groups that did not align ideologically

in the fight against ISIS. Before the rise of the Houthis Iran, also maintained relations with the Hirak movement in Yemen. An important case here is also Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Both groups while ideologically close to Iran have their differences and more crucially are Sunni in nature. But they represent the two biggest fighting forces among Palestinians against Israel. Both sides had a falling out over Iran's Syria and Yemen policies, but both sides reconciled because they needed each other. Both groups were the only actors through which Iran could strongly influence the situation in Palestine and remain relevant regarding the Israel-Palestinian situation, proving the hypothesis. But the most important case here is the Taliban. Iran has supported the Taliban – without developing a proxy relationship – because they fought the Americans and NATO and more crucially, they fought ISIS-K, which Iran deemed a way bigger threat than the Taliban. This shows that Iranian proxy behavior is best described as opportunistic or realist in that it will work with even those that do not align ideologically if it helps Iran achieve its goals.

Sub-Hypothesis 2.6

Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.

Empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis: the Houthis and Iran both had an interest in defeating the Saudi incursion into Yemen and their relationship was deep and both sides proved reliable to each other. The same holds true for Lebanon where Hezbollah had an interest in fighting Israel and in Iraq, where various groups had an interest in gaining power, and later in fighting ISIS. But in the case of the Taliban there was shared interest, but the relationship did not develop the depth as it did in other cases. In the case of Hamas and PIJ one can see that when interests diverged there was a split in the relationship and Hamas tried to get other backers. Highlighting that shared interest – in this case the fight against Israel – does not

create a strong bond, between host and sponsor. Hezbollah meanwhile had many good reasons not to get involved in the Syrian Civil War but did so after a personal appeal of Khamenei. This shows that their deep relationship is not just about shared material political gains but has a strong ideological component.

Overview of Power-based explanations

Iranian proxy warfare is motivated by geopolitical power-based interests, since proxies are a cheap way for Iran to tie down enemy forces and thereby secure Iran's borders, security and influence. But Iran can also expand its influence into other regions. Where Iran engages in proxy warfare is primarily defined through Iran's national interests. Iranian proxy warfare only happens when Iran hopes to pursue its national interest through it. Actions are limited by the need to keep Iran and its interests safe. If proxy warfare is not in the national interest, it will not happen. Therefore, it will only happen in geopolitically relevant regions and countries.

The hypothesis applies partially. Iran does not conduct proxy warfare for economic gains, neither does Iranian proxy warfare increase Iranian security. It helps secure Iran, but the threats Iran faces are partially due to said proxy warfare, resulting in no net gain of security. Iranian proxy warfare certainly expands Iranian power abroad. It has secured Iran influence in the Levante, in Iraq and Yemen. Through its proxies Iran is a regional power in the Middle East and can shape developments and even act as a spoiler in peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine. So, while Iranian proxy behavior is not defensive in any sense – neither driven by economic nor security concerns, there is strong arguments in favor that it is driven by expansive power concerns. Iranian proxy warfare has expanded Iranian influence, and it has happened primarily in the region of Iranian interest – its immediate neighborhood and in countries that are geopolitically relevant for Iran like Iraq, are allies like Syria or are historically grown important to Iran like Lebanon and Palestine. The problem is that this region also overlaps with

the area where most Shi'as, Palestinians and holy places of Islam and especially Shi'a Islam are. So, the relation between the expansive power-based and the identity-based explanation will need to be discussed, after a short excursion discussing factionalism.

Power-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
Iranian proxy warfare only happens in areas that are important for the Iranian state. States in which Iran is engaged in proxy warfare either border Iran or are close to the Iranian border or in the Iranian sphere of influence.	This hypothesis is proven. Iranian proxy warfare happens primarily in the Middle East. Countries like Iraq and Syria are important to Iran. Lebanon meanwhile is an area Iran has tried to influence in the past. Afghanistan is likewise important for Iran. In Yemen meanwhile Iran can gain influence in the Red Sea.
Iran will use proxy warfare if it helps Iran get influence in countries where it has economic interests to either defend or expand.	This hypothesis is disproven. In most cases of proxy warfare Iran has little to no economic gains. Even in the case of Iraq where Iran has made gains economically, the Iranian proxies endangered these gains through their aggressive behavior towards Sunnis.
Proxy warfare must increase the security of the Iranian state, it cannot increase insecurity. Proxies must make Iran safer, engagement in proxy warfare cannot endanger the Iranian state.	Hypothesis disproven. There is no net gain in security for Iran. By making Israel an enemy and supporting Palestinian proxies and Hezbollah against Israel, Iran is decreasing its security. Also, in Iraq the proxy approach created chaos and danger for Iran. While Iran has been able to tie down enemy forces, its proxy strategy has created more hostility from the US, Saudi-Arabia and Israel – decreasing Iranian security. The second strike-capabilities vis-a-vie these countries are canceled out by this increased hostility.
Iran will use proxies to expand its sphere of influence and entrench its influence where it already exists.	Hypothesis proven. Iran has become a regional power through its proxies and has greatly increased its influence.
Iran will work with any group and use them as a proxy if they are useful for Iran and the group works against Iranian enemies. Even when groups are not ideologically or religiously aligned, cooperation will happen if the group and Iran share an enemy.	Hypothesis proven; the best evidence is the collaboration with the Taliban. But also, the Palestinian proxies: Hamas, PIJ are different ideologically from Iran, still Iran worked with them. Previously Iran even worked with the PLO, despite strong ideological differences.
Deep relations will develop where Iran has strong interests which align with the interests of the proxy and both sides show a high level of reliability.	Partially proven. Iran had shared interests with Houthis and Hezbollah, but there is mechanism that shared interests lead to strong relations, as evident by the case of the Taliban and the split with Hamas and PIJ.

Table 26 Overview of Power-based explanations

4. Factionalism

Sub-Hypothesis 3.1

In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.

This sub-hypothesis cannot definitely be proven, because not all splits between Foreign Ministry and IRGC will become public and therefore can be analyzed as such. So, there can be no final assessment on the extent of the role factionalism plays in Iranian proxy warfare. But there are strong indications in favor of it existing and happening on several occasions. The IRGC shipped weapons intended for Palestine when Iran and the US were improving their relations in the aftermath of 9/11. These weapons got intercepted and this reconciliation was destroyed by the IRGC actions. Another example is Iraq in two ways: the policy of supporting sectarian groups and the confrontation with the US. The former can be seen as a clear example of factionalism. The Foreign Ministry tried to create a stable Iraqi state, the IRGC meanwhile wanted loyal proxies, which pursued their own sectarian agenda destabilizing the Iraqi state, the behavior being at least tolerated by the IRGC if not outright encouraged. The proxies then waged war against the US in Iraq. This happened at a time when tensions between Iran and the US were already high and the government under President Rouhani was trying to salvage its nuclear deal with the West. The IRGC also worked with the Taliban, while the Foreign Ministry of Iran engaged with the Afghan state, this caused tensions between Qassem Soleimani and Foreign Minister Zarif. Afghanistan is therefore another case where the IRGC pursued its own foreign policy. To conclude, the hypothesis applied in some cases. But overall, the proxies do not seem to serve the primary purpose of undermining the foreign policy or of enabling a Pasdaran foreign policy, but they are used in this way sporadically.

Sub-Hypothesis 3.2

The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.

Empirical evidence is partially consistent with this hypothesis. In the case of Afghanistan, the Foreign Ministry engaged with the Afghan state institutions while the IRGC worked with the Taliban. In Iraq a like-wise split exists. But here a more complex picture emerges. Rather than competing the development seems to be a gradual take-over of the entire Iraq Foreign policy by the IRGC. In other cases, both the IRGC and the Foreign Ministry engage with state institutions such as the case of Pakistan or both engage with groups such as the IMN, Hamas and Hezbollah. This shows that there is no clear-cut responsibility of foreign policy and proxy engagement. Rather than being solely the tool of the IRGC, Iran's proxies are engaged by the entire state in many cases. What can be observed is that when proxy groups take-over state-like roles such as the Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah the Foreign Ministry and other civil institutions of Iran will engage with them. While leaving official state institutions by the wayside. Rather than a general rule a case-by-case analysis of IRGC and Foreign Ministry is necessary.

Sub-Hypothesis 3.3

Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.

As with economic aspects of Iranian proxy warfare this hypothesis is disproven, given the available information. The IRGC does not seem to use its proxies for economic gain on any large scale. The IRGC economic conglomerates harvest benefits from proxy relations especially in Iraq, and there is smuggling in Africa in which the IMN might be involved - although actual

evidence for this is sparse. But overall economic considerations do not seem to be an important factor behind IRGC engagement with proxies. Rather it seems that IRGC economic activity in Iran helps the IRGC fund its proxy network.

Overview Factionalism-based explanations

Iranian proxy warfare is the result of competition or factionalism between the IRGC and the Iranian Foreign Ministry, especially under reformist and moderate governments like Khatami and Rouhani. The IRGC leadership has at times disagreed with the foreign policy of the elected branch of the government. Proxy warfare is a way for the IRGC to pursue their own foreign policy.

Factionalism does not explain Iranian proxy warfare. Proxies are not a coherent tool of a parallel foreign policy. Rather the IRGC will use them from time to time to pursue their own policy ends abroad. Factionalism can help explain some actions where official Iranian foreign policy and actions taken by the IRGC and especially Iranian proxies differ. But proxies only play one part in this conflict, the IRGC has been slowly infiltrating more of Iran's state institutions. Increasing numbers of ambassadors come from the Guard. Qassem Soleimani allegedly boasted to US general Petraeus that he is the one charge of the foreign policy in Iraq. This claim has certainly been shown to have its merits and proxies play a big role in it. But for cases where factionalism does play a role, there are many where Foreign Ministry and IRGC align politically, be it Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Nigeria or Pakistan. There is also the complaint by Medi Taeb that Rouhani had forbidden the IRGC from giving missiles to the Houthis to not endanger the nuclear negotiations, which highlights that the civil institutions can also curb the actions of the IRGC if need-be. Overall, there seems to be a tendency by the IRGC to use proxies to worsen relations with the US. The first instance of factionalism at-play occurred in the context of a thaw of US-Iranian relations after 9/11 and the Iranian support for

the US invasion of Afghanistan. Then there was the IRGC buildup of loyal proxies in Iraq, that also went against the US, the confrontation with the US leading to Qassem Soleimani’s death and lastly the support for the Taliban. So, the proven instances of IRGC using proxies to spoil official Iranian foreign policy all seems focused on the US.

Factionalism-Based Hypotheses	Empirical evidence
<p>In cases where the government pursues foreign policies unpopular with the IRGC, they will use proxy warfare to undermine the government policies or achieve their own policy outcomes regardless of the civil administration.</p>	<p>This has happened in several instances proving the hypothesis, all regarding the relationship with the US. Iranian proxies and the support for them by the IRGC has repeatedly spoiled US-Iranian relations and helped the IRGC keep America hostile to Iran. Yet at other times the IRGC seems to have been content to follow guidelines by the Iranian government.</p>
<p>The Iranian foreign ministry will only have either limited or no engagement with proxy groups, while the IRGC will have either limited or none with the official governmental institutions in countries where their proxy is active.</p>	<p>This hypothesis has been partly proven. There are several instances where both Foreign Ministry and IRGC engage with both proxies and governments. In Iraq and in Afghanistan though the IRGC engaged with Iran’s proxies and the Taliban, while the Foreign Ministry engaged with the official state. In these two countries there is evidence of factionalism. Therefore, it does happen. But these instances are rare. The Foreign Ministry also engages with proxies such as Hezbollah and the IRGC engages with state institutions such as in Pakistan. Therefore, it does not lead to a general rule about proxies and their engagement with Iran.</p>
<p>Iranian proxy warfare enables the fulfillment of IRGC economic interests through the influence of its proxies.</p>	<p>The hypothesis was disproven, no sufficient evidence of this surfaced.</p>

Table 26 Overview Factionalism-based explanations

5. A model of Iranian proxy warfare

This summary has shown the validity of the different explanations. In this section the different proven explanations are brought together, and different explanations of the same phenomena weighed against each other. The different explanations are also brought together and arranged to present one coherent model of Iranian proxy warfare. This section will also discuss some cases of Iranian proxy warfare that have been excluded but that will be discussed to paint a more complete picture.

Iranian proxy warfare will happen in states which are in a state of open conflict, Iran might build up groups in states that are not in an open conflict such as Pakistani Liwa Zainebiyoun, Afghan Liwa Fatemiyoun, Azeri Husayniyun and the Iraqi proxy groups that existed in Iran, when Saddam was still ruling Iraq from 1988-2003; but Iran will have only limited engagement with groups that operate in states which are for the most part at peace. This is seemingly in contradiction of the identity-based hypothesis that Iran sees itself as having a responsibility to protect fellow Shi'as and Palestinians. Iran is not doing the same for Pakistani Shi'as and Saudi-Shi'as. While Iran has helped groups such as Hezbollah in the Arab Peninsula and Shi'as in Pakistan, their operations have scaled down. This can be explained through three factors: an unwillingness of Iran to end up in open conflict with these states due to the support of the proxies, lack of local support and the threat of the state being mobilized against the Shi'as. The first explanation makes sense from a power-based explanation, but it is contradicted by the case studies in this thesis. In the case of Saudi-Arabia and Pakistan, Iran engaged both countries in proxy wars in other areas. Iranian proxies fought Saudi-Arabia in Yemen and attacked the Saudi state repeatedly. Therefore the argument that Iran is not supporting Saudi Shi'as via proxy warfare to not antagonize Saudi-Arabia, seems contradictory. Instead, as was shown by all case studies local factors can play a big role and the threat of the state cracking down on Shi'as in

the country if they engage in violence, even when it happens already as in the case of Nigeria, can be a deciding factor against engaging in proxy warfare.

In Pakistan and Nigeria there was little desire to engage in large scale proxy warfare by local Shi'a actors, showing that local actors are a crucial factor whether Iran engages in proxy warfare. Then there is the threat by the state, Iran antagonized Pakistan by supporting the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan and through its good relations with India and Iran engaged in proxy warfare in Pakistan for a time, but a large-scale Shi'a proxy campaign would create a split between the Shi'a minority and the Sunni majority, not desired by local Shi'a actors. While Sunni insurgents can operate in Pakistan and especially Pashtu Sunnis even challenge the Pakistani state, they do not have to fear large scale reprisal against their co-religionists by a state in which Sunnis are the majority and in power. Shi'a insurgents would cause suspicion and incriminations against their community if they operated the same way. While the Pakistani state has its problems and dysfunctionalities, it has shown its ability to crack down on unrest such as in Baluchistan, Swat valley and other places. The same holds true for Nigeria, where the state has repeatedly acted violently not to destroy the Shi'a community, but rather against public demonstrations by the IMN.

Based on this I argue that the best explanation of Iranian proxy engagements is that Iran sees itself as having a responsibility to protect fellow Shi'as and Palestinians. This explains Iranian involvement in Palestine, in Syria and Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. It is not contradicted by cases such as Nigeria or Pakistan since local factors, make a proxy engagement counter-productive and local actors have no desire for such an engagement. The late intervention in Yemen can also be explained by the fact that the Shi'a community was not under threat as long as it was primarily against the Yemeni state that the Houthis were fighting: the deaths numbered in the low thousands and regular ceasefires and prisoner exchanges tempered the violence. With the Saudi intervention things changed, Saudi-Arabia had previously tried to eradicate the Zaydis

via missionaries. Now Saudi-Arabia was intervening on a large scale militarily, the high death count that followed and the brutal campaign in Yemen that included using hunger as a weapon, showed an existential threat to the Zaydi Shi'as. Resulting in Iran having to get involved to protect them. This then helps clear up the relationship between identity and power-based explanations. In Iraq where Shi'as were under threat and Iran had the strongest possible power-based interests – be they expanded power or security – Iran got immediately involved. So, an intervention happened from the moment there was an option to do so. While in Yemen, a country not traditionally in the orbit of Iran at the time, the intervention happened only when Shi'as came under existential threat. Yet the large extent of support the Houthis received, at a time when Iran was fighting in Syria and had to support proxies in Iraq, shows the importance that Iran assigned to this theater.

This also aligns with the support for Hezbollah in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War. Lebanon's Shi'as faced an existential threat, so crucial resources were diverted to help them. This shows a continued predominance of the desire to protect Shi'as over concerns to expand Iranian power. Both Syria and Iraq were more crucial for Iran geopolitically, the huge investment in the backwater of Yemen through the delivery of drones, experts and munitions highlights the importance assigned to helping the Houthis.

As was shown in the Nigeria case study, Iran will maintain relations with Shi'a groups, as they assumedly did with the Houthis before 2015, but these will only result in proxy warfare if Iranian core power interests are touched upon, or Shi'as are under existential threat. This then also helps consolidate the support for Hezbollah during the Iran-Iraq war into the theory. Lebanon's Shi'as faced threats from all sides, the massacres of Sabra and Shatila had seen large number of internally displaced Shi'as being massacred by Christian militias. Iran saw Amal as too useless and not ideologically dependable, also because it was closely aligned with Syria, so Iran felt the need to protect its fellow Shi'as by founding a new group.

The expanded power of Iran after having built up these Shi'a groups is more a positive byproduct than necessarily a main priority when the support starts. This can be argued because the support costs Iran a lot. Iran had and has to invest large amounts of financial, military and political resources into its proxies. The only place where Iran really benefited from it economically is Iraq. But investments in Palestine, Hezbollah and the Houthis all are way beyond what Iran could hope to regain through economic benefits. The involvement with proxies has increased Iranian power, but at a tremendous cost to Iran. The lack of financial gain Iran has in return means that Iran's strategy for its proxies is too expensive in terms of money, resources and blood to be solely about gaining power. The mixed approaches presented here better explains Iranian proxy behavior.

The relationship between proxies and Iran is an insightful topic. Previous works have shown that mere shared Shi'a identity does not result in working proxy relationships (Ostovar 2018). But what this study has shown is that ideology is the key to understanding working and deep proxy relationships. The best proxy relationships Iran has - with Hezbollah, the Houthis and some Iraqi groups - are with those groups that are fully committed to Khomeinism and embrace every tenet of its ideology. The fact that the Zaydi Houthis are among this list shows that it is not necessarily about religion, though. Yet there have not been any Sunni groups with whom Iran had such close relations as with the Shi'a groups. Hamas which is ideologically different had a break in relations with Iran, the same also holds true for Palestinian Islamic Jihad, despite the latter's closer ideological alignment. Overlapping interests exist, but these exist with many groups that have no deep relations with Iran. The Iraqi Madhi Army also had an interest in a Shi'a dominated Iraq, wanted to get rid of the Americans and their allies, yet they ideologically differed from Iran's proxies in Iraq through their strong emphasis on Iraqi nationalism. So, the Madhi Army and Iran never developed a deep proxy relationship. That does not mean Iran will not engage with Sunni or not ideologically aligned groups. But this will

happen when there is no other option. In Palestine Iran had a local group the Sabireen movement that was ideologically aligned, but it was small and could not withstand Hamas dominance. In Afghanistan it was not feasible for Iran to build up a proxy group while NATO was present in the country, so Iran turned to the Taliban. Their relationship worked because the Taliban professed to have changed in their treatment of Shi'as and they had shared interests. Also, through supporting the Taliban, Iran could develop the relationship with them and hope in the future to be able to exercise influence over them. Likewise, Iran has an interest to be involved in Palestine and Hamas and PIJ need funding and military support, so they and Iran came to terms again. But Iran will try to build up closely aligned groups that share Iran's ideology and if possible, also religious identity. Iran built loyal proxies in Iraq and even expanded their influence through the PMF, it worked with the Sabireen movement when the group arose, and it worked with ideologically loyal Afghans in Syria.

Factionalism does not play a central part in this explanation of Iranian proxy warfare. Proxies do not consistently serve the IRGC to pursue its own foreign policy, historical comparisons with strong cases of factions pursuing their own foreign policy like the Japanese Kwangtung army starting a war with China, do not make sense. Instead, what can be found in the literature is a gradual takeover of the foreign policy for certain areas by the IRGC, that aligns with a gradual takeover of Iranian politics and economy by the IRGC. Again, as with the general economic argument no specific IRGC parochial interest could be identified. Instead of pursuing its own foreign policy via proxies, what the IRGC seems to have done with their proxies is to impair Iran-US relations when they seem too much accommodating. Smuggling weapons to Palestine when US and Iran were working together in Afghanistan, undermining US-Iranian negotiations over saving the JCOPA show a consistency to undermine Iran compromising too much with the US and getting too close to the US under conservative and reform minded governments. There is also the aspect that in Iraq the IRGC favored sectarian

groups that were attacking and harassing Sunnis. This destabilized Iraq, but by excluding Sunnis from power made Iraq a firmer Iranian ally. It was a policy that strengthened Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later helped facilitate the rise of ISIS. The support for these groups that is not explained by ideological or power considerations on the part of Iran, is well explained by factionalism. The IRGC saw the sectarian groups as dependable allies and wanted to see them in power. So, factionalism can explain some of the incoherent policy decisions by Iran and its proxies.

Something that has to be noted in general on Iranian proxy warfare, which makes a strong case against explanations that lean too much on power-based explanations is that Iran defines its main enemies through ideology. There is no inherent reason other than ideology, why Israel and Iran should be enemies. Both countries have worked well together in the past before the revolution and afterwards against Saddam Hussein. Likewise, the US was not opposed to working with Iran, during the Shah era they even helped built up Iran as a local strongman, so there is nothing inherent in the geopolitical context that makes US and Iran enemies.

Saudi-Arabia and Iran are competing for influence over Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. So, this is a classical geopolitical rivalry, but Iran invests so many resources in proxies that fight Israel and is willing to compromise and work with groups like Hamas and PIJ that have proven to be unreliable allies in the past, that Iran clearly is focused on fighting its ideological enemies. Working with its former enemies the Taliban against the US in Afghanistan, is classical realpolitik. But that the US is seen as such a mortal enemy in the first place is an expression of an ideological mindset, that is fueled by anti-imperialism, anti-westernism and anti-Zionism.

Overall Iran is considering power-relations when making decision about proxy warfare. There is no blind fanaticism, Iran will not attempt to start a large-scale proxy war in countries

where this would only endanger the local Shi'as. Instead, Iran will work with local actors and their context. Iranian proxy warfare will happen when in areas where Iran's core interests are touched upon and a civil war arises, such as Syria or Iraq. Then Iran will work towards building up local proxies to secure and expand Iranian interests. If Shi'as are existentially threatened by an actor in a country that is periphery to Iranian immediate interests, then Iran will also get involved, as was the case in Lebanon and Yemen. Iranian proxy warfare does not primarily serve Iranian security: it can at times increase Iranian security especially through second strike capabilities, but it also creates a lot of enemies, so that the security gain is canceled out. Iranian proxy warfare does increase Iran's power and there is an awareness for that, but the costs of this proxy engagement is too large and causes too much hostility if it is purely based on the desire to increase Iranian power abroad, there is also too little economic gain. Instead, an Iranian desire to help its coreligionists has to be given greater space as a motive. On the next page is a simplified schematic representation of this model.

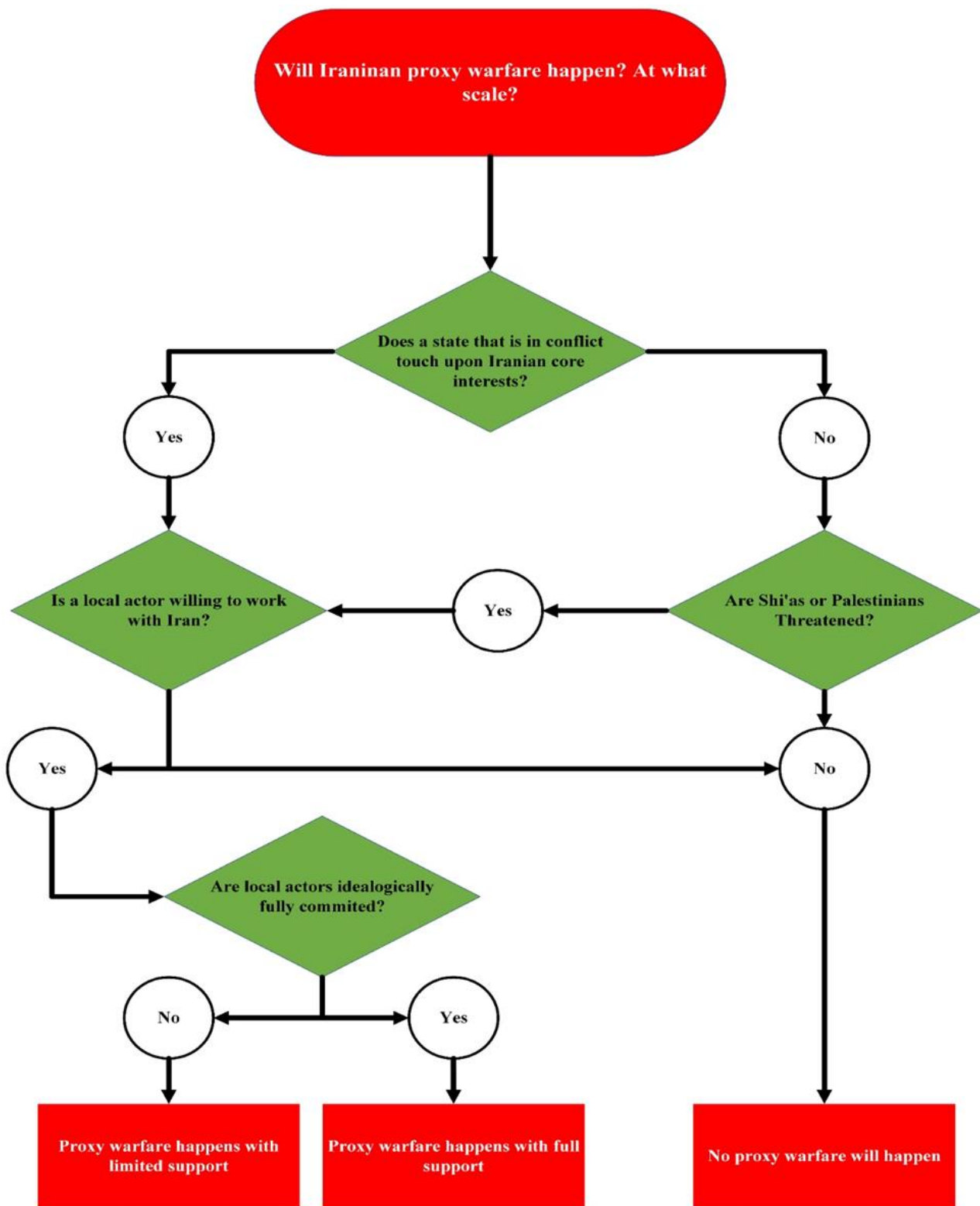


Fig. 1 Simplified schematic representation

6. Changes over Time

Given the almost four decades that have been studied for this thesis an important question is whether and how Iranian proxy warfare changed over time. From 1979 till 2019 there was the change from Khomeini to Khamenei, several different presidents serving in Iran, the end of the Cold War, the War on Terror and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Initially Iran's rhetoric was very much focused on revolutionary export (Taremi 2014), there was also the support for groups in Saudi-Arabia and the Arab Emirates (Levitt 2021) not covered in this thesis. Iran also had much better relations with the secular Fatah and head of the PLO Arafat (Badran 2019) and was supporting Afghan Mujahidin fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan (Milani 2006; Tarock 1999). While Iran's relations with Russia ameliorated, relations with Fatah and PLO have cooled down considerably.

Yet more noteworthy is the continuity. When the war with Iraq started Iran build up Iraq opposition groups into proxies, but made sure they aligned closely ideologically, likewise was Hezbollah build up as an ideologically loyal proxy. This is in line with more modern proxy behavior of Iran, the Houthis aligned with Iran ideologically, and the falling out with Hamas and PIJ had a lot to do with their refusal to fully align ideologically and geopolitically. Support for the Sabireen Movement shows a clear desire on the part of Iran to have a more ideologically aligned Palestinian proxy. So, there is a continuity in the Iranian preference for ideologically aligned proxies. Iran also built-up Hezbollah in Lebanon when Shi'as there were facing massacres and attacks, Iran supported the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan against the Taliban when those were anti-Shi'a (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020), so there is a continuity in Iranian support for Shi'as that face existential threat, the latest case being the Zaydis in Yemen and the Houthis facing off against the Saudi onslaught.

7. Current Situation

Since the end-point of this thesis in late 2019 the situation has changed again. In early 2020 Qassem Soleimani was killed in a strike by the Americans. Biden became president of the US in 2021. Hamas has made peace with Basher al-Assads regime, which has improved relations with Iran and embedded the group further into the Axis of Resistance. The West has retreated from Afghanistan in 2021, leading to a lightning-war victory of the Taliban. Saudi-Arabia has meanwhile concluded a truce with the Houthis and is improving relations with Iran. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a power-shift in the relations between Russia and Iran, with Russia being increasingly dependent on Iranian drones, ammunition to continue its war. Domestically Iran has seen large scale protests after the death of Mahsa Amini in custody of the morality police. These protests have never truly gone away and have seen many Iranian women openly defy the mandatory hijab laws.

On 7th October 2023, Hamas invaded Israel killing more than a thousand Israelis and capturing hundreds of hostages. The Israeli retaliation was fierce and saw a large-scale air campaign together with a ground offensive with tens of thousands of people being killed. The Houthis then began attacking shipping in the Red Sea using drones, helicopters, boats and missiles in support of Hamas. These attacks – labelled the Red Sea Crisis – have seen large scale deployment of US forces to the region, and US and allied strikes on Houthi positions. At the same time have Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq increased their attacks on US outposts in the region. This situation poses several questions. Will Iran risk its wider proxy network to help alleviate the pressure on Hamas? Especially Hezbollah could increase the pressure on Israel by staging large scale attacks from Lebanon. So far Hezbollah has limited itself to skirmishes. Also, from Syria Iran could attack, here Israel has repeatedly killed Iranian officers through air attacks in a preemptive air campaign. Iran could even get involved itself but this would risk retaliation strikes on Iran itself. What will Iran do if Israel follows through

on its threat and will destroy Hamas in Gaza, will Iran stand back and watch its most important Palestinian ally be destroyed? At the same time will Iran try to engage in diplomacy with the West? Trying to capitalize on Europe cutting itself off from Russian gas and oil? Will the truce with Saudi-Arabia and the Houthis and by extension Iran hold? How will the domestic situation in Iran develop? Will Iran, Russia, North Korea and maybe China form a revisionist alliance challenging the Western world order? How will the war in Ukraine change warfare? The large-scale use of drones, the realization that artillery is still “the king of battle” and the return of trench warfare (Biddle 2023), all these will impact wars in the coming years and by extension proxy wars.

Likewise, will the eventual outcome of the war in Ukraine shape the Middle East, a Russian victory might see a turn towards Russia by Middle Eastern monarchs and despots as a more reliable ally in the face of public unrest than the US. A prolonged war might increase food prices which might destabilize countries like Egypt and Jordan, yet it might also keep oil prices on higher levels that will help stabilize countries like Iran and the Gulf monarchies through a steady cash flow. A Russian defeat might renew pressure on Assad because his most important ally Russia might no longer be able to help if Turkey were to push further against him or a renewed uprising might shake his reign. Iraq continues to see large scale protests that also target the corrupt structures around Iran’s proxies in the PMF. This protest might turn violent and could threaten Iranian influence in the country. The question is how Iran and its proxies will adapt to changing circumstances and whether they will be able to take opportunities to expand their power but also face the challenges that might arise. In addition there are the global threats of a new economic crisis originating with a housing crisis in China and climate change that is already affecting nations across the Middle East. How Iran’s proxies will face down the challenges not of enemy troops and tanks but of drought, famine, heatwaves and flooding in their countries?

8. Final Remarks and Outlook

This thesis has evaluated three explanations for Iranian proxy behavior against eight case studies. Explanations that see Iranian proxy behavior as driven by economic or purely security concerns have been dismissed. Neither explanation stood up to scrutiny: While Iran was able to tie down enemy forces, gain second strike capabilities and strategic depth, it came at an enormous financial, military and political cost. The proxies increased the power of Iran, but the hostility to Israel only makes sense from an ideological viewpoint. In the past, Iran and Israel have cooperated, even after the Islamic Revolution. If Iran merely wanted to expand its power, then constantly focusing on Israel is contradictory to that goal since it wastes a lot of resources, without much security gain for Iran.

Iran very much defines certain enemies through ideology namely the US, Israel and Anti-Shi'a Islamists and it will confront these enemies via proxies. But it does so in a careful manner, Iran sees itself as having a responsibility to protect and help fellow Shi'as if they are facing an existential threat, as seen with Hezbollah, Houthis and in Iraq. But Iran is not pushing Shi'a minorities into senseless wars, as long as Shi'as do not face existential threat Iran will have contacts and expand its soft power influence but refrain from supporting proxy groups as was seen in the Nigeria and Pakistan case study. So, there is a "Shi'a realpolitik", which supersedes the Iranian national interest.

Iranian proxy warfare and support is not limited to Shi'as as is seen by the cases of Hamas, PIJ and the Taliban, but Iran has the deepest relations with those proxies that are Shi'a and ideologically aligned with the Khomeinist visions and ideology – Hezbollah and the Houthis being good examples. Here further work is necessary to develop models that adequately represent ideological proximity between proxy and sponsor. Amos Fox concept of a cultural proxies does not encapsulate the core of the deep Iranian proxy relationships, the ideology that cements the deep and lasting relationships. The analysis of factionalism showed that individual

actions can well be explained by factionalism and give evidence that the IRGC will use proxies to undermine official foreign policy. But the bigger trend that has been identified in the literature is the increasing dominance of the IRGC in overall foreign policy.

Yet further work remains, there are cases that were not used for this thesis that could yield further insights such as pro-Iranian groups in Saudi-Arabia and the Arab Emirates, the lack of clear Iranian proxy engagement in conflicts such as Libya, Tajikistan, Kashmir and conflicts further afield. Some of these cases might further strengthen the case for the model of Iranian proxy behavior presented here, others might challenge it. In addition, it is the question to what extent and when the IRGC became the dominant force in determining foreign policy in certain areas, to better understand why, rather than factionalist alignment, usurpation was the cause of one coherent foreign policy and proxy approach. Also, the question to what extent the IRGC intervention was the work of Supreme Leader Khamenei as has been argued (Adair 2023).

Something that is important to note and that became clear throughout all the case studies is the importance of local actors. Groups like the Houthis, Hamas, Hezbollah, various Iraqi groups and even the core of such units as Liwa Fatemiyoun were the driving force behind the origin of their groups. Iran came in, supported them, trained them and helped them grow. But the initial impulse was usually not in Iran, but rather in the local contexts. This is important when considering Iranian involvement in future conflicts and case studies not included in this study: Iran cannot just make proxy groups appear, but rather they are the result of local actors taking matters into their own hands and using violence to achieve political ends, that are best understood in the local context. This will need further study and will need to be considered in the discourse about Iranian proxy groups, Iran's proxies are far more brothers in the Axis of Resistance than mere pawns.

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