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United States Policy to Undermine Iran's Regional and Global Strategy

submitted to
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by
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for
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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the way in which Iran uses proxy groups to implement its regional foreign policy strategy while increasing relationships with foreign actors to implement its global foreign policy strategy. I will dive into the intricacies of Iran's strategy on a country-by-country basis while outlining the goals of the regime. I will analyze the way in which the United States has dealt with Iran and its proxy groups in the past as well as provide suggestions on the steps the Biden administration and the United States as a whole must implement in order to contain Iran's influence in the region and on the world stage.

The Need for Fundamental Review

The goals of Iranian foreign policy are to demonstrate power, challenge the United States, and accumulate allies. Iranian foreign policy strategies can be broken into two categories: regional and global. Regionally, Iran has created a network of proxy groups to extend its influence into Middle Eastern nations. Globally, Iran has conglomerated allies hostile to the United States through economic partnerships and international diplomatic support. The trajectory of Iranian foreign policy will only increase the threat Iran poses against the United States.

Iran's strategy of using proxy groups allows it to challenge major actors such as the United States, even though the nation does not compare to the power of its adversaries if it were to use conventional means. Proxy groups have expanded Iran's strategic reach, created deterrence for its adversaries, and compensated for Iran's conventional weakness.¹ If the United States hopes to maintain its power in the Middle East it must limit Iranian regional influence. Because the network of proxy groups is essential to Iran's strategy to gain even more influence across the region, the United States must evaluate its policy towards limiting Iran's proxy network.

The Iranian regime's primary regional foreign policy goal is to project power throughout the Middle East, both for the sake of increasing its own status and to counter U.S., Israeli, and Saudi influence.² The most success Iran has in the development of these proxy networks is when it capitalizes on instability in regions in order to fill the power

¹ Tierney, Dominic. "Why the United States Is Losing—And Russia and Iran Are Winning." *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (September 22, 2021): 69–87.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970336>.

² Parker, Claire, and Nick Noack. "Iran Has Invested in Allies and Proxies across the Middle East. Here's Where They Stand after Soleimani's Death." *Washington Post*, January 3, 2020.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/03/iran-has-invested-allies-proxies-across-middle-east-heres-where-they-stand-after-soleimanis-death/>.

vacuum.³ With the United States removing troops from Syria and Afghanistan, Iran is hoping to fill the power void left by the U.S. with proxy forces in order to increase its influence in these areas.

Iran begins by providing arms and funds to local proxy groups, but the next step in its process is to help these groups become more self-sufficient through integration into their respective countries' political processes and economic activities while also building their own defense industries.⁴ The integration of Iran-backed local groups into their countries' political system increases the threat of Iranian influence on official state actors. This strategy is dependent on capitalizing on weak government institutions susceptible to corruption and manipulation. The strategy of political integration has been successful in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

Through these actions and others, Iran is moving closer to its goal of a land bridge stretching from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, with the U.S. withdrawal from Syria making moving weapons and personnel throughout the region easier.⁵ The growth of the militia network gives Iran the ability to threaten any part of the region with escalation of conflict.

The use of proxy forces also allows Iran to conduct attacks on United States forces while denying responsibility on the world stage. When asked about attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria by Iranian-backed militias, Iran's spokesperson to the United Nations said, "We do not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and therefore

³ Parker and Noack.

⁴ Tabatabai, Ariane M., and Colin P. Clarke. "Iran's Proxies Are More Powerful Than Ever." Rand Corporation, October 16, 2019.
<https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/10/irans-proxies-are-more-powerful-than-ever.html>.

⁵ Tabatabai and Clarke.

are not responsible for what is happening there.”⁶ This advantage allows Iran to blame the United States for escalating conflict if the U.S. were to retaliate directly against Iran over an action committed by a proxy force. Proxy forces give Iran the ability to minimize visibility in a conflict while still having the capability to influence its course.

Attacks against US forces by Iranian-backed militias have occurred more frequently. The latest notable escalation occurred in August 2022 when militias targeted US positions across Syria with rocket fire and the US responded by targeting militia positions.⁷ There are currently around 900 US service members in Syria that militias target in order to protest continued US presence and Israel’s actions.⁸

Iran aims to increase its power on the global stage through increasing ties to nations. Since continued sanctions by the United States remain so long as the JCPOA negotiations remain stalled, Iran has been forced to choose between limited options to formulate economic and political relationships. The increasing global partnerships with Russia and China create an urgency for U.S. action because they offer Iran escape from sanctions and decrease the regime’s isolation.

⁶ Kube, Courtney, Carol Lee, and Dan De Luce. “Iran-Backed Militias’ Attacks against U.S. Targets Are up. The U.S. Hasn’t Responded with Force since Last Year.” NBC News, June 10, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/attacks-iran-backed-militias-us-target-are-us-hasnt-responded-force-20-rcna32892>.

⁷ Fassihi, Farnaz, Raja Abdulrahim, and Adam Entous. “Fighting Between U.S. and Iran-Backed Militias Escalates in Syria.” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2022, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/26/world/middleeast/iran-backed-syria-united-states.html>.

⁸ Fassihi, Abdulrahim, and Entous.

Assessment of the Situation

Iranian militias across the Middle East pose a major threat to both U.S. interests and regional stability. There are more than a hundred different Shia groups and subgroups, of which Iran is the principal creator and backer, operating in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and a host of other nations.⁹

Iran has a major influence over Iraq due to its support of Shia militias. In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran supported Shia parties and militias that have dominated the nation ever since.¹⁰ Iran's influence increased when Shia militias were organized under an umbrella group, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, that mobilized to battle the Islamic State in 2014.¹¹ The Popular Mobilization Forces are more than just a conglomerate of militias. The group has become a major political faction estimated to have the most seats in the Iraqi parliament.¹² However, to state that the Popular Mobilization Forces, also referred to as Hashd al-Sha'abi, are Iran-backed Shia militias would be over-simplification, as the Popular Mobilization Forces consist of units that have different affiliations and loyalties.¹³ The main groups in the Popular Mobilization Forces have a close relationship with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and have pledged loyalty to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kataeb Sayed al-Shuhada, and

⁹ Smyth, Phillip. "The Shia Militia Mapping Project." The Washington Institute, May 20, 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shia-militia-mapping-project>.

¹⁰ Associated, Press. "AP Explains: Who Are Iraq's Iran-Backed Militias?" ABC News, December 31, 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/ap-explains-iraqs-iran-backed-militias-68004437>.

¹¹ Associated Press.

¹² Associated Press.

¹³ Haddad, Fanar. "Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi." The Century Foundation, March 5, 2018. <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>.

Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba.¹⁴ The Badr Organization makes up the largest portion of the PMU and has entrenched itself in the Iraqi government having gained access to Iraqi politics and state institutions, most notably the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Police force.¹⁵ However, there are also groups in the Popular Mobilization Forces that have pledged loyalty to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, most notably Sarayat al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Sarayat al-Ataba al-Huseiniya, Sarayat al-Ataba al-Alawiya, and Liwa Ali al-Akbar.¹⁶ Sistani is an important figure because he urged fighters to join Iraqi government security organizations rather than paramilitary groups tied to Iran in a fatwa in 2014.¹⁷

Lebanon is another country that Iran has influenced through its use of proxies. Since the 1980s, the militia group Hezbollah has been the most successful and prominent Iranian proxy group.¹⁸ Hezbollah effectively operates as an arm of Iran's foreign policy because its strategy mirrors Iran's policy of exporting the Islamic revolution abroad while expanding it at home.¹⁹ Throughout the course of Hezbollah's operations, the group has fought against Israel, backed Assad regime troops in the Syrian civil war, sent militants to Iraq, and reportedly helped Iran crush internal dissent.²⁰ Hezbollah's recent transition to become a political party in addition to a militia group is a major cause for U.S. concern, as the group now has increased capabilities to influence the Lebanese government.

¹⁴ Jones, Seth. "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East." Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>.

¹⁵ The International Institute for Strategic Studies. "Iran's Networks of Influence - Chapter Four: Iraq," November 2019. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-06-ch-4-iraq>.

¹⁶ Jones.

¹⁷ Jones.

¹⁸ Daoud, David. "Meet the Proxies: How Iran Spreads Its Empire through Terrorist Militias." The Tower, March 2015.

<https://www.thetower.org/article/meet-the-proxies-how-iran-spreads-its-empire-through-terrorist-militias/>.

¹⁹ Daoud.

²⁰ Daoud.

Hezbollah and its allies expanded their share of seats in Lebanon's May 2018 parliamentary elections and further expanded their influence of the government in 2019 through positions like the Ministry of Health.²¹ Hezbollah has also recently improved its military capabilities with the help of Iran, including the prominent "Precision Project" aimed to upgrade Hezbollah's inventory of rockets, missiles, and drones.²² As a result of Iranian aid, Hezbollah has amassed an armed drone capability more advanced than any terrorist group in the world.²³ According to some estimates, Iran provides Hezbollah with upward of \$700 million annually.²⁴ Hezbollah's increased involvement in the Lebanese government as well as conflicts in the region show its increased capabilities and sophistication.

Iran's involvement in Syria through its militia network has contributed to the Bashar al-Assad regime's ability to maintain power. Iran has organized, trained, and funded over 100,000 Shia fighters in Syria while also providing light and heavy weapons to the regime and its militias.²⁵ Iran has imported foreign Shia fighters from Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq that currently makes up 20,000-30,000 soldiers.²⁶ Lebanese Hezbollah sent 8,000 soldiers into Syria and helps the IRGC-QF train and assist Shia militia groups collectively known as Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suria (the Islamic Resistance in Syria).²⁷ The main factions in the Islamic Resistance in Syria are

²¹ Jones.

²² Jones.

²³ Jones.

²⁴ Clarke, Colin P. "Hezbollah Is in Venezuela to Stay." *Foreign Policy* (blog), February 9, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/09/hezbollah-is-in-venezuela-to-stay/>.

²⁵ Jones.

²⁶ Smyth, Phillip. "Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias." The Washington Institute, April 12, 2018.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-outpacing-assad-control-syrias-shia-militias>.

²⁷ Jones.

Quwat al Ridha (or Ridha Forces), Al-Ghaliboun: Saraya al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suria (or The Victors: The Companies of the Islamic Resistance in Syria), and Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir (or Baqir Brigade).²⁸ Some of these militias pledge loyalty to Iran rather than the Assad regime, most notably the Baqir Brigade which declared jihad against the United States and other allied forces in Syria.²⁹

It can be argued Iran also has a proxy force in Yemen, however the relationship with this group is different from Iran's proxy forces in other nations. Iran has provided the Houthis with heavy weaponry, including ballistic missiles and drones, in order to conduct attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while also threatening international shipping lanes near the Bab el Mandeb Strait.³⁰ Despite Iran's role in escalating the conflict by empowering the group through weapons and training, the Houthis have never been an Iranian proxy before and have a unique agenda.³¹ Unlike most of Iranian proxy forces in other nations, the Houthis are not under the Iran command system and largely operate autonomously.³² The motivation for Iranian intervention was to counter Saudi Arabian influence rather than ideological ties to the Houthis. Iran has also suggested finding a diplomatic solution in Yemen, a sign it will end intervention if Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are willing to end their involvement.³³

Iran has become increasingly involved in Afghanistan in an effort to fill the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of the United States and the collapse of the Afghan government. While Iran and the Taliban have historically been adversaries, the groups

²⁸ Jones.

²⁹ Smyth, 2018

³⁰ Jones.

³¹ Falk, Thomas O. "The Limits of Iran's Influence on Yemen's Houthi Rebels." Al Jazeera, March 8, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/8/the-limits-of-irans-influence-on-yemens-houthi-rebels>.

³² Falk.

³³ Falk.

have cultivated a working relationship aimed to stabilize Afghanistan.³⁴ As a result of Iran aiding the Taliban, the Taliban installed pro-Iranian commanders as the Deputy Defense Minister and the Deputy Interior Minister while also giving prominent positions in the interim government to members of the minority Shia community supported by Iran.³⁵ These appointments give Iran direct influence into the new Taliban government. In addition to acquiring political influence, Iran has organized between 10,000 and 15,000 Afghan fighters under the Fatemiyoun Brigade to fight in the Syrian Civil War.³⁶

The influence of Iranian proxy groups is not limited to just the Middle East. Hezbollah has a large influence on Venezuela and has established infrastructure for criminal activities that include drug trafficking, money laundering, and smuggling since the early 2000s.³⁷ The United States admitted the impact of Hezbollah in Venezuela when the Secretary of State during the Trump Administration, Mike Pompeo, said Hezbollah has active cells in Venezuela and “Iranians are impacting the people of Venezuela.”³⁸ The recent instability has only helped Hezbollah’s operations as Venezuelan security officials are subject to bribes and have been unwilling to disrupt the group’s operations.³⁹ What is even more worrisome is the increasing involvement Hezbollah has in Venezuelan politics. The former vice president and minister of industries and national production, Tareck El Aissami, allegedly has close ties to Hezbollah and was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury

³⁴ Baiou, Sabine. “Iran’s Strategy in Afghanistan: Pragmatic Engagement with the Taliban.” Newlines Institute, September 23, 2021. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/afghanistan/irans-strategy-in-afghanistan-pragmatic-engagement-with-the-taliban/>.

³⁵ Baiou.

³⁶ Jones.

³⁷ Clarke.

³⁸ Clarke.

³⁹ Clarke.

Department.⁴⁰ Hezbollah operatives in Venezuela receive direction from Iran and help from Russia to help controversial President Nicolas Maduro remain in power.⁴¹ The operation to keep Nicolas Maduro in power directly affects the goal of the United States and its European allies for opposition leader Juan Guaido to become the legitimate president. If Juan Guaido were to eventually gain power, he would likely crack down on Hezbollah's activities in order to limit Iranian influence, however this would be a difficult task given how many other domestic issues Venezuela currently has.⁴² The involvement of Hezbollah in Venezuela proves the group is capable of influencing regions far beyond the Middle East. Iran does not just threaten South America, but it has a real influence in the region that should concern the United States.

On the global strategy side of foreign policy, Iran has pursued deeper political, economic, and security ties with Russia.⁴³ Russia and Iran have turned to partner with each other since 2014 in large part due to Western sanctions limiting available international partners. On the economic spectrum, Russia and Iran have cooperation in bypassing U.S. sanctions through exporting oil to Syria and overall expanded cooperation despite being competitors in the oil market.⁴⁴ In terms of security, Iran has supplied drones to Russia for its war in Ukraine, while Russia launched an Iranian satellite into space, reportedly being involved in intelligence gathering in Ukraine.⁴⁵ According to

⁴⁰ Clarke.

⁴¹ Qudrat, Omar. "Make No Mistake: Iran Remains a Powerful Threat to the US." *The Hill* (blog), January 14, 2020. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/477752-make-no-mistake-iran-remains-a-powerful-threat-to-the-us/>.

⁴² Clarke.

⁴³ Foroutan, Faezeh. "Suspicious Bind: Iran's Relationship with Russia – European Council on Foreign Relations." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 Sept. 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/suspicious-bind-irans-relationship-with-russia/>.

⁴⁴ Rome, Henry. "Iran & Russia: Growing Economic Competition." *United States Institute of Peace*, 18 July 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/jul/18/iran-russia-growing-economic-competition>.

⁴⁵ Foroutan.

western officials, Iran is preparing to send an additional one thousand weapons to Russia including more attack drones and short range ballistic missiles along with reports of Iranian troops assisting in Russian military operations.⁴⁶ On the political stage, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei supported the Russian narrative that NATO and the United States are responsible for the war in Ukraine.⁴⁷

Iran's global foreign policy strategy has led to increased partnership with China. This partnership is in large part due to the necessity to find a market for Iranian oil that is not restricted by U.S. sanctions, however the relationship has grown to have geopolitical implications. Iran provides China with large quantities of heavily discounted oil while China provides Iran with cheap consumer items as Western sanctions have made importing consumer items from the rest of the world into Iran a challenge.⁴⁸ The cooperation between the nations is here to stay as in 2021 Iran and China signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement aimed to increase economic, military, and cybersecurity cooperation.⁴⁹

Ongoing domestic protests in Iran should put the United States and allies on notice, because the Iranian government is pressured to divert attention away from the unrest by engaging in foreign acts such as the escalation of conflict with the United States and its allies. U.S. and Saudi Arabian intelligence have gathered information that Iran is

⁴⁶ Atwood, Kylie. "Iran Is Preparing to Send Additional Weapons Including Ballistic Missiles to Russia to Use in Ukraine, Western Officials Say." CNN, November 2, 2022. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/iran-is-preparing-to-send-additional-weapons-including-ballistic-missiles-to-russia-to-use-in-ukraine-western-officials-say/ar-AA13BQZf>.

⁴⁷ Rome.

⁴⁸ Vaisi, Ghazal. "The 25-Year Iran-China Agreement, Endangering 2,500 Years of Heritage." *Middle East Institute*, 1 Mar. 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/25-year-iran-china-agreement-endangering-2500-years-heritage>

⁴⁹ Vaisi.

planning on stepping up attacks on Saudi Arabia and other nations in the region in an effort to distract from nationwide protests.⁵⁰

The common theme in the assessment of Iranian proxy capabilities is that Iran has the ability to challenge the United States and its allies at every point in the region due to its high level of investment into these groups and their widespread presence. The infiltration into political systems gives Iran power over government institutions while weakening the sovereignty of these nations.

The common theme in the assessment of Iran's global strategy is that it hopes to increase relations with adversaries of the United States in order to both decrease the economic effect of sanctions while also challenging the United States and the West on the geopolitical level. These relationships decrease Iran's isolation that the United States aims for with its sanctions and it has the ability to undermine any U.S. policy.

⁵⁰ Hordern, Annmarie. "Saudi Arabia, US Share Intel on Possible Iran Attack." Bloomberg, November 1, 2022.
<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/saudi-arabia-us-share-intel-on-possible-iran-attack/ar-AA13D2Dw>

Relevant Stakeholders

Russia is a major stakeholder both in Iranian regional and global foreign policy strategies. Iran's global strategy is dependent on cooperation with Russia, as both nations hope increased cooperation forms a front against Western nations. Both nations have also become isolated due to sanctions, and their relationship is based on necessity to limit the effects of isolation. Russia is also heavily involved in Iran's regional strategy as both nations cooperate militarily to help the Bashar al-Assad regime maintain control of power in Syria. Despite the nations now being competitors with each other on the global oil market, they have turned to weapons shipments as means of cooperation. Iranian weapon shipments to Russia are means for Iran to buy Russian allyship in a time when Russia is desperate for allies.

China is a major stakeholder in Iran's global foreign policy strategy. While Iran benefits by selling its oil to China, China has created Iranian dependence that gives it influence on the nation. China is using Iran as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, a massive Pan-Eurasian infrastructure project with a record of using "debt-trap" diplomacy to bait nations into more Chinese influence.⁵¹ It is therefore in China's interest to keep the Iranian regime in power in order to keep cheap oil imports, create infrastructure projects benefiting Chinese companies, and sell cheap consumer products to Iran.⁵² In return, the Iranian regime gets assistance from China to keep a grip on power. One major Chinese impact on this goal has been the acquisition of surveillance technology that is used to surveil the Iranian population to limit dissent.⁵³ This technology has become important

⁵¹ Vaisi.

⁵² Vaisi.

⁵³ Vaisi.

due to ongoing protests and dissent across Iran due to the death of Mahsa Amini in government custody for not wearing a hijab, which has led to the arrest of over 1,000 protesters.⁵⁴ Iran will continue to have internal dissent so long as it continues to oppress its population with strict rules. Foreign powers like China will take advantage of the Iranian regime's efforts to ensure its safety.

Saudi Arabia is impacted by Iranian proxy forces on multiple fronts and would benefit from the destruction of the network. Saudi Arabia is a target for Iran and its proxies because it is locked in a power struggle with Iran to be the nation with the most influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia represents Sunni Muslims while Iran leads the Shia Muslims in the greater Sunni-Shia tension dating back to the foundation of Islam. The extent to which Saudi Arabia views Iran's threat can be seen through the nation's relationship with Israel. Despite being historical adversaries and the Saudi government failing to publicly recognize Israel due to the Palestinian conflict, the two nations have engaged in clandestine cooperation to combat Iranian military action throughout the region.⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia is threatened by the growing influence of Iran-backed groups in Iraq to its north and the Houthis fighting in Yemen to its south. In September 2019, the Houthis launched a major attack on Saudi oil installations with cruise missiles and drones imported from Iran, resulting in a temporary 50 percent reduction of the Saudi Arabian Oil Co.'s output.⁵⁶ Despite the U.S. conclusion that Iran was responsible, Iran was able to

⁵⁴ Alkhalidi, Celine. "Iran to Hold Public Trials of 1,000 People Charged with Involvement in Mahsa Amini Protests." CNN, November 1, 2022. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/iran-to-hold-public-trials-of-1000-people-charged-with-involvement-in-mahsa-amini-protests/ar-AA13CDxF>.

⁵⁵ Riedel, Bruce. "How to Understand Israel and Saudi Arabia's Secretive Relationship." *Brookings* (blog), July 11, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/07/11/how-to-understand-israel-and-saudi-arabias-secretive-relationship/>.

⁵⁶ Parker and Noack.

deny accountability yet was still able to provide a pivotal hit on Saudi Arabia.⁵⁷ Moving forward in Yemen, Saudi Arabia could continue to pursue peace talks so that it can disengage in the civil war. Iran only engaged in the conflict due to Saudi presence and without historical or strong ideological ties with the Houthis, Iran may not have a lasting impact on the group.

Israel, the primary ally of the United States in the Middle East, is a major stakeholder in the regional operations of Iranian proxy groups. Israel is actively engaging Hezbollah in Lebanon and striking both Assad forces and Iranian groups in Syria. Iran's strategy of integrating its proxy groups into political systems is most problematic for Israel, because it brings more radical elements into governments that will challenge Israel's hope to normalize relations with governments in the region. Already, Iraq has criminalized any contact with Israel.⁵⁸ Hezbollah's increased political status in Lebanon would not only weaken the Lebanese state by legitimizing the group, but it would give the group increased capabilities to launch attacks on Israel as a state actor. The most recent example of increased Hezbollah capability to launch attacks on Israel was the joint transport with Iran's IRGC of hundreds of missiles with a chemical payload to a warehouse on the Lebanese-Syrian border.⁵⁹ Additionally, the United States warns that any agreement made between the Lebanese government and Israel, including the recent maritime border agreement, may not be honored if Hezbollah were to come to power.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Parker and Noack.

⁵⁸ Riedel.

⁵⁹ Lee, Michael. "Hezbollah Transporting Chemical Weapons to Lebanon with Help of Iran and North Korea, Report Claims." Fox News, November 22, 2022. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/hezbollah-transporting-chemical-weapons-to-lebanon-with-help-of-iran-and-north-korea-report-claims/ar-AA14pLn6>.

⁶⁰ Guisky, Yochai. "Did the Israeli-Lebanese Maritime Deal Help Hezbollah?" The National Interest, November 1, 2022.

Venezuela is a stakeholder in Iranian foreign policy because the nation serves as a safe haven for Hezbollah, while the Venezuelan government has developed a relationship with Iran due to both nations being heavily sanctioned. Venezuelan domestic stability has been threatened by illegal activities performed by Hezbollah affiliates for the better part of the century. Iran has recently increased oil shipments to Venezuela in part due to extensive fuel shortages across Venezuela and lack of countries willing to buy sanctioned Iranian oil.⁶¹ Iranian assistance to the Venezuelan government undermines the U.S. maximum pressure campaign to oust the Maduro regime and restore Venezuelan democracy.⁶² Iran has also reportedly sent IRGC- Quds Force troops and unspecified weapons shipments to the Maduro regime.⁶³ These shipments and support risk an escalation into conflict between elements of the Venezuelan Armed Forces loyal to Maduro and those loyal to opposition leader Juan Guaido. Iran would be able to capitalize on the increased instability if conflict were to break out just as they do in the Middle East. Conflict in the nation would further an already devastating economic situation and create a humanitarian crisis. For Maduro, however, Iranian assistance is more than welcomed as Venezuelan domestic economic problems threaten the longevity of his power and any foreign nation willing to challenge the United States by having relations with his government will ease pressure. Despite recent increases in the Venezuelan-Iranian partnership, Maduro cannot rely on Iranian assistance alone to supply

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/did-israeli-lebanese-maritime-deal-help-hezbollah-205639>.

⁶¹ Rendon, Moises, and Antonio De La Cruz. "Understanding the Iran-Venezuela Relationship." Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 4, 2020.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-iran-venezuela-relationship>.

⁶² Rendon and De La Cruz.

⁶³ Lopez, Clare. "Iran-Venezuela Relationship Grows Closer, Threatens US." Citizens Commission on National Security, December 13, 2020.

<https://ccnationalsecurity.org/iran-venezuela-relationship-grows-closer-threatens-us/>.

his nation with fuel or keep himself in power; however, it shows that countries sanctioned by the United States are willing to collaborate.

Iraq is a major stakeholder in Iran's regional strategy because Iran is a major influence in Iraq's political scene. Iran's strategy to increase Shia representation in both government positions and the Iraqi military directly threatens Sunni and Kurdish populations. Iran has been striking Iranian Kurdish opposition parties in Iraq since 2018, with the most recent drone strike occurring on November 14th on the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan.⁶⁴ Iran uses Kurdish groups as scapegoats for domestic unrest, claiming the groups fuel protests.⁶⁵ It is in the interest of the Shia population for Iranian involvement so that they hold more power, even if it means Iran has a large influence on government institutions. Iran has been heavily involved in both the Iraqi political process and its economic system. In 2018, Iran was heavily involved in negotiations in government formation that led to the appointment of Adel Abdul-Mahdi as the Iraqi prime minister.⁶⁶ In return, Abdul-Madhi granted Iran access to his inner circles, despite being considered as a tolerable candidate by the United States.⁶⁷ In economic terms, Iran has significant leverage over Iraq as Iraq is Iran's second-largest export market.⁶⁸ Iraq is so dependent on Iranian exports that the United States granted Iraq a waiver from US sanctions imposed after the withdrawal from the JCPOA to continue importing gas and electricity.⁶⁹ Iran goes beyond political and economic infiltration as it embarks on using

⁶⁴ Wilgenburg, Wladimir van. "Iran Renews Deadly Missile and Drone Attacks on Kurdish Groups in Iraq." Middle East Eye, November 14, 2022.

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-iraq-missile-drone-attacks-kurdish-groups>.

⁶⁵ Wilgenburg.

⁶⁶ United Against Nuclear Iran. "Iran's Proxy Wars: Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories/Gaza, Syria, Yemen," August 2022. <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/proxy-wars/map>.

⁶⁷ United Against Nuclear Iran.

⁶⁸ United Against Nuclear Iran.

⁶⁹ United Against Nuclear Iran.

soft power initiatives to further influence Iraqi culture. Iran has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the construction and upgrading of religious sites in Iraq headed by companies funded by the IRGC.⁷⁰ Iran's path to becoming the dominant power broker in Iraq has weakened Iraq's central government to the point where basic governance has failed and led to extensive protests since October 2019.⁷¹ The Iraqi people, even members of the Shia community, have been neglected due to Iranian patronage.

Lebanon is another nation that is subject to Iran's strategy of integrating its proxy group into the political system. Iran-backed Hezbollah plays a major role in the Lebanese government and society. Hezbollah has weakened official Lebanese state structures, so much so that since 2008 Hezbollah has veto power over government decisions.⁷² Hezbollah has the power to block Lebanon's next president and has intimidated political opponents.⁷³ Hezbollah's goal is to have a dominant political role in Lebanon.⁷⁴ With an increased political role in Lebanon, Hezbollah risks increased escalation with Israel due to its role in assisting Palestinian militant groups.⁷⁵ Hezbollah also seeks to advance Iran's foreign policy interests.⁷⁶ With increased political power, Hezbollah gives Iran unprecedented access to determining the role in which Lebanon plays in regional conflicts while also altering domestic policies. Hezbollah's armed forces are independent of Lebanese Armed Forces and weaken the Lebanese government's ability to consolidate

⁷⁰ United Against Nuclear Iran.

⁷¹ United Against Nuclear Iran.

⁷² Steckler, Jordan. "Iranian Influence in Lebanon: The Hezbollah Model." United Against Nuclear Iran. Accessed November 8, 2022.

<https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/ideological-expansion/iranian-influence-lebanon-hezbollah-model>.

⁷³ Byman, Daniel L. "Hezbollah's Dilemmas." Brookings, November 10, 2022.

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/hezbollahs-dilemmas/>.

⁷⁴ Byman.

⁷⁵ Byman.

⁷⁶ Byman.

the entirety of the nation. Iran's support of Hezbollah's armed forces alongside weak government structures gives Hezbollah the ability to effectively operate as its own actor within Lebanon.

The Bashar al-Assad regime is a major stakeholder in Iran's regional strategy. Assad's ability to remain in power can be attributed to foreign assistance from both Iran and Russia. Assad has benefited militarily from both direct Iranian assistance and assistance from proxies from across the Middle East, including notable groups Hezbollah and the Fatemiyoun Brigade from Afghanistan. Iran uses the same soft power strategy in Syria as it does in Iraq. Iran spends approximately \$6 billion annually in propping up the Assad regime, however the project goes far beyond military assistance as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has major control of religious matters in Syria.⁷⁷ Iran has built its own Shia religious infrastructure that promotes Twelver Shia Islam which has led to thousands of Syrians converting to this branch in order to receive favorable treatment from local Iranian-backed militias.⁷⁸ The reconstruction and development projects are overseen by the Construction Jihad Foundation, who is embedded with the IRGC's Quds Force and the Syrian Army.⁷⁹ The Construction Jihad Foundation has aggravated sectarian tensions by only benefiting Shia populations in Syria.⁸⁰ These soft power initiatives by Iran are part of changing Syria's social context to give Iran more influence over the Syrian population in the long term.⁸¹ Assad is somewhat willing to allow Syria to

⁷⁷ Alrifai, Oula, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Mehdi Khalaji. "Iran's Long Game in Syria." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 29, 2021.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-long-game-syria>.

⁷⁸ Alrifai, Jahanbani, and Khalaji.

⁷⁹ Lob, Eric. "Iranian Aid in Syria: Construction Jihad." *Middle East Institute*, The Middle East Journal, 75, no. 2 (Summer 2021).

⁸⁰ Lob.

⁸¹ Alrifai, Jahanbani, and Khalaji.

become under increased Iranian influence in order to receive the short-term benefits of Iranian military support to help win the civil war. However, its autonomy has diminished at the hands of its Iranian and Russian allies to the extent where Assad has attempted to limit development assistance by forcing Russia and Iran to compete over contracts and has restricted the activities of Construction Jihad.⁸²

⁸² Lob.

Key Findings

Iran's strategy for using proxy forces falls under a similar pattern. Going beyond the known military support for proxy groups, Iran aims to integrate these groups into the nation's political system while also exercising soft power through emboldening the local Shia communities. Hezbollah and the Badr Organization are examples of proxy groups that have gained significant representation into the political system. In Syria and Afghanistan, Iran has used support for the Assad regime and the Taliban to inject members friendly to Tehran into government positions. This process is complemented with a soft power strategy that has seen the bolstering of Shia communities in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The United States needs to take into account the complexity of the Iranian proxy system. Iran not only just funds the groups, but has entrenched itself into the local society of areas where its proxy groups are present. U.S. leadership must acknowledge that targeting Iran with sanctions has not disrupted IRGC actions in implementing their regional strategy.

While similar patterns are used by Iran to embed militia leaders into the political system of the host nation, there are differences that the United States must take into account. The motivations for Iranian proxy use vary based on the region. In Iraq, the main use for proxy groups is to provide stability for Iraq while ensuring Iraqi territory will not be used to threaten Iranian sovereignty.⁸³ This is different in the motivation of Iranian support for the Houthis, which is aimed to undermine Saudi Arabia. Both of these motivations are different from action in Syria which is to prop up a leader friendly to Iran

⁸³ The International Institute for Strategic Studies.

while simultaneously gaining influence in the region in order to create a land bridge to Hezbollah in Lebanon. While Iran's strategy may have similarities, each circumstance is unique in terms of motivation.

On the other side of the relationship, not all militia groups have the same objectives and backgrounds. Groups also have varying ties and different relationships with Iran. The United States must note which groups have stronger relations with Iran and which have a weaker allegiance in order to understand which course of action to take on a localized level. For example, the containment of Hezbollah in Lebanon cannot be dealt with in the same way as the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The significance of Iran's global efforts must be analyzed to determine the success of the strategy. The more foreign partnerships Iran is able to accumulate, the less effective U.S. sanctions and pressure become. The United States must look at the extent to which Iran's partnerships with Russia, China, and Venezuela give the regime the ability to survive despite U.S. pressure. Iran's shipment of oil to Venezuela remains limited and is not nearly enough to fill Venezuela's demand.⁸⁴ However, the increased military relationship with Russia through the shipment of weapons is a dangerous sign for the United States and its allies. Iran's economic partnership with China is enough to keep Iran's economy from total collapse. All three of these relationships have seen substantial increases in the most recent years and threaten to grow to the point where the United States is threatened on a global scale.

Finally, the United States must take into account how the unfolding domestic unrest will affect Iran's foreign policy strategies. At the core of Iran's overall strategy is

⁸⁴ Rendon and De La Cruz.

defensive measures that prevent the threat of invasion or foreign-aided rebellion; however, its strategies and tactics are offensive.⁸⁵ If the United States were to capitalize on the domestic unrest to the point the regime is worried about a foreign-aided rebellion, the strategies and tactics could shift more from offensive to defensive. This would mean the redistribution of focus on expanding proxy forces and initiatives to expand influence across the region toward securing domestic stability.

⁸⁵ Yossef, Amr. "Military Doctrines in Israel and Iran." *Middle East Institute*, *The Middle East Journal*, 75, no. 2 (Summer 2021).

Alternative Policies Considered and Rejected

The alternative policies considered must be broken into two sections. The first phase of the policy must address Iran's regional strategy with the goal of limiting the influence and power of Iranian proxy groups. The second phase must address Iran's global strategy with the goal of limiting Iranian partnerships that aim to increase Iran's global position while undermining the United States and allies.

The first alternative policy to be considered is the status quo by which the Biden administration has implemented in dealing with Iran. The Biden administration has taken a more diplomatic route when it proved willing to renegotiate for a renewed JCOPA in order to end sanctions in return for termination of Iran's nuclear program. The Biden administration, however, is hesitant to enforce sanctions to their full extent while JCPOA negotiations are ongoing. This policy has given Iran some economic freedom in engagement that has increased its relationship with China, Russia, and Venezuela. On the military side, the Biden administration has directed strikes on militia targets in retaliation for when militias target U.S. personnel.⁸⁶ This policy is one step below the Trump administration's active targeting of militia targets regardless of provocation, yet it proves to Iran that the United States will not hesitate when its forces are threatened. However, the Biden administration has not drawn a red line on retaliation.⁸⁷ With no clear red line on if the United States will retaliate, Iran is able and willing to test the boundaries to see if the U.S. will respond. Overall, the Biden administration's inability to enforce sanctions

⁸⁶ Alaaldin, Ranj. "Biden's Decision to Strike Iran's Proxies Is a Good Start." Brookings, February 26, 2021.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/26/bidens-decision-to-strike-irans-proxies-is-a-good-start/>.

⁸⁷ Kube, Lee, and Luce.

to their full extent while drawing no red line on retaliation has given Iran some leeway in its actions. The United States needs to be more forceful in containing Iran so long as there is no agreement that has been signed.

A second alternative policy to be considered is a maximum pressure campaign on Iran. This policy was implemented during the Trump administration. The goal of this strategy is to damage Iran's economy enough so that Iran will cease hostile operations and negotiate to have sanctions lifted. The sanctions implemented in this strategy under the Trump administration applied to virtually every civilian sector of Iran's economy.⁸⁸ These sanctions included sanctioning foreign banks that conduct transactions with Iranian entities, penalizing firms that invest in Iran's energy sector, penalizing banks of any country that fails to reduce Iranian oil purchases, penalizing entities that transact certain materials with Iran, and designating Iran's Central Bank as a terrorism-supporting entity.⁸⁹ The administration set hard demands for Iran to follow in return of lifting sanctions. The demands included ending support of designated terrorist organizations in the Middle East, demobilizing Shia militias in Iraq, ending Houthi military support in Yemen, withdrawing all forces under Iranian command in Syria, ending support for Taliban factions, and ending threats against Israel, Gulf States, and international shipping.⁹⁰

While a maximum pressure campaign would damage the Iranian economy, there are multiple reasons why this policy would not deter Iran. Iran's GDP shrunk 9.5 percent while the economy shrunk around 14 percent between 2019 and 2020 when the Trump

⁸⁸ Katzman, Kenneth. "Assessing US Policy toward Iran." *Atlantic Council* (blog), December 5, 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/assessing-us-policy-toward-iran/>.

⁸⁹ Katzman.

⁹⁰ Katzman.

administration enacted the sanctions.⁹¹ Iran has proven it will turn to aggression in the face of increased pressure. After increased sanctions, Iran attacked Gulf oil shipping and Gulf oil infrastructure, including cruise missile strikes on two Saudi oil processing facilities that knocked out half of Saudi production for three weeks in 2019.⁹² In spite of sanctions, Iran maintained its use of proxies and defense reports indicate the maximum pressure campaign has not reduced Iran's regional influence.⁹³ The policy does not take into account Iran's ability to inflict soft power into regions that go beyond military and economic means. When the U.S. killed the powerful IRGC- Qods Force leader Qasem Soleimani, Iran's soft-power initiatives inside Syria continued without any setbacks because these programs are not restricted to any one sector or senior official.⁹⁴

The maximum pressure campaign also creates detrimental domestic dynamics that undermine U.S. strategy. Trump's strategy forced moderates in the Iranian government to act defensively, giving momentum to hard-liners linked to the IRGC who pressed for a confrontational response.⁹⁵ The economic struggles that resulted from hard sanctions led to the victory of a hard-liner in the June 2021 Iranian presidential elections.⁹⁶

This strategy also undermines U.S. global interests. Iran was pushed further into the arms of Russia and China.⁹⁷ Since the reinstatement of sanctions, Iranian forces have participated in joint military exercises with Russia and China in 2019 and 2021.⁹⁸ Even

⁹¹ Katzman.

⁹² Katzman.

⁹³ Katzman.

⁹⁴ Alrifai, Jahanbani, and Khalaji.

⁹⁵ Monshipouri, Mahmood, and Manochehr Dorraj. "Foreign Policy Populism in Iranian Politics." *Middle East Institute*, The Middle East Journal, 75, no. 2 (Summer 2021).

⁹⁶ Monshipouri and Dorraj.

⁹⁷ Monshipouri and Dorraj.

⁹⁸ Monshipouri and Dorraj.

U.S. allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates diversified their security partnerships with Russia because of the erosion of U.S. credibility.⁹⁹

A third proposed strategy would be reducing sanctions while increasing support for allies. If the United States were to pursue this strategy, it would be in their best interest to restore the JCPOA in order to ensure Iran does not gain nuclear weapon capabilities. This strategy would not be effective because Iran would be threatened by the increased power of U.S. allies. Because regime survival is a main concern for Iran, any attempt to bolster its adversaries in the region will put Iran in a desperate situation that could see an escalation in conflict. With reduced sanctions, Iran will also have the capability to pump more funds into its proxy network.

An additional proposed strategy would be boosting rival groups across the region through military and political means to counter Iranian proxy groups. The U.S. would essentially be building a proxy network of its own. This strategy would be effective in the sense that Iranian proxies would be challenged at the local level. However, this strategy would create more problems than solutions. First, the United States has a history of picking the wrong group to support. Non-state actors in the region are subject to shifting alliances and some engage in tactics not far off from the terrorist activities the U.S. is trying to stop. Second, the U.S. does not have good credibility with local groups after the Trump administration pulled support from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces which allowed Turkey to invade the group. This policy also directly escalates conflict at the local level, putting the population at further risk of humanitarian crisis due to increased instability. Lastly, the government's ability to govern decreases with the rise in

⁹⁹ Monshipouri and Dorraj.

power of non-state actors. This policy would drag the United States into a regional proxy war and would undermine any attempt at conflict resolution.

Proposed Strategy

In order to create a proposed strategy, one must take into account what interests do the United States prioritize and what are the goals it wants to achieve. It is in the primary interest of the United States to promote regional stability, to which Iran is a major threat. By promoting regional stability, the secondary goals of limiting terrorist organizations and economic development will be easier to achieve.

My proposed strategy to address Iran's regional foreign policy strategy will be broken into three parts. First, the United States must have an approach that not only targets Iran, but it targets individual proxy groups at the local level. Second, the United States must strengthen state institutions in nations where Iran is trying to infiltrate with proxy groups and soft power initiatives. This portion includes promoting peaceful solutions in regions of Iranian proxy presence that are in conflict. Third, the United States must continue to strike proxy forces when threatening U.S. personnel in order to maintain deterrence.

Iran has already shown it will not yield to US pressure by continuing to support its proxy groups and launch attacks despite the burden sanctions placed on its economy. Iran has prioritized soft power programs over its domestic economic situation through its continual diversion of large sums to shrine development and other initiatives.¹⁰⁰ It is therefore essential to target proxy groups at the local level. It is important to not have a blanket approach when dealing with proxy groups. Each group has varying allegiance to Iran, varying capabilities, and varying domestic situations.

¹⁰⁰ United Against Nuclear Iran.

The United States can combat Iran's soft power strategy with a soft power strategy of its own. This initiative can be broken into two parts: development in countries that Iranian proxies have infiltrated and increasing support and unity for U.S. allies in the region. The most effective defense of Iranian regional influence is the building of cohesive Arab states and national identities.¹⁰¹ The United States should combat Iran's strategy of integration of proxy groups into political systems by strengthening state institutions. Iran has capitalized on weak state institutions to fill power vacuums. Iran has also weakened already existing central government to the point the population is not guaranteed basic needs. It is in the interest of the U.S. to strengthen government institutions to meet the needs of the population. Not only will this aspect of the strategy increase opportunity for citizens of these countries, but it will decrease the inclination to rely on Iran for investment and support.

The strategy of strengthening state institutions, however, is not applicable in every case. In Iraq and Lebanon, development initiatives aimed at strengthening the central government would be beneficial because Iran is attempting to undermine the government. However, in Syria and Afghanistan, the United States cannot support the Assad regime and the Taliban. Regardless, if Iran saw its influence decrease in Iraq and Lebanon, it would diminish Iranian regional power and the power of its proxy groups.

The United States must support peace initiatives in conflict zones where Iranian proxies are present. Iran thrives on using proxy forces to increase power in regions that are in conflict. The most prominent example is the influx of Hezbollah's presence in

¹⁰¹ Sadjadpour, Karim. "How to Win the Cold War With Iran." *The Atlantic*, March 25, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/how-win-cold-war-iran/618388/>.

Syria and the soft power initiatives launched in recently captured areas to influence the local population. Iran also uses conflict to create proxy forces by supporting sides that are looking for foreign backing to gain military capabilities. This situation is present in Yemen where the Houthis gained military capabilities from Iranian support despite not originally being a proxy force. By achieving peace, certain groups will become less dependent on Iran for military capabilities. However, achieving peace to complex conflicts in these regions is a difficult task. There are steps the United States can take to de-escalate conflict.

The first step the United States needs to take in order to de-escalate conflict and make a pathway to peace more attainable is to limit support for non-state actors. The U.S. contribution to the escalating of conflict by injecting weapons and funds into groups has created further instability. The U.S. has also supported groups with questionable allegiances. Weapons supplied to these groups are documented to have ended up in the hands of both Iranian proxies and designated terrorist organizations. This situation became apparent when weapons supplied to rebel groups mixed alongside extremist elements in the Syrian civil war ended up in the hands of ISIS.¹⁰² Support for groups in conflict also pull the U.S. into proxy wars that Iran can escalate.¹⁰³ The United States should also ensure arms sales to its state allies are not given to non-state actors in conflict zones.

¹⁰² Shelbourne, Mallory. "Study Shows US Weapons given to Syrian Rebels Ended up in ISIS Hands." The Hill, December 14, 2017. <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/364917-study-shows-us-weapons-given-to-syrian-rebels-ended-up-in-isis-s-hands/>.

¹⁰³ Sadjadpour.

On the military side of the proposed strategy, the United States must continue with the Biden administration's strategy of striking proxy forces when they threaten U.S. personnel. The U.S. must also aid allies in striking targets when their forces are confronted by militia attacks. The policy should not include the active seeking out of targets, such as the strike that killed IRGC-Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani during the Trump administration. The United States must acknowledge confronting Iran's regional strategy cannot be solved through military means alone. Actively escalating conflict will increase Iran's mobilization of proxy forces and undermine the ability of the U.S. to exercise soft power. However, strikes that are aimed only for retaliation will discourage future militia attacks. The United States must be careful not to provoke escalation at a time when the Iranian regime feels vulnerable due to domestic unrest. Iran will take any chance it gets to divert attention from protests by engaging the United States or its allies militarily. This strategy ensures Iran understands that any attempt to escalate conflict with the U.S. will come with significant risk.

Because of the variety of proxy groups and different domestic situations in each nation, the general strategy must be tweaked on a case-by-case basis while keeping the main goal of establishing regional stability in mind.

In Iraq, the United States should aim to strengthen government institutions. The U.S. must make an investment into the democratic process in Iraq to prove it is not giving up on the nation. The goal of this process should be to limit Iran's influence on a fair election process through intimidation factors. The U.S. should also strengthen state institutions so that Iranian proxy groups do not present themselves as an alternative and perhaps superior form of governance. The strengthening of institutions should not include

the arming and funding of the Iraqi army because of the presence of Iranian militias in its ranks. During the fight against ISIS, Iranian proxy group the Badr Brigade received U.S. weapons directly from the Iraqi Defense Ministry.¹⁰⁴ These weapons were part of the \$20 billion spent for the training and arming of the Iraqi army.¹⁰⁵ U.S. support for the democratic process and not the supplying of arms to the military will increase the independence of the Iraqi government from Iranian influence and its militias.

Because of the group's deep historical presence in Lebanon, Hezbollah cannot be outright destroyed. However, the United States must find ways to limit Hezbollah's power in Lebanon. While the United States can, and should continue to do, put financial pressure on Hezbollah through sanctions and other means, the group's fate will be decided by domestic Lebanese and regional dynamics.¹⁰⁶ Efforts to create regional stability and stronger state institutions will diminish Hezbollah's regional role as the group has infiltrated conflict zones in Syria and Yemen while capitalizing on weak governance in Venezuela and Iraq. In order to curb Hezbollah's domestic influence, the Lebanese government must find ways to reduce corruption, engage in economic reform, and improve transparency.¹⁰⁷ Lebanese are outraged by the government's inability to manage the financial crisis, as Lebanon's GDP has plummeted from \$55 billion in 2018 to \$20.5 billion in 2021.¹⁰⁸ Bolstering the Lebanese economy is essential to increase government stability because Hezbollah has capitalized on being an alternative to governance in Lebanon. The United States has put limited efforts in supporting a buildup

¹⁰⁴ Williams, Holly. "Armed with U.S. Weapons, Infamous Militia Beating ISIS." CBS News, February 2, 2015. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/armed-with-u-s-weapons-ruthless-militia-beating-isis-in-iraq/>.

¹⁰⁵ Williams.

¹⁰⁶ Byman, Daniel L. "Hezbollah's Dilemmas." Brookings, November 10, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/hezbollahs-dilemmas/>.

¹⁰⁷ Byman.

¹⁰⁸ Byman.

of the Lebanese army and police in addition to conditioning some financial support for economic reform.¹⁰⁹ The U.S. has not succeeded in exploiting Hezbollah largely because Lebanese reform has not been a policy priority.¹¹⁰ The first step the U.S. needs to take is to encourage and support domestic economic reforms with help from its regional allies. Further actions the U.S. should take are focusing on limiting Hezbollah's smuggling that benefits the group's finances while also supporting an independent Lebanese president open to creating conditions for international assistance.¹¹¹

In Syria, the goal of the United States should be to limit Iranian proxy presence in the nation and halt Iranian soft power initiatives that go into its long-term strategy of inflicting cultural influence. Syria goes into the category of situations where the United States cannot support the central government. However, an Assad regime without civil war would mean decreased dependence on Iran and Russia. Assad has already shown reluctance to accept development programs from Iran because it feels its autonomy is being lost. Stability would also stop the need for Hezbollah and other Iranian militias operating in Syria. The United States should encourage peace talks between the Assad government and opposition forces through mediation by the United Nations. The U.S. must do everything in its power to convince Turkey to halt military operations in support of opposition forces in order to jumpstart peace negotiations while also stopping violence against Kurdish presence in Syria to lower the threat of conflict escalation.

The goal of the United States in Yemen should be to find a peace settlement to end the civil war. Iranian support for the Houthi rebels was in large part to limit Saudi

¹⁰⁹ Byman.

¹¹⁰ Byman.

¹¹¹ Byman.

influence in a proxy war. The Houthis are not a prototypical proxy force in that they do not directly answer to the IRGC or the regime. Attempting to stop Iranian material support for the Houthis has failed to prevent Iranian weapons from making their way onto the battlefield. Peace in Yemen will be difficult to achieve due to the diversity of militias groups and high influx of foreign weapons, as seen when a negotiated ceasefire was broken. The end of conflict will require working with allies in the Saudi-led coalition to halt the influx of weapons into the war.

The goal of policy addressing Iran's global foreign policy strategy is to maintain pressure on Iran through isolation in order to force them to the negotiating table. The strategy of the United States in dealing with Iran's global foreign policy should be broken into four parts. First, the U.S. must aid protesters in Iran because domestic unrest has implications on the course Iran's global strategy will take. Second, the United States should hold off on JCPOA negotiations; however, it should be willing to enter talks if moderate leadership comes to power. Third, the U.S. should continue the sanctions in place while coordinating allies to keep pressure applied. Lastly, the United States must undermine Iran's relationship with China, Russia, and Venezuela through exploiting economic and ideological weaknesses.

The United States also must take a stance on the domestic unrest occurring in Iran. The protests have the ability to threaten the position of the hard-liners in Iran that saw an increase in power during the maximum pressure implemented by the Trump administration. The Iranian regime is put in a vulnerable position so long as this movement continues. The international reaction to the protests has been overwhelming

and has resulted in a low global image for the Iranian regime.¹¹² The hope is that the movement can shift the balance of power from hard-liners to officials that are more moderate in an effort by the regime to ease the unrest. Already, the continued pressure mounted by the protests led Iran's Attorney General to announce that the nation's parliament and judiciary are reviewing the mandatory hijab law.¹¹³ It is in the interest of the United States for these protests to continue to the point where the regime is forced into some sort of compromise, even if it is as small as replacing a few hard-liners. President Biden has expressed support for protesters and national security meetings have discussed providing communications gear to protesters.¹¹⁴ The United States must do what it can to support the longevity of the protests; however, operations must be performed at the clandestine level while denying public involvement. If the Iranian regime is able to connect the U.S. to actively supporting domestic protest movements, it will have grounds to use its proxies to attack U.S. forces and allies throughout the region. The clandestine involvement should be kept at a small scale in order to avoid involvement accusations by the regime. Even at a small scale, covert action helping protestors comes with great risk especially with the long history of the C.I.A. meddling in Iranian politics.¹¹⁵ I would argue that the benefits these protests bring to undermining the regime outweigh the risks of being caught aiding the protesters.

¹¹² Sariolghalam, Mahmood. "Iran's Playbook in the Arab World: Ideology or Domestic Politics?" Middle East Institute, October 24, 2022.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-playbook-arab-world-ideology-or-domestic-politics>.

¹¹³ Stambaugh, Alex, Arash Azizi, and Akhtar Makoi. "Iran Says Hijab Law Is Under Review, as State Media Dismisses Claims Feared Morality Police Has Been Abolished." CNN, December 4, 2022.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/04/middleeast/iran-hijab-law-under-review-intl/index.html>.

¹¹⁴ Sanger, David. "US Confronts Iran on Protests, Ukraine and Nuclear Enrichment." The New York Times, November 25, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/24/us/politics/iran-protests-ukraine-nuclear-enrichment.html>.

¹¹⁵ Sanger.

The United States should hold off on JCPOA negotiations so long as hard-liners remain in control of negotiations and domestic protests continue. Stopping Iran from gaining nuclear weapon capabilities should continue to be a priority goal for the United States. However, hopes to re-enter a deal with Iran by the Biden administration has died, with John Kirby, a spokesman for the National Security Council, saying there is no diplomacy right now underway with respect to the Iran deal.¹¹⁶ The U.S. should not completely abandon any hope of signing a deal in the future and should be willing to reconsider negotiations if conditions in Iran change. If the course of the domestic protests brings moderate leadership, then favorable conditions to re-negotiate a JCPOA would emerge. In the meantime, the administration should remind Iran that it is willing to return to negotiations if Iran is willing to make legitimate concessions. Because this issue remains a top priority, the administration can use deterrence by threatening Iran military options are on the table if the regime comes closer to nuclear capabilities. However, it must be noted that a new JCPOA should only complement U.S. strategy and should not be viewed as the sole driver of curbing Iranian influence.

Creating unity with Arab allies allows for an efficient strategy to combat both Iran's regional and global strategy. Any new agreement with Iran would need U.S. allies in the region to approve, otherwise these nations could escalate tensions against Iran in an effort to undermine any deal between the United States and Iran that they do not agree with.¹¹⁷ If the allies were to sign on to a renewed agreement, Iran would likely have to pledge to end support for proxies around the region.¹¹⁸ This is another reason a new

¹¹⁶ Sanger.

¹¹⁷ Cook, Steven. "The Only Sensible Iran Strategy Is Containment." Council on Foreign Relations, March 11, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/article/only-sensible-iran-strategy-containment>.

¹¹⁸ Cook.

agreement should not be made with the current dynamic, as hard-liners in Iran would not agree to this condition. Not just a new agreement, but any strategy the U.S. decides to implement to contain Iran regionally can be risked by the actions of its allies because Iran will pin the blame on the United States. Allies should also play an important role in the building of stronger state institutions by investing in the government.

In order to combat Iran's global strategy, the United States must work to undermine the benefits gained by Iran engaging with China and Russia. It would be impossible to prevent Iran's relationship with China and Russia given the regime's necessity to avoid Western sanctions. However, there are measures the United States should take that would undermine the effects of these relationships. China provides an outlet market for Iranian oil. Chinese purchases of Iranian oil have risen to record levels in 2022, and the Biden administration has failed to enforce sanctions against Chinese individuals and companies amid the negotiations on reviving the JCPOA.¹¹⁹ Now that JCPOA negotiations have faltered, the administration should impose heavy sanctions on the purchase of Iranian oil by Chinese entities. Curbing China's relationship with Iran is also dependent on Gulf allies and Israel. China currently has a bigger economic and trade relationship with these nations than they do with Iran.¹²⁰ Given the priority on limiting Iranian power, allies should be convinced to either threaten their economic relationship with China if it continues to import Iranian oil.

¹¹⁹ Aizhu, Chen, and Alex Lawler. "China Buys More Iranian Oil Now than It Did before Sanctions, Data Shows." *Reuters*, March 2, 2022, sec. China. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-buys-more-iranian-oil-now-than-it-did-before-sanctions-data-shows-2022-03-01/>.

¹²⁰ Phillips, James. "How To Counter Iran's Growing Ties to China." The Heritage Foundation, January 14, 2022. <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/how-counter-irans-growing-ties-china>.

The United States can take steps to undermine Iran's growing relationship with Russia. Conflict resolution in Syria will decrease Russia's military relationship at the local level with Iran. So long as heavy sanctions continue to isolate the nations, Russia and Iran will be competing for limited oil markets. The United States should continue fueling this competition by ramping up sanctions on China if it chooses to keep importing Iranian and Chinese oil. The longer both Iran and Russia continue to be sanctioned, the more economic pressure will mount and competition will be increased. Any future return of the JCPOA will see increased cooperation between Russia and Iran to sell Russian oil through Iran. Putin has already engaged in talks with Iran to come to an agreement to export Russian oil if a JCPOA was reinstated.¹²¹ The United States should set a hardline that Iranian export of Russian oil would be the end of a new JCPOA. If moderate leadership were to gain increased power due to domestic protests, Iran's relationship with Russia could be decreased. Moderate politicians view Russia as an important neighbor, but reject efforts to strengthen Iranian ties with Russia due to a general distrust of the nation.¹²²

Combating Hezbollah and Iranian influence in Venezuela comes with great challenges. So long as Nicolas Maduro remains in control of state institutions, the idea of strengthening institutions to combat Hezbollah's presence is off the table for the United States. If opposition leader Juan Guaido, or another leader supported by the U.S., becomes under control of state institutions, then this strategy must be pursued. A new government must accept a U.S. presence to train Venezuelan forces to take down criminal

¹²¹ Foroutan.

¹²² Foroutan.

networks organized by Hezbollah.¹²³ The United States will likely need to take a leading role in this operation; however, because the Venezuelan government will have higher priorities such as rebuilding a fractured society and economic reforms.¹²⁴ While combating Hezbollah in Venezuela depends on the rise of a new government, the United States can take steps to limit Iran's relationship with the Maduro government. These steps start by blocking Iranian oil shipments to Venezuela from Iran. The U.S. Navy has intercepted and seized Iranian oil tankers bound for Venezuela in the past, including four in 2020.¹²⁵ The United States should work to intercept and confiscate any Iranian oil shipments.

¹²³ Clarke.

¹²⁴ Clarke.

¹²⁵ Lopez.

Advantages of Proposed Strategy

The primary goal of promoting regional stability will improve the lives of citizens living in both conflict zones and areas with weak governance. The role of the United States in finding peaceful solutions to conflict will improve its standing in the region. By decreasing arms shipments and support to non-state actors while supporting government institutions, the U.S. will contribute to the ability of governments to provide for its population and will foster economic development. U.S. military support for non-state actors in the past has contributed to the instability in the region while decreasing the central government's ability to function. The strategy of using military force only when responding to Iranian provocation will lower the risk of conflict escalation. A lower risk of conflict escalation benefits U.S. allies who are worried about Iranian attacks on their own nations if greater conflict were to break out. There will be an overall shift in perception of the United States from aggressor to defender of peace so long as the goal remains to promote stability through non-military means.

The strategy of patience when considering a return to the JCPOA gives the United States flexibility to act when conditions are optimal for a deal that maximizes U.S. goals. Conditions may allow for an agreement to be made, especially if mounted economic pressure brought on by the continuation of sanctions continues or if domestic unrest brings about moderate leadership willing to disband Iran's proxy network. Willingness to enter the negotiation table is also a way to de-escalate conflict if Iran were to choose to escalate, even if agreements are not made.

By involving allies in the region on strategy implementation and development, the United States will foster a better relationship with allies. Too often U.S. policy is

implemented without consultation with allies or without their best interests in mind.

Allies also have the impression that the United States is hoping to disengage with the region after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. By investing in a strategy that will benefit the stability in the region, the United States can rebuild trust with allies that has been in jeopardy due to past policy failures and fluctuation. The focus on peace building will benefit the security of its allies. Encouraging the help of allies in investing in state institutions will improve relations with governments prone to Iranian proxy presence.

By focusing on limiting Iran's partnership with Russia and China, the United States is able to contribute to its own goal of challenging Russian and Chinese power on the global scene and in the region.

Supporting protesters in Iran will increase the possibility of increased moderate leadership. Increased moderate leadership will jumpstart the conflict resolution process while limiting Iran's relationship with Russia.

Maintaining sanctions and keeping military presence as means of retaliation only will keep pressure on Iran. Sanctions will continue to impact the Iranian economy while limiting the funds available to its proxy groups. So long as Iran maintains extensive support of its proxy network, any reduction of sanctions will go to its funding. Any agreement made with Iran to reduce sanctions should come with the reduction or outright halt to the support of its proxy groups. Military presence will provide deterrence for any aggressive military action by Iran. However, by only using military force as retaliation, the United States will not be viewed as the aggressor and instigator of conflict. By increasing the infiltration of smuggling operations by both Iran and its proxies, the United States will both increase the isolation of Iran while limiting global criminal networks.

Key Policy Recommendation

The Biden administration as a whole will play a key role in the implementation of this strategy. The administration must be broken into different sections because each will play a different role.

The president should start with convening the National Security Council. The National Security Council should both organize coordination between different branches and to outline individual goals for each branch. Having a coordinated approach will kickstart an efficient policy. The NSC must continue to play an active role and gather information from different agencies as new developments occur.

The State Department plays a major role in the implementation of the strategy in regards to interaction with state actors, its role in the United Nations, and providing the president with the most effective course of action. The State Department will be the key entity coordinating strategy implementation with U.S. allies in the Middle East. Other Western allies must also be on board to keep sanctions in place on Iran. The State Department also must apply pressure through dialogue with nations such as China that offer Iran a market for oil exports. The State Departments also should draft any agreements needed with state actors that would benefit strategy implementation. These agreements would have to be approved by Congress, however, if they were to remain permanent without threat of the next presidential administration reversing any agreement. The State Department must also play a key role in peace processes taken on by the United Nations. The United Nations will play the key role in the implementation of peace in Yemen. The UN will also play a key role as the intermediary between any agreement the United States and Iran were to negotiate.

The role of the Central Intelligence Agency is to monitor any changes in Iranian strategy and new developments that can be used to adjust the strategy. The agency must coordinate efforts to analyze the domestic unrest, identify ways Iran is smuggling oil to undermine sanctions, and identify changes in proxy capabilities. Having the most up to date intelligence gives the United States the preparedness to get ahead of any new Iranian strategy while determining if the U.S. strategy is working. The agency should go a step further in active implementation of the strategy by providing support to protestors and sabotaging Iranian smuggling operations. This role will be crucial to combat any Iranian attempt to circumvent any sanctions.

The role of the Department of Defense is to provide deterrence against Iran and its proxy forces while intercepting illegal oil shipments. The Department of Defense will be needed to retaliate if Iran chooses to attack U.S. personnel. It, therefore, must maintain a presence in the region but should not work to instigate any conflict with Iran. The U.S. Navy will contribute to the global strategy by intercepting and seizing Iranian tankers attempting to export Iranian oil.

President Biden should lead the effort to implement the policy through spearheading relations with allies and governments. Biden will play an important role in maintaining U.S. dialogue on the issue to ensure the public that supporting stability in the region is a policy priority. He should sign off on any executive orders that support the policy not stated in agreements made with allies by the state department. Biden also should not sign off on arms shipments to state actors without conditions that they are used for retaliatory measures only and not given to non-state actors.

The Treasury Department will be in charge of the implementation of sanctions against both Iran and actors doing business with Iran that go against regulations set by the United States.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) will be responsible for sending funds to initiate any reforms needed to support the strengthening of state institutions. These will include much needed economic reform and investment in nations that are subject to economic problems, such as Lebanon. The Agency will play a major role in the “soft power” strategy by the United States in areas with weak governance.

Congress will play a complementary role to the executive branch in the implementation of the policy. Congress has the ability to make any agreement made by the executive branch permanent. The JCPOA made under the Obama administration was able to be pulled back under the Trump presidency because it did not have Congressional approval. Congress should be flexible in following the administration's lead on any changes that need to be made based on any fluctuation on Iran's strategy. This includes the need to increase or decrease sanctions.

Conclusion

The implementation of new U.S. policy is needed in order to combat the threat Iran poses both to the United States, its allies, and world stability. Iran's regional capabilities through its proxy network give it the capability to challenge the U.S. and its regional allies. Its proxy network has contributed to instability and conflict in the Middle East.

The goals of the policy to achieve greater regional stability will limit Iran's ability to take advantage of conflict zones and weak governance. If implemented properly, the achievements will go beyond just limiting Iranian influence by supporting regional economic development and decreasing conflict.

The United States must maintain pressure through sanctions and military retaliation; however, it should not provoke Iran through military escalation. The rising relations with China and Russia provide a real threat that the United States cannot let go unchecked.

The strategy comes at a time where Iran is the focus of world attention due to its domestic unrest. The United States can take advantage of the negative world view of the Iranian regime by rallying its allies into action.

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