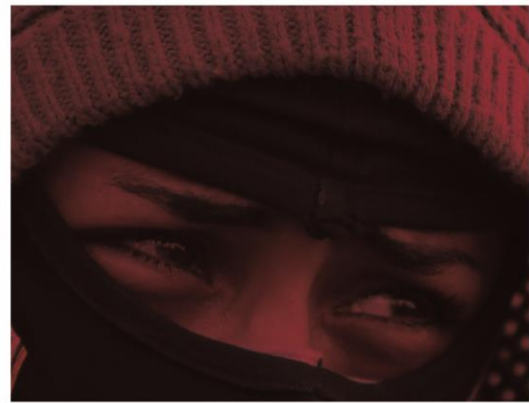


FACT SHEET

IRANIAN REGIONAL HEGEMONY

Introduction | Clerical Rule | Islamic Awakening | The Quds Force | Hezbollah | Syria | Other Resources

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IRANIAN REGIONAL HEGEMONY FACT SHEET

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INTRODUCTION

While Iran is no different from other countries in that it pursues influence and power, in two respects it does differ. The first is in the totalitarian and supremacist ideology that it is seeking to export. The second is the methods with which it aims to support that ideology. The nature of the Iranian state is predicated on a hardline interpretation of Islam applied to the political sphere. Such an ideology inflicts daily human rights abuses on its own citizens and brooks no opposition.

The Iranian regime uses extreme violence, including sponsoring terrorism and the use of proxies, to achieve its goals. Hezbollah is only one of the many terrorist groups that have been supported by the Iranian state, which does not balk from targeting civilians. Others include Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al-Qaeda. (For more information see our factsheet on: [Iranian Support for Terrorism](#)).

Iran does not confine itself to any one set of tactics in the pursuit of its goals. Yet all its actions should be taken holistically. The Islamic republic has a clear set of aims laid out by the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council and is not fettered by the need to take opposition parties or media into account, as is the case in Western democratic systems. It is therefore able to plan and execute long term strategies to achieve its goals.

Soft power¹ (such as financial support, trade, diplomatic activity and cultural influence), is as integral a part of Iran's core strategy as hard power (normally military action). However, it seems to have been largely unsuccessful in its efforts to brand itself as the leader of the Islamic world. A recent Pew study found that Iran's global image is overwhelmingly negative, and its approval ratings have been steadily dropping in the Middle East for the past few years.



The poll shows that favorable views of Iran under Rouhani were very low:²

- Turkey 11%
- Tunisia 22%
- Jordan 5%
- Egypt 17%

¹ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/02/22/think_again_soft_power

² <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/06/18/irans-global-image-largely-negative/>

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CLERICAL RULE – VELAYAT-E FAQIH

Guardianship of the Jurist, *Velayat-e Faqih* in Persian, refers to a concept in Twelver Shiite theology, the official state religion of Iran. It mandates that the leading Islamic scholars of the day ought to control the government.

Historically *Velayat-e Faqih* referred to the authority of scholars over theological questions, leaving the business of government to Sultans (Kings).

Ayatollah Khomeini altered the concept in the 1979 revolution such that the clerical establishment was given ultimate power over the state institutions as well as religious matters. This remains the foundational political ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is explained in depth in Khomeini's book, "Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist."³



In the revolution itself Khomeini showed no hesitation in allying with other elements and in using the practice of 'taqqiyah' (dissimulation) waiting to reveal his vision of Velayat-e Faqih until he had sufficiently consolidated his power.

The clerical elite believe that their mandate to rule is not limited by geographical borders, and therefore they seek to extend their influence and power abroad.⁴ According to Juan Cole,

Professor of Middle Eastern History at the University of Michigan, "Khomeini did not envisage himself as making a revolution in one country. His ideology of clerical rule, rejection of the Western colonial heritage, he felt was a universal message."⁵

³ See link for a translation of the book:

http://www.iranchamber.com/history/rkhomeini/books/velayat_faqeeh.pdf

⁴ <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/Uploads/2903Iranian.pdf>

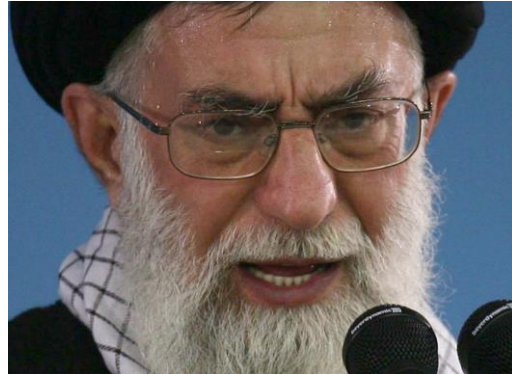
⁵ <http://www.npr.org/2007/02/14/7392405/export-of-irans-revolution-spawns-violence>

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ISLAMIC AWAKENING

Iran regards itself as the rightful guardian of not only Shiite Muslims, but of the Muslim world. Iranian revolutionary ideology sought to promote pan-Islamic unity. To that end, Iran has historically been ready to support Islamist movements and terrorist groups that align with its goals, particularly when those groups threaten the West.

In September 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring protests that swept across the region, Iran hosted more than 700 delegates from 84 countries in Tehran for the first International Conference on the Islamic Awakening.⁶ At the conference, Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei spoke to the delegates about the need for Islamic government and the overthrow of the old Arab dictatorships and monarchies, including those of Jordan, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.



The conference was repeated in 2012 and 2013, but the efforts gained little success.⁷⁸ Arabs largely mistrust Iran's regime. The Syrian Civil War and the deteriorating situation in Iraq have exacerbated sectarian tensions across the Muslim world, and many Sunnis are unsympathetic to the idea of Islamic unity when preached by a regime they view as divisive and power hungry. Iranian attempts to brand sectarian struggle within the Islamic world as a Western conspiracy intended to serve the interests of the State of Israel were met with skepticism.

An illustration of this is that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) derisively refer to the soldiers of Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki's army as 'Safavid's' in a reference to the Shiite Persian dynasty that once ruled the region.⁹

⁶ <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB71.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/world/middleeast/effort-to-rebrand-arab-spring-backfires-in-iran.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

⁸ <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/04/29/300830/islamic-awakening-confab-opens-in-iran/>

⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27866841>

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THE QUDS FORCE

The Quds Force, commanded by Major-General Qassem Suleimani, operates as the 'long-arm' of Iranian regime. It carries out covert missions behind enemy lines, trains and arms Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah.

It is a subsidiary of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which functions as a second army tasked with guarding Iran's Islamic system of government.¹⁰ The IRGC in general and the Quds force in particular carry out operations in the Middle East and the world at large. They are backed up by the Basij militia, a paramilitary force attached to the IRGC which can be deployed to bolster other troop deployments or to act as thugs. They were widely used to crush anti-government protests in 2009.¹¹

Major-General Qassem Suleimani took command of the Quds Force 15 years ago and has directed its operations ever since.

“Several Middle Eastern officials, some of whom I have known for a decade, stopped talking the moment I brought up Suleimani. ‘We don’t want to have any part of this,’ a Kurdish official in Iraq said. Among spies in the West, he appears to exist in a special category, an enemy both hated and admired: a Middle Eastern equivalent of Karla, the elusive Soviet master spy in John le Carré’s novels. When I called [Meir] Dagan, the former Mossad chief, and mentioned Suleimani’s name, there was a long pause on the line. ‘Ah,’ he said, in a tone of weary irony, ‘a very good friend.’” – Dexter Filkins, author of “The Shadow Commander,” published in The New Yorker. ¹²



According to the New Yorker's Dexter Filkins “His tools include payoffs for politicians across the Middle East, intimidation when it is needed, and murder as a last resort.” He is regarded by many as the most powerful operative in the Middle East, both hated and admired by Western spies.

He travels extensively and was last reported in Baghdad after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria captured Mosul, in order to organize the defense of the city.¹³ Ayatollah Khamenei called him “a living martyr of the revolution.” He is fiercely and utterly devoted to Iranian and the revolutionary

¹⁰ <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-revolutionary-guards/p14324>

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/17/basiji-militia-iran-election-protests>

¹² http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=3

¹³ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/suleimani-irans-near-invisible-quds-force-commander-2048016649>

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cause. He likened war to heaven, saying “The battlefield is mankind’s lost paradise—the paradise in which morality and human conduct are at their highest.”¹⁴

He has been instrumental in shoring up Assad in Syria, providing training, carrying out covert operations and supporting Hezbollah and other militia groups. One American defense official told *The New Yorker* “he’s running the war himself.” There are reportedly thousands of Quds Force members in Syria, doing everything from training and establishing irregular militia forces, to targeted assassinations, even changing the way Assad’s forces operate.

In August 2012, 48 Iranians were captured inside Syria by rebel forces, widely reported to be members of the Quds force, despite Iranian claims that they were pilgrims to a Shiite shrine.¹⁵

Amongst the Quds Force’s more notable operations have been:

- Founding, training and arming the Hezbollah.
- Training and arming Shiite militia groups in Iraq, such as the Badr Brigade¹⁶ and the Mahdi Army, to fight American forces and Sunni groups such as the Islamic State (formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). On June 21, the Mahdi army paraded 50,000 fighters through central Baghdad as a show of strength and readiness to fight the Islamic State.¹⁷
- Carrying out a series of assassination attempts and bombings on American and Israeli targets around the world. One salient example was an abortive attempt to hire a Mexican drug cartel to blow up the Saudi Ambassador to Washington. The cartel representative turned out to be a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent. The assassination attempt prompted two officials to call for the U.S. to kill Suleimani in a targeted strike.¹⁸



¹⁴ http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=3

¹⁵ <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/14/hizballah-cavalcade-irans-losses-in-the-35th-province-syria-part-1/>

¹⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/international/slot2_060905.html? r=0

¹⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10916926/Iraq-crisis-Baghdads-Shia-militia-in-defiant-50000-strong-rally-as-Isis-make-further-gains.html>

¹⁸ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/man-in-iran-backed-plot-to-kill-saudi-ambassador-gets-25-years/2013/05/30/0435e7a2-c952-11e2-8da7-d274bc611a47_story.html

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HEZBOLLAH – THE PARTY OF GOD



Hezbollah is a Shiite paramilitary and terrorist organization based in Lebanon that functions as an Iranian proxy in the Islamic Republic's war against Israel. It is more powerful than the Lebanese army, and has seats in the Parliament, social services programs and even a satellite TV station (Al-Manar).

It was founded by members of the Quds force in the early 1980s with financial backing from the Iranian government in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of

Lebanon in 1982. Initially it planned to take over Lebanon and turn it into a theocracy based on Velayat-e Faqih.¹⁹

"Inside Lebanon, the IRGC had two objectives: fight the Israelis, who had occupied Lebanon, and export the ideals of the Iranian revolution. To accomplish its first objective, the IRGC trained and deployed a proxy army composed mainly of battle-hardened street fighters. Eventually, this group adopted the name Hizbollah, meaning the Party of God in Arabic. To accomplish its second objective, the IRGC, through its Hizbollah proxies, preached its revolutionary ideology across Lebanon. Years of covert military and political support infused Hizbollah with power and influence, especially among the Shias of southern Lebanon. By the end of the 1980s, the organization had evolved from a ragtag terrorist organization that specialized in kidnappings and murder into a powerful political-military force that would alter regional politics." – "The Small Wars Journal, A Brief History of the 2006 Lebanon War."²⁰

Hezbollah is designated as a terrorist organization by both the US and the EU.^{21,22}

Structurally it is modelled on the Iranian system, and power rests in the hands of the clerics. Currently Hezbollah is led by Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, supported by a council of clerics. Hassan Nasrallah is reported to be close personal friends with Qassem Suleimani.²³

¹⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4314423.stm

²⁰ <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-2006-lebanon-war-a-short-history>

²¹ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/07/212246.htm>

²² <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196335.htm>

²³ http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=all

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Major terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hezbollah include:²⁴

- **1983** - Suicide bombing on a US barracks in Beirut, killing 240 American and 48 French servicemen.
- **1985** - Hijacking of TWA flight 847, taken from Athens airport to Beirut, then to Algeria and back to Beirut. 1 US marine was killed.
- **1992** – Suicide bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 and injuring 242. Islamic Jihad, a front-group name used by Hezbollah, claimed responsibility for the attack.
- **2006** – 8 Israeli soldiers were killed in a cross-border raid and two soldiers, Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser were kidnapped, sparking the Second Lebanon War.

Other high profile bombings of American and Jewish targets are widely suspected to have been perpetrated by Hezbollah. Two such incidents include the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center²⁵ which killed 29 people, and the 2012 Burgas bus bombing in Bulgaria.²⁶ In both cases Hezbollah is strongly suspected of carrying out the attack, but it cannot be proven.

Hezbollah are also responsible for launching rockets at civilian population centers in Israel. During the 2006 Second Lebanon War Hezbollah fired nearly 4,000 rockets, killing at least 39 civilians.²⁷ Human Rights Watch condemned the attacks as unlawful. Sarah Whitson, Director of HRW's Middle East and North Africa division said "Hezbollah's explanations for why it fired rockets at Israel's civilian population utterly fail to justify these unlawful attacks"²⁸

Hezbollah maintains a stockpile of rockets for future conflicts, including more sophisticated ones supplied by Iran. In 2012 during the Israeli military response to Hamas rocket attacks known as Operation Cast Lead, Hezbollah did not participate. At the time, the group was estimated to have a rocket arsenal of 40,000 rockets.²⁹ It is thought that the number has grown considerably due to Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war and the transfer of weapons from Assad.

Hezbollah is funded primarily by Iran and Syria. In 2012 experts estimated that Iranian funding for the Hezbollah ranged from \$100 million to \$400 million per year.³⁰ This funding is for their day to day operations, not including extra supplies during war time.

²⁴ http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Timeline-of-Terror_Membership-version_low-res.pdf

²⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/hezbollahs-1992-attack-in-argentina-is-a-warning-for-modern-day-europe/274160/>

²⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21342192>

²⁷ http://csis.org/files/publication/120720_Cordesian_LessonsIsraeliHezbollah.pdf

²⁸ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2007/08/28/lebanonisrael-hezbollah-rockets-targeted-civilians-2006-war>

²⁹ <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2012/11/20/15315678-why-hezbollah-is-sitting-on-40000-rockets-and-missiles-and-sitting-out-the-gaza-conflict?lite>

³⁰ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/10553>

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It also receives donations from Muslims both in Lebanon and around the world.³¹ Sections of the Shiite Lebanese Muslim diaspora provide financial support to Hezbollah. A large part of this support comes from South America, in the 'triple frontier' border region of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. The South American funding comes from crime, predominantly smuggling. One operative running illegal activity in the triple frontier area is estimated to have sent \$50 million to Hezbollah between 1995 and 2002. In 2002, Brazil arrested a leading operative there and found him guilty of funding Hezbollah.³²

In 2012, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah admitted that the organization has been and will remain funded and equipped by Iran. He told thousands of followers over video-link: "We have been receiving since 1982 all kinds of moral, political and material backing from the Islamic Republic of Iran"³³

Hezbollah also cooperates with other groups. According to the Council on Foreign Relations "evidence suggests al-Qaeda and Hezbollah have cooperated in the past and may do so again."³⁴

SYRIA



Iran has been involved in the Syrian Civil War since its onset. They have invested considerable resources in propping up the ailing regime of Bashar al-Assad. Syria is the cornerstone of Iran's regional strategy aiming to ensure an "Axis of Resistance" opposed to the United States and Israel, and aligned with Iran.

As such, Iran has sent considerable amounts of military assistance to the regime in Syria, in addition to

³¹ http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0201_12.htm

³² <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/world/americas/man-linked-by-us-to-hezbollah-is-arrested-in-brazil.html? r=0>

³³ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iran-funds-hezbollah-leader-nasrallah-admits.aspx?pageID=238&nid=13324>

³⁴ <http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/al-qaeda-hezbollah-relationship/p11275>

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the aid it sends to Hezbollah, which is also fighting on the regime side in the war. This caused fallout with Hamas, a Sunni organization, in February 2012. The leader of Hamas, Khaled Mashal closed the group's base in Damascus and broke off relations with Iran, declaring Hamas support for the predominantly Syrian opposition.

As the war progressed, and Assad forces began to lose significant ground, Iran stepped up its support. It began doing more frequent airlifts once the rebels took control of the ground routes that had been used to ship equipment previously.

"As the Syrian crisis continued into the autumn and winter of 2011, it [Iran] increasingly assumed both a regional and an international dimension. A proxy war began to emerge involving regional and international actors. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Arab states began to provide material and financial support to the Syrian opposition. As a result, Iran, Hezbollah, and to some extent Iraq, felt compelled to throw their weight fully behind the Assad regime. Tehran saw the Syrian crisis as providing its regional rivals with a golden opportunity to deny it of its most valuable ally, and diminish its power and influence in the Middle East." – "Iran and Syria at the Crossroads, The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?" by Jubin Goodarzi, Webster University, Geneva.³⁵

Assistance given to the Syrian regime by Iran includes:³⁶

- Oil and financial aid
- Intelligence support
- Airlifts of military equipment, including ammunition, small arms, heavy weaponry and artillery
- Technical specialists and officers to train and lead Syrian forces
- Quds Force units to carry out operations
- The arrival of Major-General Qassem Suleimani and other leading Quds Force officers to Syria to direct operations.

Iran is also training Shiite and other militia groups inside Iran.³⁷ For example, considerable support has been given to the Baath Brigades, a militia body loyal to Assad's Baath party. Selected paramilitaries are also sent to Iran for training. Such support has two functions: firstly, to bolster Assad's forces and provide extra troops for the war and secondly, to ensure a continued Iranian-aligned military presence in Syria should Assad's regime lose.

Hezbollah and Iranian assistance is credited with turning the tide of the war in favor of Assad's regime.

³⁵http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran_syria_crossroads_fall_tehran_damascus_axis.pdf

³⁶ <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>

³⁷ <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/08/14/pentagon-iran-training-pro-regime-militias-in-syria/>

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OTHER RESOURCES

Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Damascus Tehran Axis?

http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran_syria_crossroads_fall_tehran_damascus_axis.pdf

Iranian Strategy in Syria – Institute for the Study of War

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>

Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan – American Enterprise Institute and The Institute for the Study of War

<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianInfluenceLevantEgyptIraqAfghanistan.pdf>

The Islamic Awakening: Iran's Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings – Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University

<http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB71.pdf>

Iran's Revolutionary Guards – Council on Foreign Relations

<http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-revolutionary-guards/p14324>