

Iran's West Asian Neo-Empire: Armed and Ready

Written by Jamsheed K. Choksy and Carol E. B. Choksy

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JAMSHEED K. CHOKSY AND CAROL E. B. CHOKSY, AUG 9 2024

“Death to America, death to Israel” emerged as a slogan of the 1978–1979 Islamic Revolution, then was transformed into a reason for existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Conventional and chemical weapons that pounded Iranian cities from Iraq during the latter nation’s US-supported war between 1980–1988 did not topple the Islamist regime. Nor have subsequent decades of ever-mounting sanctions or, more recently, the elimination of Iranian nuclear scientists and military commanders as well as its client Hamas and Hezbollah leaders and commanders by the US and Israel. Iran’s leadership, under second Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since 1989, seems thoroughly convinced that their revolutionary guide and first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was correct when he declared in 1979, during the Embassy Hostage Crisis, that: “America can’t do a damn thing against us.” Indeed, Tehran has positioned itself to take on the United States of America, Israel, and any Arab nations militarily from all corners of West Asia. Tehran will do so “cautiously and carefully” directly and also circuitously through its West Asian retainers.

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to become the major shaper of regional events and an important influencer of global affairs at the expense of the US. To accomplish those foreign policy goals, Iran is expanding control over other areas of West Asia not through direct invasion as its ancient Achaemenian and Sasanian empires did but by steadily transforming regimes and territorially-based groups into subject territories—client states and client semi-states—through violence, corruption, and influence. The violence is deployed largely through military factions that are reliant upon Tehran with the aim of controlling territory. The influence is spread through diplomatic, informational, and economic methods to create dependencies at state and local levels. In so doing, Tehran is taking de facto control over strategic locations on land and sea for cornering and reshaping the entire region. The conflicts, some of them preexisting, now-propelled by Tehran as part of its take-over quest will not be going away anytime soon, just getting worse, unless Washington coordinates a successful counter thrust.

Iran claims that its political and military involvements in neighboring countries and waterways are geared to “fight terrorism and help establish peace, stability, and lasting security.” To the contrary, by deftly aggravating regional sectarian politics and by undermining societies through persistent attacks, well-crafted propaganda, and illicit substances deployed via quasi-state organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, and Iraqi militias, and governments like that of Syria, the regime in Tehran is generating region-wide instability to secure its hegemonic goals. All the missiles, drones, landmines, bullets, and other munitions come from Iran. Tehran emphasizes that its “foreign policy course is stable and will remain so” irrespective of changes in leadership. Indeed, soon after winning the presidential election in July, Masoud Pezeshkian met with Supreme Leader Khamenei and thereafter announced that ties with regional dependencies are “unbreakable bonds.” Through those vassal states and groups, who Iran’s leaders label as their political-military Axis of Resistance or Resistance Front, a ring of fire has been ignited against other West Asian nations who have not granted suzerainty to Iran’s fundamentalist leaders and against US bases, ships, and embassies. Consequently, if Iran’s aggressive expansion is not reversed, regional and global wellbeing will be negatively impacted for a long time.

Tehran's Approach

Iran has established a territorial network of like-minded, aggressive, regional retainers—some are Shiites, others are

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Alawites and Sunnis—who are extensions of its own military and policies. They include liegemen like the Assad regime of Syria and quasi-state retainers including Popular Mobilization Force paramilitaries in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank/Palestinian Authority, and Ansar Allah (Houthis) in Yemen. In each situation, these entities control strategic territories and shipping channels which serve as Tehran's outposts or power projections. Expanding its pattern of carving out client states, Iran is drawing upon Shiite affiliations to radicalize coreligionist groups such as the Baharna in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia and the Nakhawila of the Red Sea coast or Hijaz who are politically, socially, and economically discriminated by Sunni elites and so have separatist aspirations.

Iran systematically exploits fissures within West Asian polities, using its influence and resources to purposefully exacerbate and reshape problems. Iran's strategy has been a hybrid one. Its clients are dependent on Tehran for direction, finances, training, and weapons—such as provided to the Popular Mobilization Forces and to Islamic Jihad. Yet the Islamic Republic's government attempts to mask agency by asserting that it “does not have proxies in the region, and no individual, group, or nation operates under Iran's directive.” Tehran goes on to characterize them as “partner Resistance Groups” sharing common anti-Western, anti-Israel, and even anti-incumbent Sunni regime causes amongst themselves and with Iran. Doing so permits Tehran to maintain varying degrees of deniability, ensuring it does not directly enter into wars with the US, Britain, EU member nations, and neighboring Arab countries. Indeed Tehran, until recently has been avoiding direct confrontation with an estimated 45,000 US troops plus warships and aircraft in the region. Yet, it did shoot 12 missiles at the Ain al-Asad and Erbil airbases during January 2020 in retaliation for the elimination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general Qasem Soleimani at Baghdad. Likewise, Tehran had been wary of taking on Jerusalem directly until recently. Then Tehran shifted its stance to display offensive capability after Israel blew up the Iranian Consulate in Damascus which served as a field headquarters for IRGC generals, killings two of them. Washington's intervention was necessary to thwart Iran's aerial offensive against Israel during April 2024, although at least 9 missiles caused minor damage at airbases. By establishing, directly and through its clients, a neo-empire of strategic land locations and chokehold nautical passages Iran is increasingly better prepared for what its leaders regard as a winnable multi-front war against the US, Israel, and Arab states who work with Washington and Jerusalem.

Iran-allied militia members are estimated to number from 180,000 to over 320,000 across West Asia, extending the might of its own IRGC and Atesh militaries which comprise approximately 527,000 troops. By comparison, the combined militaries of Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Kuwait stand at approximately 650,000. IRGC generals, strategists, and soldiers, including members of the Quds Force, are present to train, equip, and guide local combatants. Like satraps or governors summoned to a meeting with the king of kings at the royal court of the Persian Empire, each subject group's leadership regularly consults in person with Khamenei and his representatives per “the basic strategy of the Islamic Republic.” The funeral of President Ebrahim Raisi in late May 2024 was utilized as an opportunity for face-to-face strategy sessions in Tehran between high-ranking IRGC and IRGC-Quds Force commanders and leaders of all the Resistance Groups. A similar gathering took place at the end of July—when Pezeshkian was sworn in as president, the regime's foreign retainers including Hamas leaders came to pledge allegiance—and one of them, Ismail Haniyeh, lost his life in Tehran, for which Supreme Leader Khamenei who has vowed “harsh punishment” against Israel. Political elites from regions under pressure such as Iraqi Kurdistan attended the inauguration to curry favor. Upon taking office, President Pezeshkian spoke with Resistance Front liegemen to promise Iran's continuing “support with firm determination.”

Regional Clients, Vassal States, and Battlegrounds

In Iraq, influence of the Islamic Republic began right after the US ousted Saddam Hussein in early 2003. By 2014, Iran had set up a Coordination Framework and spread its control via the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, also known as Popular Mobilization Units). Tehran-backed groups within the PMF now hold 101 of 285 seats on provincial councils. They have become firmly entrenched as a hybrid, semi-state entity, influencing budget allocation, civil service employment, and national security across Shiite and Sunni regions of Iraq—and now even expanding into Kurdistan—on behalf of Tehran. Those pro-Iran entities, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Badr Organization, Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba, Iman Ali Saraya (or Brigade), Islamic Resistance, Kataib Hezbollah, Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada, Saraya al-Khorasani, and Saraya al-Salam, command between 90,000-160,000 soldiers. These forces constantly

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launch deadly missile, drone, and other attacks against US interests not just within Iraq but in Syria and Jordan as well. Kataib Hezbollah and Muqawama al-Islamiyat (Islamic Resistance) routinely target the American embassy in Baghdad, the Al-Harir military base at Erbil, and in early August injured U.S. personnel at the Ain al-Asad air base.

The attacks are producing a result that Tehran desires, pushing American troops out of Iraq. In addition to military pressure, Tehran is using its diplomatic and economic clout, directly and via the PMF, on the Iraqi government to oust the Americans. Increasingly unwelcome, Washington too seeks to gradually withdraw forces possibly eventually abandoning its Kurdish allies. Recently, the Iraqi Islamic Resistance has been coordinating with another of Tehran's clients, the Houthis of Yemen, in directing almost daily launches of suicide drones and cruise missiles at airbases and ports such as Ovda, Ramon, Haifa, and Eilat and cities including Tel Aviv and Haifa in Israel. Moreover, in early July, Houthis set up a political-military office in Baghdad close to PMF headquarters and near the Green Zone. They have begun buttressing PMF efforts to unite southern Iraq's tribal and religious leaders under Tehran's sway. Control within Iraq also gives Tehran access to land bridges and porous borders across which ideology, disinformation, and disruption can be spread to the populations of Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

Iran's Islamist regime began deepening ties with the Syrian dictatorship during the 1980s. Tehran became the lifeline for Damascus when civil war broke out in March 2011. Iran now counts on the IRGC-supported Assad government's armed Alawite military to share Syria's naval, land, and air bases, collect intelligence about Israeli, Palestinian, Lebanese, and Jordanian activities, and to maintain cross-country access to those regions. Pro-Iranian groups such as Fatemiyoun Saraya, Zeynabiyoun Saraya, Liwa al-Baqir, Saraya al-Khorasani, and Quwat al-Ridha number between 18,000–20,000 troops. In addition to propping up the Alawite regime, they too facilitate the IRGC's supply chains of weapons, funds, and personnel into Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank, and the smuggling of narcotics to undermine Sunni populations of Iraq, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Those supply chains even include underground tunnels, at least one of which ran for approximately 25 miles from Damascus to the Lebanon border, to hide activities from American and Israel surveillance. In these manners, Syria serves as a frontline dependency for Iran to destabilize other societies in West Asia. Israel, Kurds of Eastern Syria, Syrian Defense Forces constituted by Kurds, and the U.S.A. are constantly breaking up those nefarious supply chains. Jerusalem has become especially adept at eliminating IRGC and Syrian field commanders who guide Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian militias targeting Israel—including those based in the Iranian consulate at Damascus. Despite Israeli and American inflicted damage, however, Tehran shows no sign of pulling back efforts to maintain an anti-American vassal regime in Damascus and, via Syria, to target the societies of Washington's allies and to harm U.S. troops.

Hezbollah counts 30,000–45,000 fighters who maintain the political-military party's stranglehold over Lebanon's politics, society, and economy. That Lebanese Shiite group has been beholden to Iranian commanders and politicians since 1982. Hezbollah administered territory—including neighborhoods in Beirut and southern and eastern Lebanon—serve as extensions of Iran. There, Hezbollah provides Tehran's forces with access to military bases, including maritime ones, plus intelligence. Not surprisingly, Hezbollah-controlled regions of Lebanon—especially the border with Israel—are prime locations for Iran's warfare and propaganda against the Jewish state. Attacks by Hezbollah display the rising presence of advanced Iranian technology; recently even heavy rockets have been fired at Israeli military posts. Concern is mounting within the US and Israel militaries that Iran-supplied precision missiles soon will be capable of overwhelming Iron Dome defenses. Additionally, Hezbollah serves as the direct conduit for Iranian munitions into Gaza. A range of Iran-provisioned Palestinian militias, such as Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, are present in Lebanon too, making that fragile nation a major staging ground for Iran's machinations within Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. Killing of Hezbollah and IRGC leaders by Israel has made limited impact on the lethal and political consequences of Iran's presence which includes accessing Mediterranean Sea routes to destabilize North Africa and Southern Europe.

Iran's support of Sunni Palestinian militants is ideological, fiscal, tactical, and logistical. Hamas from 1987, and subsequently Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and over time smaller armed groups such as Abd al-Qadir al-Hosseini Brigades, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Lions' Den, Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement, Palestine Mujahideen Movement, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Popular Resistance Committees, have come to depend on Iran to help pay, train, and equip some 30,000–45,000 soldiers.

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Not surprisingly, reports from the Coalition Council of Islamic Revolution Forces and the IRGC indicate Tehran was involved in planning the October 2023 attack by Hamas which triggered the war in Gaza. Despite its hard-hitting response, the Israel Defense Forces have not been able to stem Iranian munitions from refueling Hamas to continue rocket fire into Israel's cities and ground attacks against Israeli troops. Gaza, as a result, has become yet another territorial outpost of Iran from which missiles penetrate the Iron Dome. Its focus set on controlling the West Bank as well, Tehran is pushing via propaganda and militias, for an albeit corrupt and inefficient Palestinian Authority to "fall into utter disgrace (and) be dissolved." Fearing this mounting challenge to their three-decade authority, Palestinian Authority officials accuse Tehran of "sacrificing the blood of the Palestinian people for its own interests." By late July, Iran's actions had coerced the Palestine Liberation Organization and its main faction Fatah, who control the Palestinian Authority, into accepting the Beijing Declaration which proposes a unity government with Hamas. So, by force and pact, Tehran is extending control into the West Bank and is unlikely to be set back by Israel's elimination of Hamas elites.

Tehran's support for Palestinian causes, while often derided by ordinary Iranians as a waste of money and lives which would be better focused on improving their own nation, galvanizes support among Muslims worldwide. It also undercuts Sunni Arab regimes who are more reluctant to take on Israel and care little for Palestinian statehood; Saudi Arabia, for instance, has even begun deleting demarcation of Palestine from maps in school textbooks. So, by championing Palestinians and Palestine when others do not, the leaders of Iran are able to coopt and refocus dissatisfactions among Arabs upon the governments of the US and Israel and upon the monarchies of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan. Iran knows how to widen cracks even within American society, as evidenced by Supreme Leader Khamenei insinuating: "You (student protestors for Palestinians) have now formed a branch of the Resistance Front." As the nascent Islamic Republic did during the 1980 US presidential elections via the embassy hostages, now too Tehran disrupts American democracy via the fires it burns in West Asia as acknowledged by the US Director of National Intelligence.

Houthi or Ansar Allah fighters of Yemen, estimated at between 10,000-30,000 strong, could not have become as potent a fighting force without the Islamic Republic's patronage. The Houthi movement was influenced by Tehran via Hezbollah from 2003-2009. When radicalization and militarization of Houthis occurred in response to civil war in 2014 and the Saudi-Emirati invasion to support Yemen's Sunnis in 2015, Iran was quick to buttress southern Arabia's Shiites with ideology, training, and supplies. Drawing upon increasingly sophisticated Iranian technology, Houthis acquired and developed low-cost weapons that reached into Saudi Arabia, forcing that Sunni kingdom to withdraw from Yemen. Fear of Houthi attacks has resulted in Riyadh preventing US counterstrikes into Yemen being launched from within the kingdom. Houthis now control the capital of Sanaa and most of western Yemen—giving Tehran a substantial client state on the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb, and Gulf of Aden. The Gaza War gave Houthis an excuse to target Israeli and Western interests; so, they launched a sustained offensive against commercial vessels moving European, American, and Asian goods through vital shipping lanes off Yemen's coast. According to the US Defense Intelligence Agency, as of mid-February 2024 transit of container shipments dropped 90 percent, impacting approximately 9–14 percent of international maritime trade with increases in cost and time. The Houthis are well armed with Iranian and Iranian-style ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and unmanned surface vehicles to conduct these attacks. So, Houthis utilize inexpensive—approximately \$2,000 each—Iran-sourced weapons which the US and EU navies have to shoot down with expensive missiles—costing approximately \$2 million each. An IRGC naval vessel just outside the Chinese base at Doraleh on Djibouti's Red Sea coast is suspected of having provided targeting data to Houthi launch sites. Houthi troops have even boarded and commandeered vessels using tactical training and equipment provided by the IRGC. They are increasingly adept at shooting down American reconnaissance and attack drones. Equally troubling is the cutting of submarine cables at the bottom of the Red Sea during March 2024, disrupting one quarter of all telecommunication traffic between Asia and Europe, for which Houthi-manned Iran-supplied submersibles are the prime suspects.

Safeguarding maritime global trade and communications from the Arabian Sea through the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, namely Operation Prosperity Guardians, falls largely to Washington. Not surprisingly, Iran adds directly and via its surrogates a mounting maritime fiscal burden to the toll racking up elsewhere within West Asia in American lives and supplies. Tehran knows that "the image and reality of the United States as a global superpower partially depends on its ability to maintain ... global trade security" and stifling the flow of goods "challenges the United States'

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reputation.” Likewise, understanding the economic importance of Red Sea shipping for Israel’s economy and labor force, Iran’s state and quasi-state retainers regularly launch Tehran supplied missiles and drones from Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen toward the ports of Eilat and Haifa—including more than 200 attacks over the past nine months by Houthis. Through these actions, Iran keeps up the pressure on Israel’s economy. Egypt’s Suez Canal Authority has lost \$2.2 billion over the past 12 months due to decreased maritime transit. Massive investments by the Saudi state in boosting Red Sea tourism are taking losses. Resistance Front members have not, however, attacked Persian Gulf nations’ oil and gas shipments likely due to those Arab states having previously reached diplomatic deals with Tehran—reinforcing regional conclusions that appeasing Iran is important. Likewise, with only one exception each, perhaps due to misidentifications, Houthi drones and missiles have not been aimed at vessels linked to Iran’s major supporters Russia and China. Houthis are receiving Iranian precision guided medium and intermediate range ballistic missile technologies to fulfill threats of reaching targets in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, even bringing the US-British base at Diego Garcia within range. Operational reach into the southern and western waters of the Arabian Peninsula augments Tehran’s already significant control in the Persian Gulf where its navy attaches limpet mines upon or seizes international vessels supposedly to deter smuggling of oil and drugs.

During September 2019, Iran successfully conducted a damaging multi-drone assault on Saudi Aramco’s oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais. Tehran’s Arabian surrogate Houthis unleashed approximately 1,000 missile attacks plus more than 350 drone attacks against the Arabian kingdom between 2015 and 2023. Despite the Beijing-brokered pact of March 2023, Iran continues its undermining of the Sunni kingdom’s societal stability. Tehran’s weapon of choice is a chemical WMD, Captagon (fenethylamine), manufactured in Syria by Tehran’s client, the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad, and smuggled—millions of pills with a street value of billions of dollars—into Saudi Arabia, and into UAE and Jordan too, through Alawite, Hezbollah, and Bedouin networks, to turn youth into addicts. Restive Shiite populations within eastern and western Saudi Arabia, including those who have joined Hezbollah al-Hijaz, plus the Al-Ashtar, Al-Mukhtar, and Waad Allah Sayaras of Bahrain, and Iranian-expatriate groups in the UAE and Oman all function as means by which Tehran ferments intrastate turmoil based on preexisting economic, social, and religious discontents. Iranian Shiite prayer leaders even threatened to turn the 2024 summer’s Hajj into a protest movement, ostensibly to galvanize worldwide Muslim support for Palestinians against Israel. Tehran’s actions caused much concern among the Saudi ruling establishment about the likelihood of clashes like those of July 1987 that resulted in more than 400 deaths and 1,000s injured at Mecca. The Iranian call to action during the Hajj also stoked fears that Gaza-related protests among pilgrims would inspire Arabian Peninsula residents to stage anti-regime populist uprisings. Not surprisingly, the Saudi regime banned pro-Palestine activism on the grounds that “the Hajj is a time for worship and not for political expression.” Nonetheless, skirting Saudi threats that “no political activity” would be tolerated, some pilgrims publicly prayed for their “brothers in Palestine ... may God grant victory to the Muslims.”

Islamic Republic’s Objectives

Tehran undermined American and Coalition attempts to rebuild Iraq, then infiltrated and coopted that nation’s politics, economy, and security. Iran, and its superpower ally Russia, successfully kept Assad in power at Damascus. Tehran has secured land routes through Iraq and Syria to its militant retainers in Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan. Maritime routes connect Iran to its Yemeni ally despite non-stop interception efforts by American and European warships. The Islamic Republic’s territorial and maritime control provides networks, storage facilities, and operational centers for channeling of cash, trainers, and materiel across West Asia. Iran’s collaborators routinely launch missile and drone attacks not only against Israel but on Arab states in the region. Tehran-supplied drones and locally-manufactured copies have even been identified in successful assaults launched by Sudanese government troops against rebel Rapid Support Forces who operate drones supplied by the UAE—so yet another proxy civil war between Iran and its Arab rivals is heating up. U.S. naval intelligence is monitoring the IRGC navy’s refitting of a merchant container ship into a drone aircraft carrier which would extend the mobility of Iran’s striking range and free it from more easily cutoff land routes. Its hold over key locales, especially liege-controlled territories, increasingly secure and expanding, and substantial stockpiles of weapons which can reach targets across West Asia regularly replenished for those clients, Tehran threatens: “Boiling the Red Sea (is) just the beginning.”

Tehran’s tenacious immediate goals are to drive out the US from West Asia and transform regimes of regional

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American allies into Iranian client states. As attacks and counterattacks mount between the IDF and Iran's surrogates, Tehran eyes a multifront sectarian war as one more means of crippling Israel, dividing the American public, and ramping up populist Muslim pressure against Sunni Arab leaders. Outlays for staying on to push back Iran are steep for Washington. Since late 2023, at least 186 American soldiers have been injured or killed and over \$1.6 billion expended there without much success. Tehran is counting on those mounting costs to draw down US resources and reserves and to squelch Americans' desires to continue major involvement in the region. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei envisions "a fundamental transformation ... (of) West Asia's geopolitical map ... (through) de-Americanization." Seeking to unite Muslims of the region in "rejection of US hegemony," Iran's head claims to abjure "the Arabs vs non-Arabs dichotomy, the Shiite vs Sunni dichotomy, and the myth of the Shiite Crescent ... that they (i.e., Americans) have brought up." Yet the primacy of Shiites in the Iranian-led challenge remains a constant refrain: "Who help the most?" Khamenei often asks, before answering, "Shiites do—the Lebanese Shiites, the Iraqi Shiites, the Arab Shiites, and the non-Arab Shiites."

The Islamic Republic's endgame is unswervingly broader, imperialist, and colonialist. Its ultimate purpose is to challenge "longstanding rules of the international system as well as U.S. primacy within it ... to undermine the United States on the global stage," as warned in the 2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the American intelligence community. From Tehran's viewpoint, one shared not just by its regional affiliates but championed by Beijing and Moscow too—Iran has a 25-year cooperation agreement with China and is finalizing a 20-year one with Russia—the American-centric "unipolar world has ceased to exist as new powers emerge." Indeed, meetings between Iranian, Chinese, and Russian political and military leaders are becoming more frequent. Immediately after the assassination of Hamas' political leader in Tehran, Russia's Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu arrived to consult with his Iranian counterpart and others. That emerging union of nations and groups claims to seek a multipolar order which supposedly will bring "more stability through equity and justice." So, territorial changes in West Asia have global ramifications, especially for the rules-based international system which the US and its European partners established.

Possible U.S. Countermoves

U.S. leaders are cognizant of the mounting threat from Iran to Washington's position of primacy within the current global system. Washington has sought to militarily surround Iran with bases for aircraft and troops in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq including Kurdistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. American naval fleets monitor and try to intercept Iranian and pro-Iranian vessels in the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea. Those bases and fleets, via not only their presence but more frequent joint exercises and operations with Arab militaries, could be utilized to demonstrate more strongly to Tehran that Washington's posture is not going to remain reactive but would become proactive in preventing threats. Likewise, Washington can choose to continue committing financial resources to its regional allies, such as \$450 million earmarked for the Jordanian military, to counter the destabilizing activities of Iran financing its vassals.

Most recently, the Trump and Biden administrations have responded to Tehran through the Abraham Accords and in-the-works West Asian security coalitions. The latter include air and missile defense shields with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member nations and radar data sharing agreements such as one recently inked with Kuwait. Yet, by actively supporting Palestinian groups against Israel, Iran has managed to fray the economic and political ties generated from the September 2020 Abraham Accords through depicting the monarchies of Bahrain and UAE as complicit with Jerusalem in Muslim deaths. This issue also has slowed American attempts to have Saudi Arabia sign onto the Accords. Nascent US-crafted security pacts' viability are being tested as well, for Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Manama, and Amman have disavowed direct connections to sharing of intelligence and downing of missiles and drones launched in April from Iran toward Israel. Fear of retaliation from Tehran plus disapproval by their own populations for siding with Jerusalem are the main reasons for those Arab regimes' need to keep involvement out of view. So, Washington through stepped-up engagement will have to reassure the Arab kingdoms and Israel that it will stand firmly by them as a shield, even when necessary as a sword, despite the tenacity of Iran and Iranian clients.

Washington needs to find more effective ways of neutralizing commanders, scientists, and even politicians who direct Tehran's efforts without impacting ordinary Iranians through sanctions and violence. To date, American and

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Israeli efforts have been all or nothing, yet neither fiscal pressures nor assassinations have set back Iran or its client states and retainers. The IRGC, Syrian military, Hezbollah, Hamas, PMF groups, and Houthis have developed deep cadres from which to swiftly promote new principals to replace those cut down. Other means of co-opting—including fiscal, political, familial, and even coercion—do need to be developed and deployed more effectively and frequently. Only then will leadership vacuums emerge which could negatively impact Tehran's operational capabilities, regime stability, and regional hegemony.

Most important, American policymakers should constantly bear in mind that Iran and its regional underlings do not stand alone. Stopping Tehran's takeover of West Asia will serve the U.S. well in beginning to counter even larger concomitant challenges to its global alliances such as NATO from the Islamic Republic's superpower partners Russia and China. Ultimately, Iran's territorially-based, Axis of Resistance-deployed, power grab meshes with an even broader tri-partite push against Washington by Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran to restructure global power distribution, with Iran hoping to control West Asia through client states. Already, those three nations have staged four air and naval Security Belt exercises in the region's waters, between December 2019 and March 2024, aimed at establishing their version of "security and peace." Iran has teamed up with China to keep Russia on the offensive in Ukraine despite American and European supplies and finances to Kiev. Increasingly Beijing has been buttressing, augmenting, and complementing both Tehran and Moscow in West Asian expansionism.

Washington must reach out to and work with Beijing, despite differences over Taiwan and chips. After all, the US and China are each other's largest trading partners and the latter counts on the former to maintain the maritime passages of West Asia through which oil and gas flow eastward. The US and China have much more in shared, mutually beneficial, interests than Beijing does with Tehran. Likewise, despite the tussle for Ukraine, Iran's militant Islamist expansionism poses more of a threat to Russia (and even China) than to the US. So Washington could work with Moscow to stabilize West Asia and neutralize Tehran. Washington and its partners cannot afford to lose this seemingly regional, yet actually global, contest spearheaded by the leaders in Tehran. US leaders must demonstrate that, contrary to supreme leaders Khomeini and Khamenei, America can do many things against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

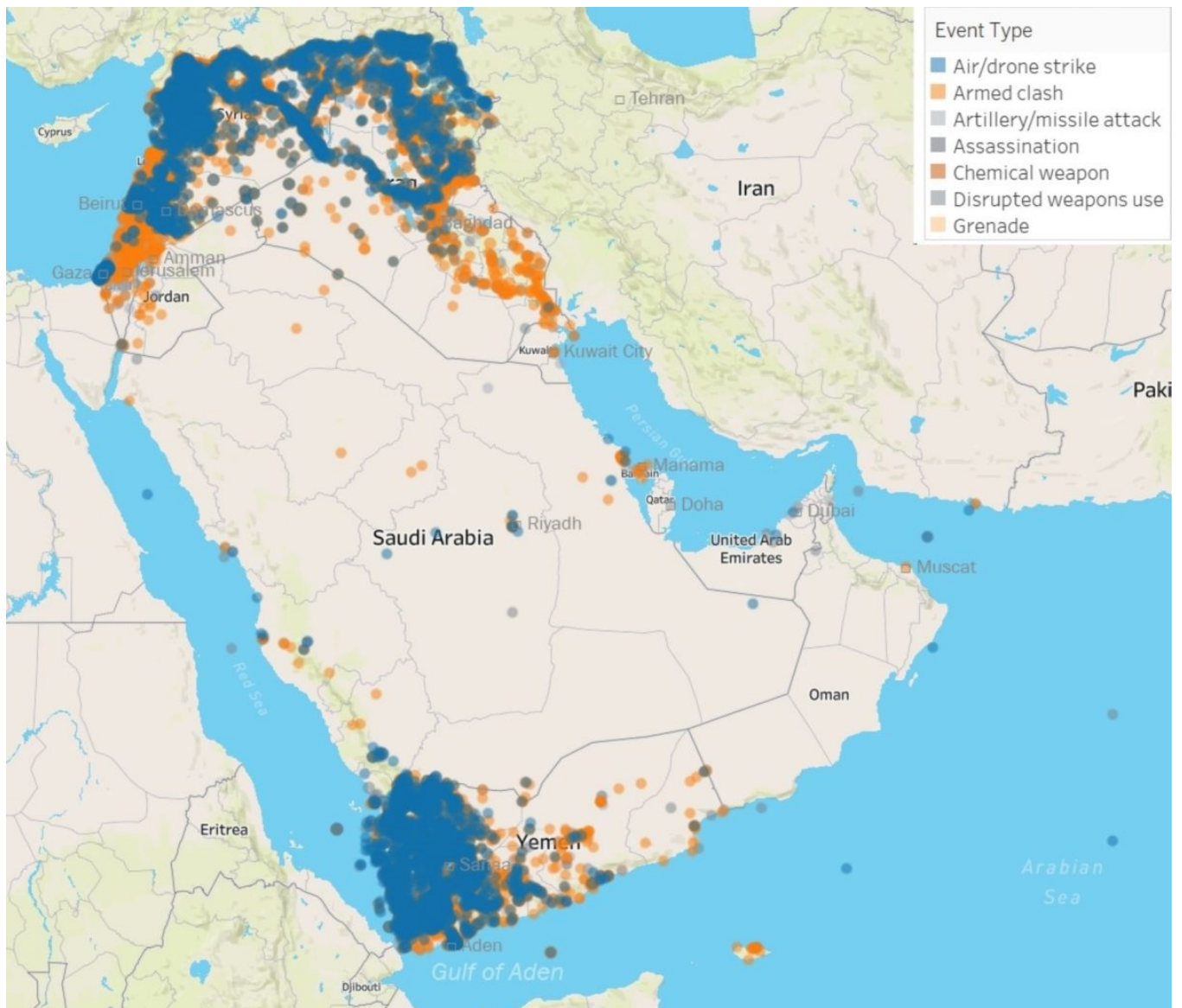
Figures

MAP 1. Distribution of Violence Involving Iran and Its Clients, 1979–2024.

Produced from information at Armed Conflict Location & Events Data, Defense Intelligence Agency, Global Terrorism Database, CENTCOM reports.

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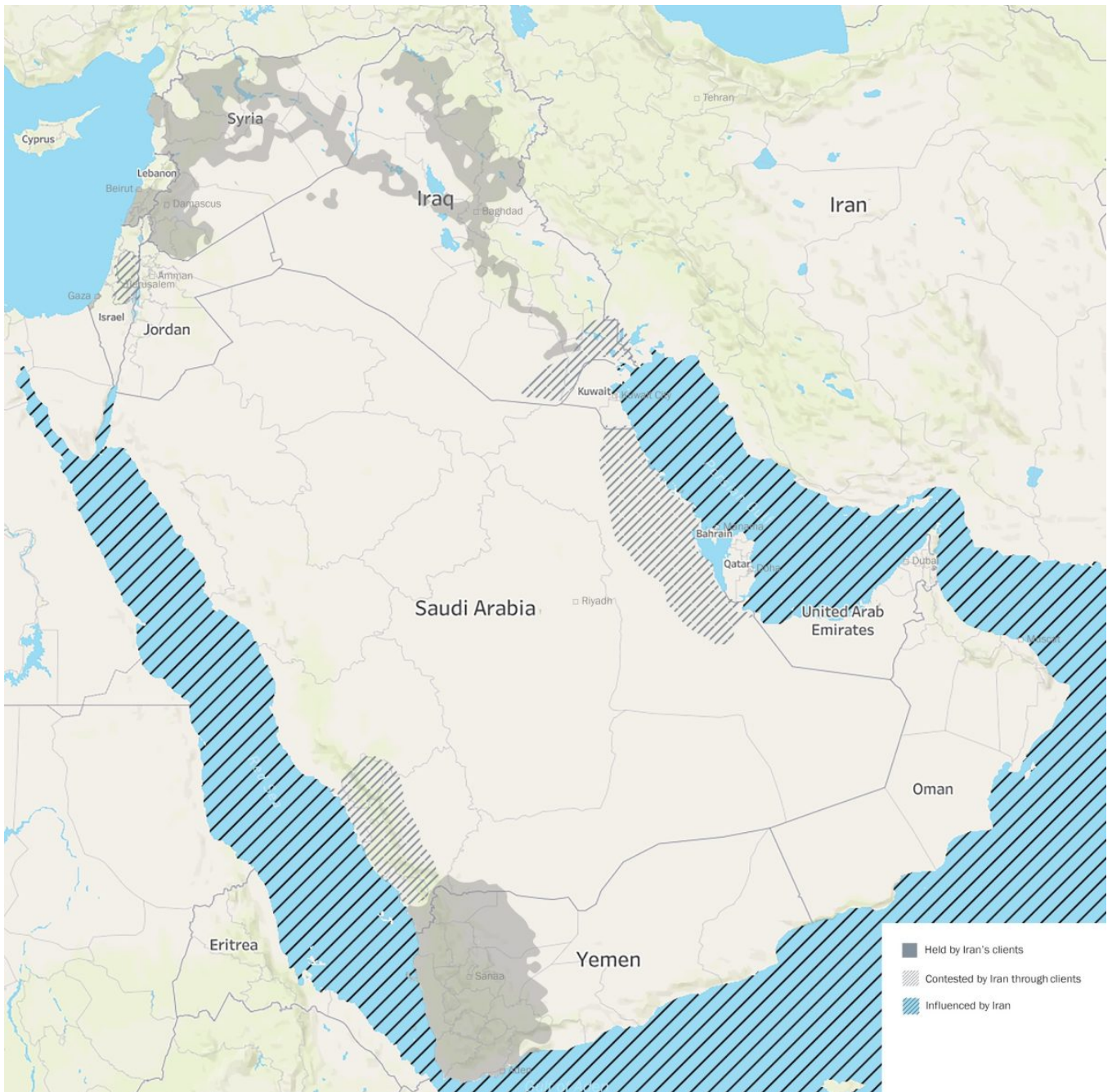


MAP 2: Territories Held, Contested, and Influenced by Iran and Its Clients, July 2024.

Produced from information at Armed Conflict Location & Events Data, Defense Intelligence Agency, Global Terrorism Database, CENTCOM reports.

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