



Fighters of Hashed Al-Shaabi (popular mobilization units) flash the victory gesture as they advance through the town of Tal Afar, west of Mosul, 26 August 2017 after the Iraqi government announced the launch of the operation to retake the town from Islamic State control. Hashed Al-Shaabi is a composite organization mainly composed of Shia Islamic militias that is underwritten by the government of Iraq but heavily influenced by Iran. (Photo by Ahmad Al-Rubaye, Agence France-Presse)

“Trans-Rational”

Iran’s Transnational Strategy for Dominance and Why It Cannot Survive Great Power Competition

Maj. Scott J. Harr, U.S. Army

*Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation,
and every city or house divided against itself will not stand.*
—Gospel according to Matthew

As the United States seemingly scales back its counterterrorism operations—primarily in Middle Eastern theaters—and shifts to focus on nation-state competition, one of the enduring lessons from its experiences over the last nineteen years relates to the limits of American power with the emergence of capable transnational actors. Far from being uniquely American, these lessons reflect a shift in the concept of sovereignty as it applies to all nation-states existing in the current Westphalian paradigm that ranks the nation-state as the most powerful political entity. Modern global trends lie at the heart of these lessons. While shrinking the metaphorical distance between people groups and cultures across the globe, the convergence of technology and globalization has empowered entities that transcend established national boundaries and enables them to project power and influence far beyond their physical sizes and geographic locations. In a state-centric global world order, these transnational, nonstate actors take many forms including corporations, nongovernment organizations, social movements, and terrorist groups. These inject the world order with an unprecedented level of complexity, which tends to confound the international status quo. The result is an international community teeming with transnational groups, creating transnational issues, opportunities, and threats. Reactions to the rise of transnational threats have been varied with some, like author Anna Simons, calling for a reinvigoration of nation-state sovereignty even as nonstate actors assert themselves on the international stage.¹ Others, like Maryann Cusimano Love, see a reduced role for traditional concepts of nation-state sovereignty in an increasingly interconnected and shared global community.²

The emergence of transnational organizations is enough in its own right to strain the state-centric world order. However, nation-state adversaries of the United States increase the danger posed by transnational organizations by harnessing their ambiguous attributes to shape and prosecute competitive actions that undermine U.S. interests. While U.S. adversaries identified in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* have exploited and incorporated transnational groups in their efforts to make policy gains

on the margins of peace (bypassing American strengths in the process), Iran is perhaps most adept at influencing and plying transnational groups to work against U.S. and allied regional interests. Iran is well-versed in shaping movements toward its own ends, having deployed this tactic to assume power in 1979, hijacking legitimate social and antigovernment movements to install the current theocratic regime. Building on this successful experience, modern Iran trains, supports, and employs a vast network of nonstate, transnational proxies to advance its foreign policy agenda across the Middle East.

Given the above dynamics, it is clear that Iran has evolved the use of transnational groups in proxy warfare from a strategy traditionally employed to balance power, forestall direct nation-state confrontation, and decrease risk into a power-projection strategy designed to defeat regional and international adversaries without a build-up or investment in traditional military capabilities. An analysis of some of the latent (and perhaps unforeseen) challenges of the Iranian approach that elevate transnational groups to such a prominent power-projection role in a state-centric world order will lead to conclusions about the prospects of Iran's strategy in a global environment dominated by great-power competition between nation-states and will offer constructive and pragmatic recommendations regarding the best course that U.S. policy and actions should take to defeat hostile Iranian actions.

The Transnational Transformation

The concept of nation-states employing transnational forces as proxies is neither a new phenomenon nor a novel tactic in warfare. Mechanically, proxy warfare is relatively straightforward in terms of its components. A state sponsor typically provides some form of support to a benefactor (often a transnational group) in order to lower its risk in indirectly achieving its objectives by way of the benefactor's actions that service mutual interests. While this form of proxy warfare is not new, *how* Iran employs it to achieve its policy objectives is new and represents a significant pivot and transformation from historical applications of the concept.

In the bipolar world order that emerged after World War II in which the United States was pitted against the Soviet Union in the Cold War, both nations routinely sought indirect confrontation through the use of transnational proxy forces that often transformed the improbable landscapes of third-world

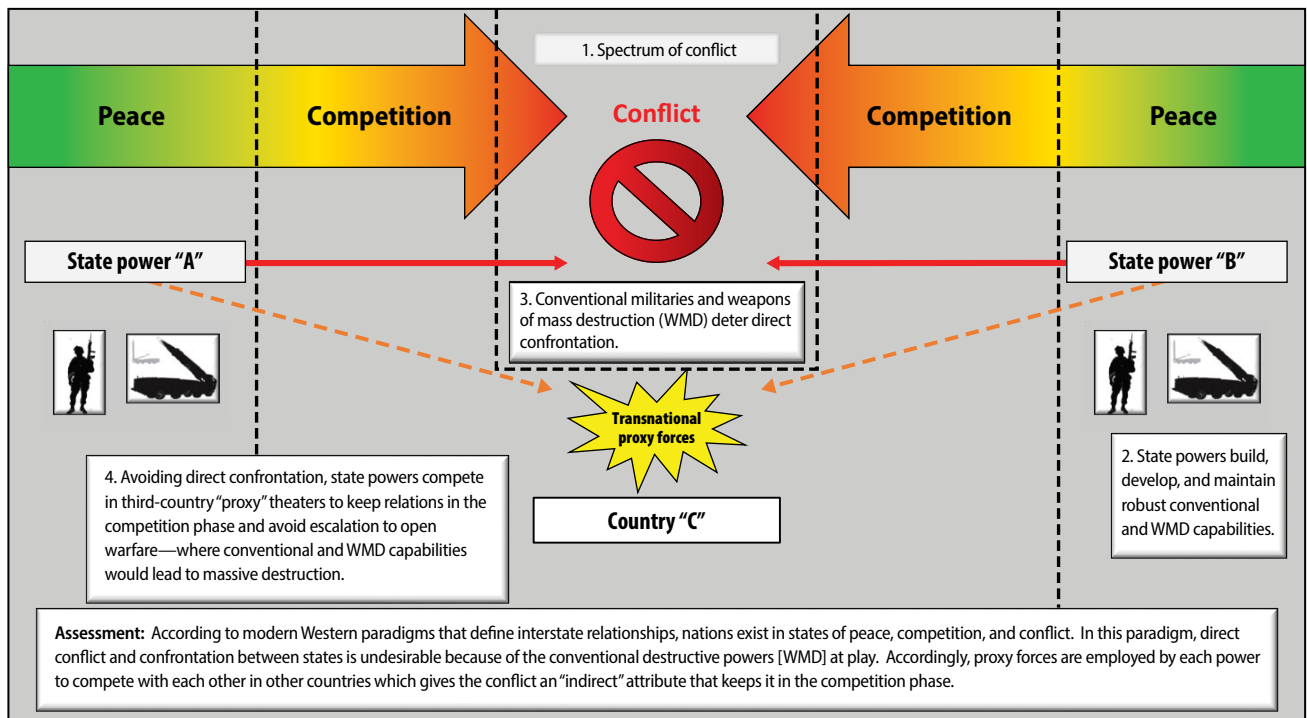
countries (e.g., Angola, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, to name a few) into venues for great power competition using locally aligned, transnational forces.³ Despite the preference and popularity of proxy warfare empowering transnational groups during the Cold War period, its use during this time period represents a *tactic* in warfare—not an overarching or primary strategy to protect and to ensure the respective national global interests at stake. That is, even as the United States and Russia employed proxies across the globe, they simultaneously developed robust conventional military capabilities as their primary means of deterring adversary actions and defending their national interests. Tellingly, “deterrence theory” (reflecting the mass destructive concerns of employing conventional military capabilities) dominated strategic theory of this time.⁴ Such strategy, by default, relegated proxy warfare to a subset tactic (even if popularly used) designed to forestall high-stakes direct confrontation between nations.

In its development and use of transnational proxy forces across the Middle East, Iran has elevated proxy warfare from a popular tactic to the centerpiece of its military strategy working to achieve its foreign policy objectives. The conquest and destruction of Israel remains the foremost policy objective of the theocratic Iranian regime since its rise to power by way of the Iranian Revolution in 1979.⁵ Because of the power imbalance between the two adversaries that bestows conventional advantages to Israel as a bona fide nuclear power, Iran has created, developed, and nurtured transnational proxy groups across the Middle East as its primary and strategic means to threaten and counteract Israeli advantages in the conventional and nuclear domains. From Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Shia militia groups in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen, Iran’s investment in transnational proxies supersedes any of its other military activities aimed at projecting power. This is evident in observing how Iran prioritizes and arrays its military forces across the Middle East. According to recent figures, in addition to its robust special forces charged with conducting asymmetric proxy warfare, Iran has begun deploying its conventional security forces (Artesh) abroad to advise, train, and assist its transnational proxy forces in record and unprecedented numbers.⁶ Additionally, Iran’s asymmetric forces (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Quds Force) receive the lion’s

share of national funding and resources compared to conventional forces.⁷ By essentially retasking its conventional forces to focus on supporting its transnational efforts and by giving the forces charged with conducting asymmetric warfare the bulk of its national funding, Iran has signaled that it is strategically focused on transnational proxy warfare, perhaps at the expense of its conventional military forces. Given the historical and recent success Iran has had using its proxies to successfully confront Israel via Hezbollah, infiltrating the Iraqi government to subvert U.S. interests, using the Houthis to drive the Yemeni government from power, and ensuring the survivability of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, it’s not hard to understand Iran’s preference for proxy warfare.

To further demonstrate how Iran’s use of transnational proxies diverges from historical applications, it is useful to first introduce and discuss current paradigms of interstate relationships that have informed and shaped national strategy documents and emerging military operating concepts. The foremost paradigm that frames current U.S. strategic military dialogue articulates interstate relationships along a spectrum of warfare ranging from conditions of peace and competition to conflict.⁸ In the most desirable phase, nations enjoy peaceful relations defined by the absence of conflict and a general desire to cooperate to achieve mutual interests. As interstate interests begin to diverge, relations enter a phase of conflict that is marked by competition (sometimes fierce) to achieve or secure

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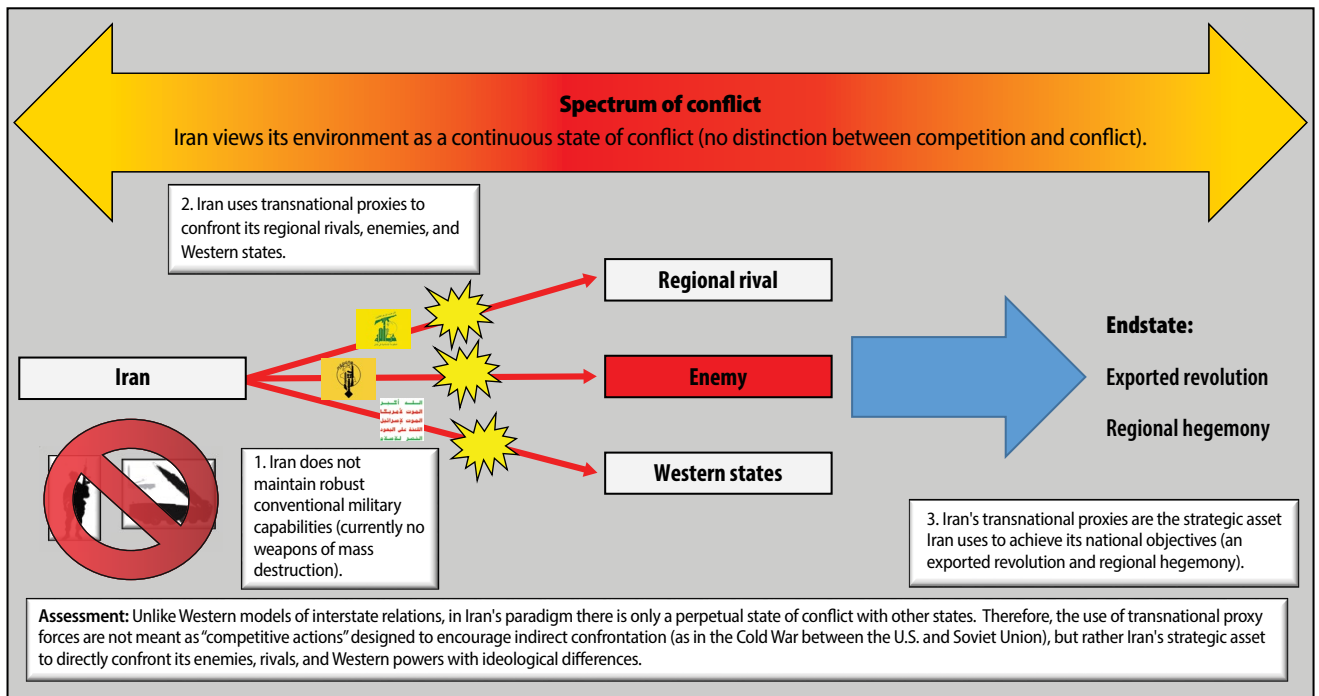
(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Transnational Proxy Warfare According to the U.S. Paradigm

divergent interests. While there may be considerable tension between the competing nation-states in this phase, their respective competitive actions generally endeavor to keep confrontation beneath thresholds of open warfare. In modern parlance, this environment is often termed “the gray zone,” referring to competition that is neither entirely peaceful nor overtly hostile.⁹ Beyond the competition phase is open and declared conflict. In this phase, states are openly at war with one another and employ the full range of military options to achieve or win their objectives at the expense of another state.

Using the above paradigm (peace, competition, and conflict) as a lens through which to characterize interstate relationships helps distinguish the traditional role of transnational proxy warfare from Iran’s current and modern applications. While the great nation-state powers of the Cold War used transnational proxy warfare as a tactic to balance power and forestall confrontation, Iran uses transnational proxies as a strategic means to win its objectives outright. This Iranian dynamic, elevating transnational proxies from a tactical method to a strategic imperative, reflects the disparity between U.S. and Iranian paradigms that define

interstate relations. Whereas the United States makes a distinction between conditions and relationships of peace and competition prior to open and declared conflict, Iran makes no such distinctions and views itself as a nation-state in perpetual conflict with both its regional and international community. The current Iranian ayatollah, Ali Khamenei, voiced this perspective when he infamously declared that he was a “revolutionary, not a diplomat” when commenting on his strategy for Iranian interstate relations.¹⁰ In other words, Iran seeks conflict and not engagement as its default norm when pursuing its foreign policy agenda exporting its revolution abroad. Iranian support to transnational proxies, therefore, is not a “competitive action” (as perhaps viewed by U.S. strategists and policy makers); rather, it is the preeminent and strategic means by which Iran projects power in its perceived state of continuous conflict. This difference in perspective, in which one side (United States) perceives a “competitive” relationship (see figure 1) and one side (Iran) perceives a state of conflict, brings to mind the old adage that cautions the combatant who brings the proverbial knife to a gunfight (see figure 2, page 81). That is, as the United States



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Transnational Proxy Warfare According to the Iranian Paradigm

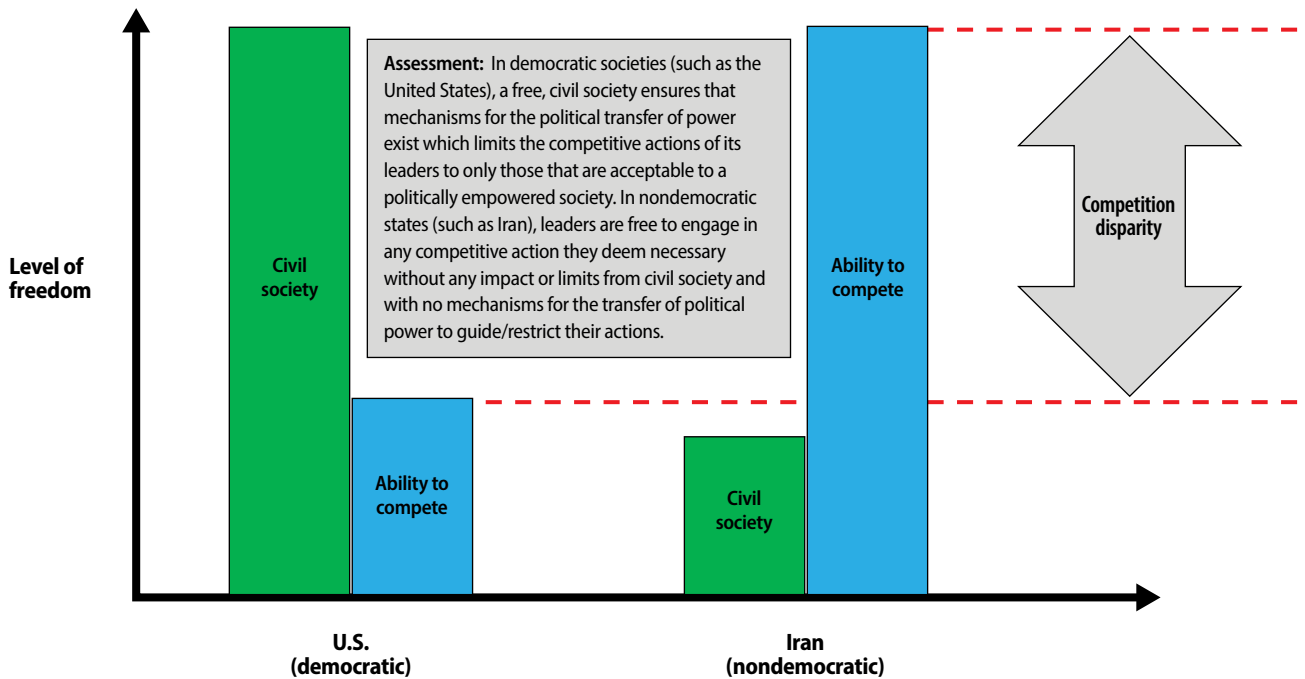
articulates a national strategy aimed at “expanding the competition” with adversaries in a competition phase, Iran’s strategy seeks to defeat its adversaries in open conflict.¹¹ However, even as Iran’s transnational strategy has yielded success (with the apparent opening of northern and southern avenues of approach from Iran into Israel) in a counterterrorism-dominated environment, empowering transnational actors in a state-centric world order featuring great power competition is not without its challenges, dangers, and tensions.

“Trans-Rational”: Why Iran’s Transnational Strategy Will Not Survive Nation-State Competition

Even as the rise of transnational actors has undoubtedly altered the role and expression of national sovereignty in the state-centric world order, a national strategy designed to project power by empowering transnational actors inherently induces tension and contradictions that potentially limit its effectiveness. Simply put, nation-state power devoted to empowering nonstate actors undermines the very system that allows nation-states to project power in the first place. More

specifically, as a regional national power, Iran’s strategy of employing transnational groups weakens the very means by which it projects power in the region. Iran is a strong regional power in the Middle East with a resilient regime that concentrates national power by controlling all elements of its civil society. Paradoxically, the Iranian regime’s tight control of social and civil freedoms gives it more capacity to compete and project power than democratic states (with more social and civil freedom) because the Iranian regime can take unconstrained actions largely unconcerned about the desires of a domestic voting constituency. Democratic states, on the other hand, are constrained in their actions by a popular voting constituency that limits state actions despite a greater degree of civil freedom (see figure 3, page 82). Despite this concentration of national power, empowering transnational groups weakens the national power base on which Iran depends. Besides normalizing the practice of empowering antigovernment transnational groups to an internal population that appears to be growing more and more dissatisfied with international isolation and economic hardship brought about by the regime, this dynamic implies, at best, diminishing returns for the state

The competition paradox: the more free a state's civil society, the less free that state is to compete in "gray zone" conflict.



(Figure by author)

Figure 3. The Competition Paradox

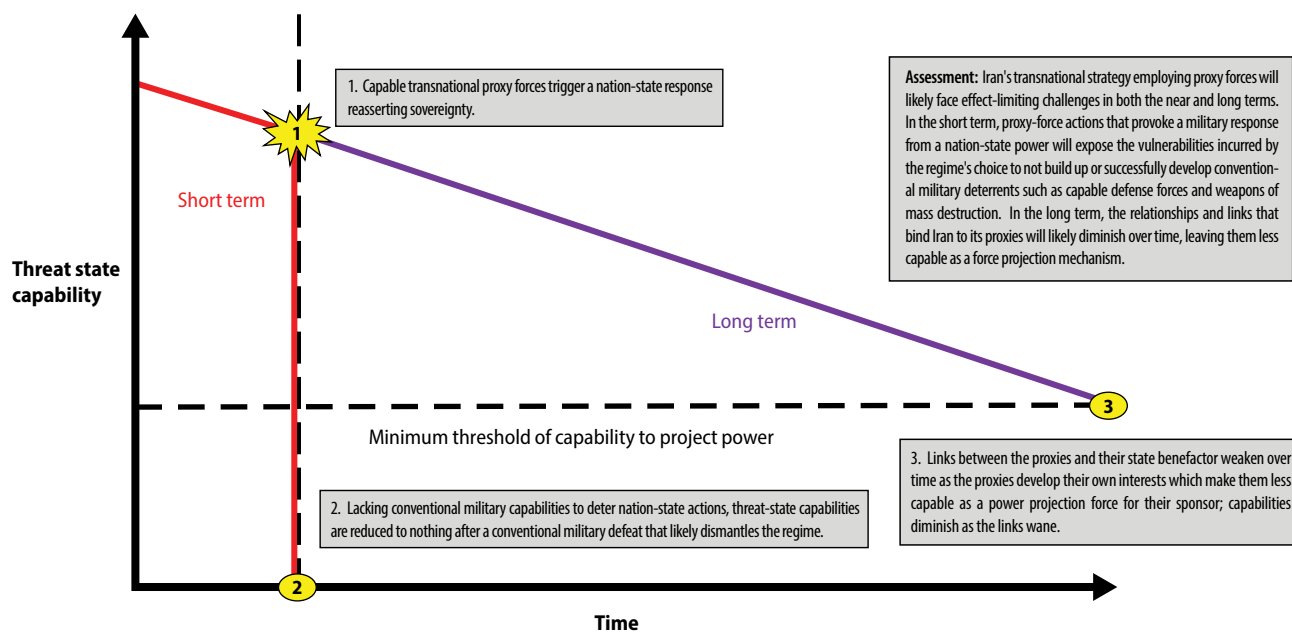
practitioner, or at worst, unsustainability when confronted with a great-power adversary.¹²

In the short term, Iranian transnational groups run the risk of provoking great powers like the United States to take actions reasserting its sovereignty against Iranian transnational threats conducted by proxies on its behalf (see figure 4, page 83). By putting all of its eggs in the transnational basket while forsaking the development of conventional and national defense capabilities, Iran remains unprepared to conventionally respond to the large-scale military actions of great-power states seeking to reestablish the preeminence of nation-state power as a reaction against transnational proxies.

In the long-term, the links between Iran and its proxies are likely to diminish over time as transnational groups develop their own interests and capabilities that diverge from or do not require Iranian support. Recent studies on the historical effectiveness of proxy warfare conducted during, and at the behest of, President Barack Obama's administration support

this dynamic. The analysis noted that the vast majority of proxy war interventions in the Cold War failed because Soviet and U.S. sponsors could not control or dictate the interests of their benefactor groups over time.¹³ Iran's relationship with Hezbollah seems to support this trend as some recent studies have suggested and argued that Hezbollah is better characterized as a legitimate Lebanese political actor instead of the compliant Iranian proxy from the 1980s.¹⁴

The sum of the above makes Iran's transnational strategy "trans-rational"—that is, a strategy that exceeds the limits of rationality, and despite its success in a counterterrorism environment, will likely not succeed in an environment featuring great-power competition. Either Iran's transnational groups will trigger a great-power response for which Iran will not have a defense, or its transnational proxy ties will diminish over time and leave it without reliable and less capable groups to project power. It also seems possible that the Iranian model of empowering nonstate actors may ultimately end up encouraging domestic groups to rise up and challenge



(Figure by author)

Figure 4. The Diminishing Returns of Transnational Proxy Warfare

the regime, which would perfectly illustrate the irony, tensions, and contradictions of dedicating nation-state power to employ transnational actors.

Iran’s transnational strategy also suggests actions that the United States must take to ensure and maintain critical advantages over this adversary. First, denying Iran the ability to obtain and use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is the most important action that ensures Iran remains vulnerable with its transnational strategy. Currently, Iran seems incapable of defending itself against a great-power conventional military threat as it relies on external proxies as a force projection strategy while paying less attention to force protection of the home front. WMD would change that equation and give Iran a credible and powerful response to great powers seeking to intervene and dislodge a hostile regime for transnational proxy threats that violate national sovereignty. Second, if willing to play a more long-term game outlasting the hostile policies of Iran, the United States should seek to accelerate the weakening of links between Iran and its proxy groups. While this is admittedly more easily said than done (given the strong ideological and cultural

ties that tend to initially bind Iranian proxies to their sponsor), even so, precedent and blueprints exist that suggest appropriate actions. Hezbollah, once again, serves as a striking example. When integrated into the Lebanese government formally in 1992, Hezbollah refused to disarm, citing its necessity as the only competent “protector” against foreign aggression.¹⁵ However, U.S. commitment and investment in the Lebanese Armed Forces over the past two decades has helped improve the capabilities of its armed forces to such an extent as to weaken or nullify Hezbollah’s argument of proclaiming its right to exist based on its status as the best Lebanese national defense force. Efforts that reduce the perceived need for proxy forces to exist will help weaken their links to and dependency on Iran. Helping to create more representative governments in Yemen and Iraq (to reduce the justification of Houthi and Shia transnational groups’ respective struggles in both countries) while continuing to improve the security and opportunity for prosperity in Lebanon and Syria (weakening Hezbollah’s need to exist) are prudent, albeit long-term, investments and actions that will break Iran’s transnational strategy.

Conclusion: A House Divided

As the United States rapidly shifts its strategic focus from counterterrorism to great-power competition, much of the analysis and assessment has been rightly turned inward to self-assess the nation's readiness and vulnerabilities in the new strategic environment. These introspective analyses should be accompanied by a review of adversarial strategies in the new and emerging operational environment. Even as transnational groups confuse and potentially alter the world order, the nation-state is not going away any time soon as the most powerful international political actor. Therefore, in a global environment featuring nation-state competition, a strategy that relies on empowering nonstate actors cannot succeed. As a well-known passage from the Bible reminds us, a house divided against itself cannot

stand. Iran cannot triumph in a nation-state-centric world order by empowering nonstate actors. Its transnational strategy will either induce reassertions of nation-state power that it cannot withstand or its supported transnational actors develop independent and diverging goals and objectives over time. Additionally, as a powerful nation-state, the United States should not recoil or flinch in the face of a shifting global environment that features transnational groups. Reasserting national sovereignty by denying the spread and threats of WMD from hostile regimes while working to short-circuit the justification for hostile transnational groups are the prudent actions that must be taken unilaterally and lethally, if required, to exploit the weaknesses in Iran's transnational strategy and preserve American interests and way of life in the new global environment. ■

Notes

Epigraph. *Matthew* 12:25 (King James).

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