universität wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„A Staff for Its Wayfarers
-
On the Discursive Construction of an Iranian 'Proxy Policy'"

verfasst von / submitted by

Alexander Max Nikolai Friedrich, B.A.

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2021/ Vienna, 2021

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt / degree programme code as it appears on the student record sheet:	UA 066 589
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt / degree programme as it appears on the student record sheet:	Masterstudium Internationale Entwicklung
Betreut von / Supervisor:	Mag. Dr. Helmut Krieger

Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of a particularly formative hegemonial discourse that informs the Western perceptions of Iran's network of influence in the Middle East and its foreign policy at large. First, I explore theoretically, how an English language sub-discourse acquires and maintains hegemonial status within the larger knowledge production on Iran. As the centerpiece of this work, I then analyze the core narratives this discourse communicates and the way it contextualizes this information against entrenched presumptions about Iran as a state. These narratives, which the hegemonial discourse employs systematically portrait Iran as an aggressor seeking regional domination. Ostensibly to this end, it installed a system of "proxies", led by the clandestine Quds Force, creating a network of Iranian influence from Lebanon to Yemen.
Lastly, I put the content of the discourse in perspective by discussing the circumstances under which expert knowledge production on Iran takes place. I demonstrate how it takes place within a close-knit system of experts producing ideologically guided analyses that are heavily influenced by a set of axiomatic beliefs about Iran, which they, in turn, reproduce.

Diese Masterarbeit ist eine Analyse eines hegemonialen englischsprachigen Leitdiskurses, der die westlichen Wahrnehmungen des iranischen Netzwerks von Verbündeten im Mittleren Osten und der iranischen Außenpolitik im Allgemeinen prägt. Zunächst untersuche ich theoretisch, wie der besagte Sub-Diskurs innerhalb der Wissensproduktion zu Iran einen hegemonialen Status erlangt und aufrechterhält. Im Hauptteil dieser Arbeit analysiere ich dann die Kernnarrative, welche dieser Diskurs kommuniziert, und wie er diese Informationen vor dem Hintergrund axiomatischer Grundannahmen über Iran als Staat kontextualisiert. Diese Narrative des hegemonialen Diskurses porträtieren den Iran systematisch als Aggressor, der nach regionaler Vorherrschaft strebt. Unter der Leitung der geheimen Quds Force installierte er zu diesem Zweck ein System von "Stellvertretern", die heute ein angeblich zusammenhängendes Netzwerk iranischen Einflusses vom Libanon bis zum Jemen bilden.
Abschließend diskutiere ich die Umstände, unter denen die Produktion von Expert*innenwissen über die Außenpolitik Irans stattfindet. Ich zeige, wie die oben genannte Darstellung von einem System von Expert*innen getragen wird, die tendenziell ideologisch geleitete Analysen produzieren, die stark von einer Reihe von axiomatischen Überzeugungen über den Iran beeinflusst sind.

Keywords: Iran, Quds Force, "Proxies", Discourse Analysis

Content

Glossary

AEI: American Enterprise Institute

AP: Associated Press

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

CSIS: Center for International and Strategic Studies

CNN: Central News Network

DC: Shorthand for Washington, District of Columbia

DoD: Department of Defense

FSA: Free Syrian Army

HQ: Headquarter

IISS: International Institute for Strategic Studies

IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

IRGC-GF: IRGC Ground Forces (Branch)

ISIS / ISIL: Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham / the Levant

ISW: Institute for the Study of War

NDF: National Defence Forces

NPR: National Public Radio

NSAA: Non-State Armed Actor

PMF / PMU: Popular Mobilization Forces / Units

QCA: Qualitative Content Analysis

QF: Quds Force

SAA: Syrian Arab Army

SLA: Shia Liberation Army

US: United States (of America)

WI: Washington Institute (for Near East Policy)

I. Introduction

> "I am a Revolutionary Guard. A seeker on the path of the heroic men of Ashura. I have raised my head to shield the sapling revolution. I am the gardener of its cinquefoils and a staff of support for its wayfarers. With no gratitude and no expectations, I am a Guard."

– From the IRGC's monthly publication "Payam-e Enqelab", March 19th 1980.[1]

In the first two years of conflict following the revolution in Syria in 2011, the downfall of Bashar Al-Assad's regime appeared only a matter of time, its fate ultimately sealed by widespread popular resistance and organized, highly militant opposition. Onlookers at the time expected Assad's long reign to eventually end in a similar fashion to that of Tunisia's Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, swept away by the rising tide of popular protests and internal conflict as a matter of logical consequence in what would come to be the Arab Spring. In July 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was founded by defected officers, and major fighting occurred in Latakia and elsewhere. This culminated with the siege of Homs in early 2012, in which both sides alternately lost and retook the so-called capital of the revolution, inflicting catastrophic damage to the city in the process. Following these events, attempts were made – and subsequently failed – to implement a ceasefire, and in June of the same year the conflict began to be treated as a civil war. From this point on, the conflict rapidly and drastically expanded and began transforming into the spectacularly complex landscape of actors it remains to this day. Foreign nations began backing their preferred factions more decisively and more openly; Islamist jihadist groups, above all the Al-Nusra Front, appeared to increasingly co-opt the anti-Assad forces centered around the FSA, which Western media called the "pro-democratic rebels"; and the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), that had not yet risen to its later infamy, took hold undeniably. Throughout these dramatic events, there were persistent calls for Bashar Al-Assad to step down, and it seemed to observers that in the ever-increasing chaos and brutality of the conflict his cause was lost. Yet he continued to refuse to relinquish power with equal persistence, and the regime's forces were killing their compatriots in what was perceived as a doomed attempt to succeed where the equally ruthless Gaddafi and Mubarak had failed. Military analyses seemed to

[1] Quoted in: Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Section: Warriors of Karbala.

confirm this impression, with the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) having suffered drastically between 2009 and 2013. The International Institute for Strategic Studies stated that the SAA's "fighting capacity has been cut roughly in half [as] the result of a combination of defections, desertions and casualties".[2]

However, by late May of 2013, the government's fortunes appeared to be changing. In what was almost immediately declared to be a turning-point victory, regime forces retook the city of Al-Qusayr, which strategically links Homs to the capital of Damascus. Western military observers such as the US Institute for the Study of War noted the crucial importance of Assad's victory, writing in June: "The fall of al-Qusayr has thus effectively altered the balance of power on the ground and serves as a critical turning point in the civil war."[3] For the first time, observers attributed the victory, which occurred in spite of Assad's crippled forces and embattled position, to the significant involvement of Lebanese Hezbollah[4] and its "overlord" Iran. This marked the beginning of a crucial change in the lead narrative surrounding and explaining the regime's resilience, at least from a Western perspective. Republican US Senator John McCain, then still an opinion-maker in conservative circles, said on CNN after he visited the FSA in late May 2013:

> "Hezbollah is slaughtering people in this key city called Qusayr […], Hezbollah is fighting in many areas of Syria. The Iranians are in more, Russian weapons are flowing in. It's a totally unfair fight and a slaughter is going on. And all of those people that said: 'It's inevitable that Bashar Assad will fall', remember that? Now he's winning! Thanks to the Russian, Iranians, Hezbollah."5

Likely driven by the political need to legitimize US support for the FSA and the Syrian Kurds, as well as to portray Russia and Iran as outsiders responsible for the continuing "slaughter" of Syrians by Assad and his allies, this narrative quickly gained traction and crept, at least for a considerable time period, into the center of the debate. Representative of the media resonance this narrative received, Reuters reported:

---

[2] In: Associated Press, "Syria's Diminished Security Forces," 2013, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-28/228953-syrias-diminished-security-forces.ashx#axzz31ko8ddGF, accessed August 30, 2021.
[3] Elizabeth O'Bagy, "The Fall of Al-Qusayr," Backgrounder (Institute for the Study of War, 2013).
[4] I use "Lebanese Hezbollah" for clarity, since there are other movements utilizing variations of *hizb'allah*, the party of God, in their names in Iraq, Iran and elsewhere. There are also several other transliterations which are used for valid reasons, such as Hizbullah for its proximity to the Arabic pronunciation. I use "Hezbollah" because it is close to the Farsi pronunciation and by far the most commonly found variant.
[5] CNN, "McCain: Hezbollah Is Slaughtering People," June 9, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nxY3n2PoSU, accessed August 30, 2021.

> "Shi'te [sic] Iran[6] has already spent billions of dollars propping up Assad in what has turned into a sectarian proxy war with Sunni Arab states. And while the presence of Iranian military personnel in Syria is not new, military experts believe Tehran has in recent months sent in more specialists to enable Assad to outlast his enemies at home and abroad."[7]

In addition to corroborating Senator McCain's general line of argument, the narrative is expanded by characterizing Iranian backing for Assad's regime as part of a wider "sectarian proxy war", a theme which has been reproduced countlessly since then. Next, the discourse was quick to find a face to pin the events on. In September 2013, The New Yorker ran a detailed feature on "The Shadow Commander": "Qassem Suleimani[8] is the Iranian operative who has been reshaping the Middle East. Now he's directing Assad's war in Syria."[9] In a striking – and representative – example of the cycle of media reproduction, NPR's Fresh Air, referring to the original New Yorker article two days later, comments thus: "[Soleimani is] not a familiar name to Americans, but one former CIA officer described him to Filkins [the author of the New Yorker piece] as 'the single most powerful operative in the Middle East today.'"[10] By 2021, Americans would find the name most familiar indeed. These initial articles set a flood of similar pieces in motion, becoming so ubiquitous that, by 2014, satirist Karl Sharro mockingly wrote: "The leader of the elite branch of the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guard, the Quds Force, Major General Qassem Suleimani is a fearsome figure that makes foreign correspondents and analysts tremble with delight as they concoct fantastical tales about his legendary powers."[11]

---

[6] This essentialist use of "Shiite" as a defining character trait of an actor, be it Iran or various regimes and non-state actors is the rule within the discourse. It serves to imply a natural political affinity to Iran and constructs "being Shiite" as a category with distinct definitory value, implying a fairly homogenous set of shared values and beliefs. That is not accurate and gives an impression of greater political importance of the category of "being Shiite" than is due in most cases. I discuss this problem in more detail later on, but I want to clarify that I am not reproducing "Shiite" as an essential attribute with clear religious and political implications, but as a reference to the discourse.

[7] Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad," https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/iran-boosts-military-support-in-syria-to-bolster-assad-idUSBREA1K09U20140221, accessed July 12, 2020.

[8] The most common transliteration from Farsi is "Soleimani", which I use as well because it is closest to the pronunciation in Farsi.

[9] Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker Online*, 2013, accessed August 30, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander.

[10] "Meet the Iranian Commander Pulling Strings in Syria's War," NPR Online, https://www.npr.org/2013/09/25/226104144/meet-the-iranian-commander-pulling-strings-in-syrias-war?t=1594551901514, accessed July 12, 2020.

[11] Karl Sharro, "Qassem Suleimani Iran's Shadowy Commander Who Has No Shadow," http://www.karlremarks.com/2014/10/qassem-suleimani-irans-shadowy.html.

This progression signifies the emergence of an Iran narrative that has not significantly changed to this day, shaping all subsequent coverage on the issue of Iranian regional foreign policy. While commentators' eyes were originally on Syria, soon connections would be drawn to Iraq, Yemen, and other theaters and actors, painting a more and more comprehensive image of a system of Iranian influence in the Middle East, driven by Soleimani's ominous Quds Force (QF), a subdivision of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Before this point, they had only been of some interest to security analysts regarding Iraq during the later stages of US occupation. Particularly, 2007 saw the only significant surge in international interest in the organization prior to 2013[12] – at which point they were (re)introduced, throughout both the media and analyst reports, as one of the primary antagonists of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

From this point on, voices from across the discoursive landscape continued to add to a meta-narrative of Iranian involvement throughout the Middle East, and varied presumptions and interpretations consolidated into what is still the predominant view of Iranian 'proxy policy', with the Quds Force as its primary executor: Iran, in the context of a wider, sectarian rivalry with the Gulf States, and driven by historical ambitions of regional dominance, aims to establish a network of proxy organizations spanning from Gaza to Yemen to Pakistan, mobilizing local Shia to pressure their political enemies and support their allies. Qassem Soleimani is cast as the "chief architect" of this policy, and commentators closely observed his increasing influence in Tehran, ostensibly coinciding with increasing domestic leverage of the IRGC, up until his death in early 2020. These central convictions have informed analyses of Iran's activity throughout the region since: Iranian engagement in Syria deepened and broadened after 2013, centered around Lebanese Hezbollah and the National Defence Forces (NDF), an umbrella organization consolidating pro-regime non-state armed actors (NSAAs), and increasingly involved Iranian nationals, in advisory as well as in combat roles. Additionally, increasing attention was paid to foreign Shia fighters funneled into Syria by Iran. Particularly, Afghans and Pakistanis were numerous enough to be organized in ethnically grouped units called the *liwa zainabiyoun* and *liwa fatemiyoun,* and would

[12] See, for instance: Borzou Daragahi and Peter Spiegel, "Iran's Elite and Mysterious Fighters," *Los Angeles Times Online*, 2007, accessed August 30, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-feb-15-fg-quds15-story.html or Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007) or Abedin Mahan, "Iran: Expert Discusses Iran's Quds Force and U.S. Charges Concerning Iraq," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, https://www.rferl.org/a/1074751.html, accessed August 30, 2021.

later become cause for concern regarding their future role in their home countries.[13] In 2014, the Iraqi Badr Organization, arguably Iran's second most long-standing proxy relation after Hezbollah and allegedly Qassem Soleimani's 'pet project' before the outbreak of war in Syria, was the center of renewed attention after a series of victories against the then resurgent *Daesh* in northern Iraq.[14] In March 2015, Reuters first reported that "elite Iranian guards" were "training" and "advising" the Houthi in Yemen in their fight against the Saudi-backed Hadi government, again reproducing the narrative elements discussed above, by now well established, situating Iranian proxy involvement within a wider, regional sectarian rivalry.[15]

These debates, though concerned with geographically, temporally and politically distinct phenomena covering half a dozen nations and spanning roughly four years, served as the building blocks for a coalescing idea of a supposed wider, coherent Iranian 'proxy policy'. Throughout this progression, there was no mention of Tehran explicitly entertaining such a policy in institutionalized form – no strategy papers, government directives or the like. If an explicit institutionalization did indeed take place, news of it did not reach English language commentators. On the whole, however, this seems unlikely, given how much more weight any such source would have given these commenters' arguments. Instead, Iran's regional relation to its "proxies" was discursively molded into a coherent whole and negotiated as an explicit policy based on the implications many analyses saw in the respective constituent narratives of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and so on.

In a similar fashion, the notion of the Quds Force being at the center of this policy also emerged as an implication between the lines of the conversation. Due to the secrecy surrounding the Quds Force since its inception in 1980, attempts at even the most basic definition of it as an organization have been discrepant and have changed over time. Most commonly, it has been defined as a hybrid of foreign intelligence service and special operations division, and an "elite wing" of the IRGC.[16]

---

[13] Hanin Ghaddar, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Impact of Shia Militias on US Foreign Policy," Policy Notes (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-impact-of-shia-militias-on-u.s.-foreign-policy.

[14] Susannah George, "Breaking Badr," Dispatch (Foreign Policy, 2014), https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/.

[15] Warren Strobel and Mark Hosenball, "Elite Iranian Guards Training Yemen's Houthis: U.S. Officials," March 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-houthis-iran/elite-iranian-guards-training-yemens-houthis-u-s-officials-idUSKBN0MN2MI20150327, accessed August 30, 2021.

[16] See, for instance: Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, "Quds Force," Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quds-Force, accessed August 30, 2021 or: Miriam Berger, "What Is Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps That Soleimani Helped to Lead?," *The Washington Post Online*, 2020, accessed

It has also been called a paramilitary arm, a terrorist organization, an exporter of the Islamic revolution (with the IRGC as its guardian) and much more. Both because of this difficulty in defining the QF conceptually, and because its activities are a matter of secrecy, its *de facto* actions throughout its existence have been tracked and documented rather disjointedly. This is, in part, due to the fact that the QF, like its parent organization, has most often been analyzed as a secondary phenomenon regarding other primary interests of research, such as Hezbollah or the war in Syria, and therefore been afforded passing attention at best. There exist only very few English academic monographs specifically concerned with the IRGC and not a single one dealing with the Quds Force. Instead, the vast majority of material on the QF originates from the security sector, the intelligence community, and related think tanks. Additionally, the majority of authors writing on the issue are based in the United States, openly view it through a lens of US national interests, and are primarily concerned with producing policy advice for Washington. Because of this structural entwinement, analyses of the IRGC and the QF are bound to be informed by the wider interests and paradigms of US foreign policy in the Middle East, which they themselves, in turn, inform. I argue that this interaction has generated a hegemonial discourse on Iran's 'proxy policy' and its foreign policy at large, and that this discourse has regularly reoccurring narrative content, a consistent core of influential discourse participants, and a clearly identifiable discursive space of origin.

This thesis provides an analysis of this discourse. Primarily, I identify its central narratives by conducting a content analysis of a sample corpus drawn from some of the most formative discourse participants. I discuss the underlying presumptions that appear to guide the discursive negotiation of these core talking points, the way framing affects what exactly is communicated, and some of the political circumstances that likely inform the discourse. Thus, the research questions this paper aims to answer are as follows: How is the currently dominant English-language hegemonial discourse on Iran's network of influence constructed? What are its innate presumptions, explicit and implicit core statements about Iran and its "proxy" network, as well as its wider foreign policy, and finally, how does it communicate this content?

August 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/04/what-is-irans-revolutionary-guard-corps-that-soleimani-helped-lead/.

First, I discuss the technical aspects of this work: its theoretical framework, my choice of methodology and use of research techniques. I then briefly discussing the extant literature as it relates to this thesis and outline its problematic aspects. Next, in the centerpiece of the thesis, I describe and interpret the results of my content and discourse analyses and discuss the core narratives of the hegemonial discourse, their content, implications, and the discursive strategies with which they are communicated to the audience. Lastly, I summarize, draw conclusions and touch on further questions raised by my observations.

II. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I discuss the major elements of my theoretical framework. This primarily entails specifying my approach to the highly contested concept of discourse, as well as the adaptation of the Gramscian concept of hegemony to discourse. I do not attempt to theoretically frame Iran's relationships with its allies (proxies, partners, etc.), because I merely reproduce the disunified framing within the discourse and contextualize it as such. Therefore, I will instead discuss the choice of terminology in the discourse and its implications later on, in the discourse analysis proper.

Discourse and discourse hegemony make up the center of this thesis's theoretical framework. These preconceptions include three central elements: An encompassing definition of discourse as formatively co-constituting reality, the notion that discourses and political practice reciprocally inform and shape each other and lastly, the assumption that discourses can produce and maintain a discursive hegemony affecting both the discourse itself and the corresponding political practice. Fundamentally, I take on Rainer Keller's conception of discourses as providing a system of interpretation of reality for the discourse participants, thus "constituting and constructing the world [through] underlying structural patterns or rules of (re-)production of meaning."[17] This encompassing view of discourse entails the conclusion that discourses are not mere representations or products of a corresponding social or political reality but an inseparable formative process within those realities and practices. For this paper, I further understand discourse as generating,

[17] Reiner Keller, *Diskursforschung*: *Eine Einführung Für SozialwissenschaftlerInnen*, Qualitative Sozialforschung (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2011), 8. All translations from German sources are by me.

integrating, and negotiating *statements*, ordered in *narratives* communicating specific meanings, situated in a specific discourse-*dispositif*.

2.1 Discourse, Discursive Hegemony and the Hegemonial Discourse

The central theoretical discussion informing this thesis is the intersection of discursive practice and the exercise of political power. Norman Fairclough explains this interaction in Critical Discourse Analysis:

> "[…] hegemonic practice and hegemonic struggle to a substantial extent take the form of discursive practice, in spoken and written interaction. Indeed, my use of the term 'discourse' […] implies the imbrication of speaking and writing in the exercise, reproduction and negotiation of power relations, and in ideological processes and ideological struggle."[18]

My further assumption is that this interaction does not affect all parts of the discourse on any given issue equally but, for many reasons, empowers specific sub-discourses, narratives, forums and participants, while marginalizing others. Regarding the central mechanism of this phenomenon, Fairclough posits:

> "The concept of hegemony implies the development […] of practices which naturalize particular relations and ideologies, practices which are largely discursive. […] In so far as conventions become naturalized and commonsensical, so too do these ideological presuppositions. Naturalized discourse conventions are a most effective mechanism for sustaining and reproducing cultural and ideological dimensions of hegemony."[19]

Keller, who is also concerned with power in discourse, a core interest particularly of discourse analysis in political science,[20] elaborates on Fairclough's approach, saying that discourses are ongoing attempts by their participants to "at least temporarily fixate attribution of meaning"[21] in specific configurations beneficial to the respective participants. The saying "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" is a simple example. Calling specific acts of violence "terrorism"

[18] Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London, New York: Longman Publishing, 1995), 94.
[19] Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 94.
[20] See: Eva Herschinger, Martin Nonhoff and Johannes Angermüller, *Diskursforschung: Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch*: *Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, DiskursNetz Band 1 (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 193.
[21] Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 8

or calling them "resistance", "liberation" etc. obviously results in a vastly different interpretation of the same events. Discourse participants would therefore strive to discursively fixate either the one interpretation or the other, depending on their agenda, by means of a wide variety of acts of communication. This also applies, in a more complex configuration, to the discourse on Iran's foreign policy. Tehran's alliance structure can either be labeled as "the Axis of Resistance" or wanton acts of "state-sponsored terrorism", or as one of many shades between those poles.

Based on this fundamental understanding of discourse as co-forming reality by naming, framing, contextualizing and interpreting experiences, I draw from Critical Discourse Analysis, formative authors Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as well as Norman Fairclough to tie together the thesis's theoretical frame and methodology of choice. The central issue here is the relationship between discourse and power and the role of hegemony in discourse. German cultural theorist Andreas Reckwitz gives a useful, summarizing account of the intersecting histories of the concepts of discourse and hegemony and their treatment of power.[22] He traces the use of these concepts from their origins with Foucault, Gramsci, Derrida, Nietzsche and others over the post-structuralist, neo-Marxist reception by Laclau and Mouffe. Laclau, interested primarily in the practical use of the concept of discourse hegemony for the analysis of concrete political happenings in Argentina in the 1970s and beyond, naturally applied them in a less linguistically and more politico-analytical sense. In keeping with the general understanding of the nature of discourse utilized in this paper, Reckwitz states: "The removal of the categorical discrimination between discursive and non-discursive practices, between 'discourse' and 'practice' is a decisive step for Laclau in order to deconstruct the difference between *Basis* and *Überbau*, of structure and culture."[23] He derives from this a notion of discursive "cultural hegemony" which, together with Norman Fairclough's positions, form the basis of my understanding of discursive hegemony, as I lay out below. Reckwitz summarizes Laclau's modifications, going back to the idea discussed earlier of temporary fixation of meanings: "Cultural hegemonies necessarily utilize the 'particular', meaning the historically and regionally specific, systems of difference and subject-positions, but they present them, through specific rhetorical strategies, as a universal horizon […]".[24] In opposition to this pseudo-universalized horizon, and with far-reaching political

[22] Andreas Reckwitz, "Ernesto Laclau - Diskurse, Hegemonien, Antagonismen," in *Kultur. Theorien Der Gegenwart.*, ed. Dirk Quadflieg (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006)
[23] Reckwitz, "Ernesto Laclau - Diskurse, Hegemonien, Antagonismen," 342
[24] Reckwitz, "Ernesto Laclau - Diskurse, Hegemonien, Antagonismen," 343

consequences, an external 'other' is discursively constructed in what Laclau, in Marxist tradition, terms simply "antagonism". Reckwitz again summarizes thus:

> "For Laclau, it is decisive that the term antagonism is not reduced to a 'power struggle' between social groups or individuals, or thought of as a quasi-logical 'contradiction' within a societal structure, but instead is subject to a discourse- and difference-theoretical reformulation: [In antagonism,] a border is demarcated between what is legitimately 'within' the intelligible sphere of society and what is situated as threatening, unacceptable and barely comprehensible, outside of the borders of society […]."[25]

This twofold discursive dynamic of negotiating values by creating an appearance of universality, while also constructing an 'outside' to be opposed, is traceable within the discourse on Iran's alliances and are central to this paper's analysis of it. The statements I collected and narratives I analyze below are discursively relevant because they serve those two functions in varying configurations. Especially attempts to attribute a specific, 'universalized nature' to Iran as a state is a prominent mechanism by which the hegemonial discourse argues its interpretations.

Leaning on Laclau and Mouffe[26] and based on Fairclough's application of the Gramscian concept of hegemony to discourses, the basic assumption of this paper is that participants, spaces and forums, discursive strands and narratives interact with, can be imbued with, acquire and maintain political power in a hegemonial fashion. Thus, specific discourse participants can sometimes, in specific discursive spaces and using specific narratives, dominate the conversation to such a degree that a process of investment of political power in a narrative begets political power that can be again invested into maintaining the narrative – resulting in a cyclical, self-reproducing symbiosis of discourse and exertion of power, an effective hegemony. The hegemonial discourse is, therefore, a constellation of mutually reinforcing discursive statements and narrative elements that recreates the abovementioned dynamics and is equipped with the structural means of effectively and continuously reproducing itself – the discourse dispositif. At the same time, this hegemonial (sub-)discourse is part of a wider discourse on the subject matter, containing differing or even counter-hegemonial positions and participants, as well as other forums and platforms. However,

[25] Reckwitz, "Ernesto Laclau - Diskurse, Hegemonien, Antagonismen," 344

[26] As discussed in: Georg Glasze and Annika Mattissek, *Handbuch Diskurs Und Raum*: *Theorien Und Methoden Für Die Humangeographie Sowie Die Sozial- Und Kulturwissenschaftliche Raumforschung,* Sozialtheorie (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 149–71.

because it is hegemonically entrenched in the above sense, the hegemonial discourse overshadows these divergent positions, establish a sense of and claim to universal truthfulness on the matter and translate much more effectively into political practice by being closer to the centers of power.
As hinted to above, I refer to Foucault's concept of the dispositif as the central venue for and mechanism of this interaction of statements and narratives with the political practice. Keller summarizes the concept concisely as "the material and ideational infrastructure, that is, measures, rulesets and artefacts with which a discourse is (re-)produced and takes effect".[27] In the case of this work, a particularly important component of the dispositif is that of forums and platforms. Dispositif-analysis allows for the identification of reciprocal translation-mechanisms between statements and narratives and political action which are established, enabled and reinforced in specific discursive locations (physical or otherwise). Such forums or platforms can, for instance, include specific outlets, such as reputable journals or newspapers, mass communication such as TV- or radio-stations, as well as 'the ear' of key executives. The degree of access among discourse participants to these locations therefore regulates the degree of influence specific participants have, directly or indirectly, on decision-making processes. For this thesis, this observation suggested drawing literature for the corpus from a group of well-established think tanks. I expand upon this below.

Ultimately, as mentioned above, Norman Fairclough provides the most detailed application of the Gramscian concepts of hegemony to discursive spaces and forms the basis for my conception of a hegemonial discourse, saying that "hegemony and hegemonic struggle are constituted to a significant degree in the discursive practices of institutions and organizations. Discourse conventions may embody naturalized ideologies which make them a most effective mechanism for sustaining hegemonies."[28] As mentioned above, this would logically grant a growing influence over the conversation to those discourse participants who adhere to the naturalized ideologies and positions in the discourse, and thus also closer proximity to political power, if the same ideology is shared by decision makers. Those discourse participants, mobilizing factors of cultural hegemony (in this case primarily the role of the English language in world communications and the authority of expert knowledge), then act as agents of discursive hegemony, and their platforms

[27] Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 68
[28] Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 91.

and positions form what I call the hegemonial discourse. Conversely, discourse participants who hold differing, counter-hegemonial opinions with less access to the axes of hegemonial discursive power, for instance because they publish in Russian or in Farsi, are not part of the hegemonial discourse, but find themselves marginalized by the same dynamics that empower other actors, while still being part of the discourse at large, as they voice opinions on the issue of Iran's network of influence.

In summary, based on an understanding of discourse as an essential, formative component of social and political reality, and as a comprehensive space for negotiating such realities, I have narrowed my approach by focussing on discourse through the lens of social and political science, specifically focusing on the relation of power to discourse. Consequently, I primarily refer to Norman Fairclough's insights into critical discourse analysis to theoretically develop the concept of the hegemonial sub-discourse as the central theoretical lens through which to view and analyze the material in my corpus as multimodal texts situated in a hegemonial position within the discourse.

III. Methods and Techniques

Methodologically, this paper is a mixed-method study, centered around discourse analysis and drawing prominently from Grounded Theory and qualitative content analysis (QCA). For this chapter, I first discuss the corpus of data and my sampling strategy, including initial selective sampling and continuous theory-guided sampling, followed by an outline of the methodology of the content analytical groundwork, and lastly that of the discourse analysis itself. This should not imply, however, that one of the phases is clearly methodologically delineated against the others or ultimately concluded when the next begins. Instead, these analytical steps continue to inform the emergent sampling criteria: the discourse analysis influences the coding and category-building of the content analysis etc. As such, the phases are intended to reinforce and progressively substantiate each other, contributing to a problem-oriented, context-sensitive mixed-method approach. The methodological progression, implied in the progression of the elements in this chapter, is therefore to be understood more as a cyclical logic than a chronological succession of distinct steps. Ultimately, this thesis aims to flexibly combine methods and techniques from content and discourse analysis, creating a hybridized triangulation-approach that implements

elements of its constituent parts, while consciously neglecting other aspects of their respective, ideal-typical forms.

3.1 The Two-Fold Sampling Strategy and Defining the Corpus

The sampling strategy consists of two distinct elements, an initial selective sampling phase and the continuously revised theory-guided sampling from which I ultimately derived the corpus. The sampling strategy is important because it defines the subject matter of the subsequent substantial analytical processes, the corpus of literature for the content analysis and the scope of the discourse for the discourse analysis. In constructing the sampling approach, I draw from Keller's 2011 handbook on discourse research, *Diskursforschung*, in which he adapts Strauss, Glaser and Corbin's original work on theoretical sampling in Grounded Theory for use in social sciences, specifically for discourse analysis purposes. In particular, he provides guidelines on corpus-construction from emergent, cyclical theoretical sampling.[29] Additionally, I refer to the 2007 work of Draucker, Martsolf et al, "Theoretical Sampling and Category Development in Grounded Theory", to inform both the initial selective sampling element as well as guide the category development process during the content analysis phase.[30]

3.1.1 Exploratory Reading and Initial Sampling

The initial selective sampling, in a sense, forms the exception to the principle of cyclical, mutually reinforced application of the methodological components of this thesis, because its guiding principles originate from the research question and hypotheses as well as the researcher's preconceptions, which I discuss explicitly later.

The most obvious starting point for the initial selective sampling in a thesis aiming to analyze the hegemonial discourse on the issue of 'Iran's proxy policy', therefore, was to search for literature explicitly referencing it. Searches in academic databanks, on Google, and Google Scholar for this exact terminology, "Iran's proxy policy",[31] quickly revealed a first, relevant fact: While very few publications use it in their title, they do use varying constellations of a terminology that collectively implies the existence of a system of Iranian proxies which could aptly be described as a 'proxy

[29] Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 90–91.
[30] Claire B. Draucker et al., "Theoretical Sampling and Category Development in Grounded Theory," *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 8 (2007).
[31] Not utilizing the hyphen in order to cast a wider net.

policy', though without explicitly referencing it as such. The many examples for this pattern include, for instance, "War by Proxy – Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East",[32] or "Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars"[33] and so forth. Through their wording and framing, instances such as these examples imply a systematic nature and internal cohesion to Iran's use of "proxies", even though they do not use the term "proxy policy". A brief from Hoover Institute's Tony Badran perfectly exemplifies the many kinds of paraphrasing used throughout the literature on this topic, all of which appeared to refer to the same phenomenon at the core. In the short article, amounting only to 1360 words, Badran speaks of "the Islamic Republic's realm from Iraq to Lebanon", "Iran's Arab holdings" and "the Iranian order".[34] His colleague Sanam Vakil, in the same volume and in only 1282 words, talks about "Iran's regional playbook" and "Tehran's regional strategy", which, he suggests, "[amount] to a 'parallel state building' process".[35] This serves to illustrate how the shared notion of a coherent, systematic policy with specific, consistent characteristics persists despite the use of disparate terminology and flexible theoretical and conceptual framing. This presents a challenge for sampling, and almost immediately required discourse-analytical attention and input, kicking off the process of emergent sampling and, at the same time, producing first, tentative discourse-analytical findings. A narrow range of keywords did not seem to be an adequate strategy for capturing the body of literature concerned with the system I was interested in. Instead, I would progressively add to a multi-dimensional understanding of what made literature relevant to answering my research questions. Time of publication, author, authoring organization and format of a text therefore all joined the key-phrase approach in identifying literature as pertinent. In this context, a second observation defining the sampling strategy was that the vast majority of relevant texts were written after 2013, narrowing the search and requiring explanation further down the line. Further reading into literature concerned with Iranian proxy-activity – independent from the notion of an institutionalized policy – revealed further, empirical criteria for sampling, primarily recurrent mentions of specific actors, geographical and political contexts, as well as common theoretical reference points. The actors most commonly referenced in literature on Iranian

[32] See: Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," CSIS Briefs (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019).
[33] See: Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars,* Middle East Today (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
[34] Tony Badran, "An Incorrigible State: Washington Should Stop Looking for That Elusive Moderation in Iran. The State Itself Is the Problem." *Hoover Digest* 3 (2020): 106.
[35] Sanam Vakil, "Shaken, Not Deterred," *Hoover Digest* 3 (2020): 111–12, https://www.hoover.org/research/shaken-not-deterred, accessed July 22, 2021.

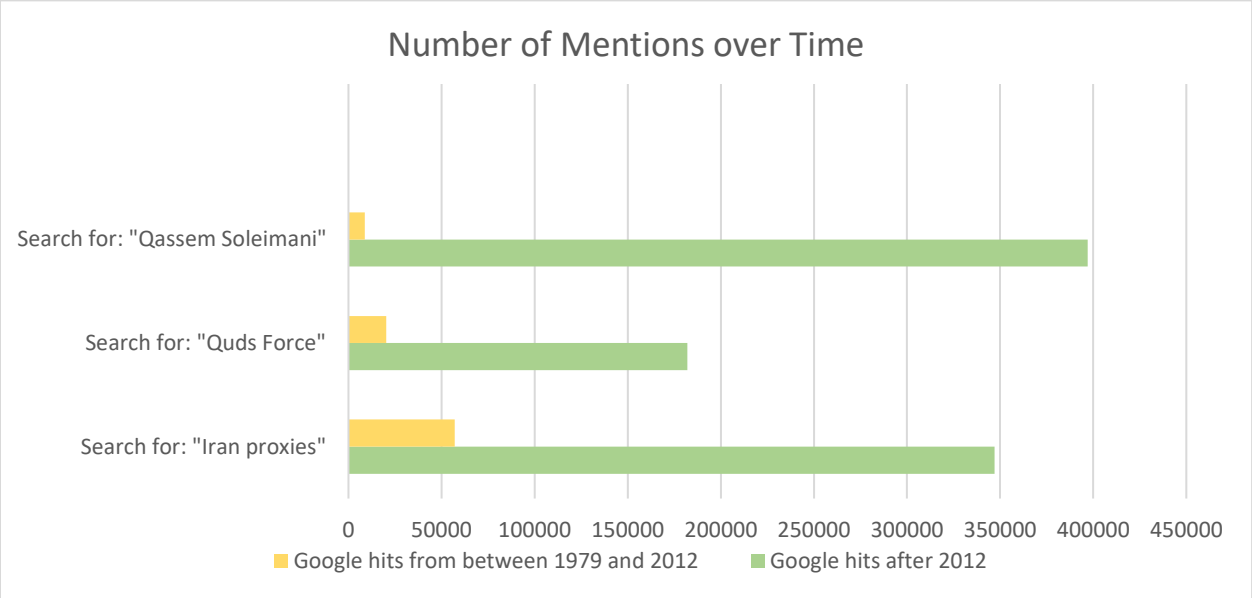
proxy-activities after 2013 in a more general sense are (Lebanese) Hezbollah, the Quds Force and specifically their commander at the time, Qassem Soleimani, pro-Assad non-state armed actors in Syria, specifically the National Defence Forces, many NSAAs in Iraq, primarily the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and, to a lesser degree, the Yemeni Houthis and a few other groups. This narrowed the geographical context in which the literature primarily locates Iranian proxy-activity: Syria, Iraq and Lebanon and Yemen. A specific strand of the discussion of Iranian "proxies", concerned with what was termed Iran's "foreign legion", also discussed Tehran's interest in establishing "proxies" in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Of greater analytical importance, however, was how the sources tended to contextualize and frame Iran's network of influence. It is regularly characterized as either a part, manifestation or product of a Saudi-Iranian rivalry, a regional Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict, an expansionist strategy of Iranian regional hegemony, or varying combinations of these elements. Again, identifying these discursively relevant trends is part of the subsequent analytical steps, but early analytical observations also guided and informed the sampling and data collection process. At this point, initial selective sampling had already fluidly transitioned to emergent theoretical sampling and suggested, at least tentatively, both the empirical and theoretical boundaries of the discourse.

Relating to the sampling strategy, the starting point in terms of theory and conceptual framework was the concept of proxy and the theory of proxy warfare, because it is the most common descriptor of Iran's relationship to the aforementioned actors among the initially sampled data. I have discussed the theoretical background of the concept, the analytical problems and the problematic implications of applying it to the relations in question in the chapter on conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and I have explained how the underdetermination of the concept of proxy and of the theoretical framing of the network of influence affect the hegemonial discourse.

3.1.2 Corpus Selection and Criteria for the Inclusion of Data

As in the initial sampling process, it was paramount that the research question, the hypotheses and my impressions from the exploratory reading dictate some limitations for the corpus from the very beginning, that is, before theory-guided sampling could be applied and further reading could narrow the formal and theoretical frames. Some initial criteria for inclusion or exclusion were necessary to guide the reading process and seemed logical, at least until further research were to demonstrate otherwise.

The first of these conditions was temporal: Only data from after the first of January 2013 would be considered. It became quickly apparent during exploratory reading that aside from specific, insular exceptions with little bearing on the core issue of this study, the discourse on an Iranian 'proxy policy' only emerged significantly after the Second Battle of Al-Qusayr in May 2013, and only then began to develop the narrative strands and elements that have dominated it since. This sudden increase in discourse volume is clearly represented when comparing the numbers for mentions on Google of combinations of key terms (such as "Iran proxies"):



Between January 1st 1979 and the cut-off point, January 1st 2013, there are a total of 57,100 mentions. In the seven years between the cut-off and now, the total is 347,000. "Quds Force" generates 20,300 for the first period and 182,000 for the second. Qassem Soleimani's name, even though he became the QF's commander in the late 1990s, is only mentioned 8,740 times before 2013 and a staggering 397,000 times since.[36] This pattern repeats for related searches. While the reasons for the increase are obviously manifold (significantly influenced by increasing digitalization) and do not permit any final conclusions, they do serve to highlight the effect certain key events, both on the battlefields of Syria and in the media and political discursive landscapes, on an increased interest in Iran's regional role. While after 2013, a considerable number of the mentions are concentrated around specific key events, such as the appearance of Hezbollah fighters in Syria, the capture of IRGC personnel in Yemen or the killing of Soleimani, before 2013 the

[36] Mention numbers last checked on google.com on October 9, 2020.

discourse only existed surrounding a very few clearly identifiable events, such as allegations of the Quds Force supplying Iraqi "Shia" militants with explosively formed penetrators in 2007, as well as the assassination plot, backed by the Quds Force, on the Saudi-Arabian ambassador to Washington in 2011. Aside from these two instances, coverage of the issue, or the QF as an actor, was few and far between, and mostly restricted to niche circles such as the US special forces community concerned with the military technicalities of the US occupation in Iraq. After 2013, while still surging around the events mentioned above, there was a much wider and more consistent interest in the issue.

In early 2020, immediately following Qassem Soleimani's death, Kenneth Pollack of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) reported: "Iran's current means of handling the Axis of Resistance [referring to Iran's strategy between 2013 and early 2020] and its new way of waging low-intensity conflict represent a set of adaptations to a particular set of circumstances. It is just not clear that those same circumstances will continue to apply forever."[37] As of October 2020, it would seem such a significant change of circumstances is in fact already occurring. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, which has also affected Iran, its populace and its economy tremendously, on the heels of Soleimani's death in early January 2020, could have a considerable transformative effect on Iran's regional alliance system and regional policy. In the summer of 2020, Iran struggled to uphold its financial support to the PMF in Iraq and the NDF in Syria,[38] and Soleimani's successor, Esmail Ghaani, had to officially apply for a visa in Iraq, a symbolic gesture of Iraqi wariness and possibly increasing distance.[39] More significantly, both in Lebanon and in Iraq, public protests explicitly opposed Iran's perceived sway over their governments and meddling in their affairs. In Iraq, "protesters have defaced posters of Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei and have attacked the Iranian consulate along with the offices of militias like the Badr organization" with protests also occurring "in majority-Shiite cities like Karbala, Najaf, Nasiriyah, and Basra."[40] As a whole, these occurrences seem to indicate a fundamental transformation in the structure of Iran's alliances since

[37] Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution: The Changing Nature of Iran's Axis of Resistance" (American Enterprise Institute, 2020), 13.

[38] Reuters, "Coronavirus and Sanctions Hit Iran's Support of Proxies in Iraq," 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY, accessed October 9, 2020.

[39] Associated Press, "Cash-Strapped Iran Struggles to Maintain Sway over Iraq Militias: Nearly Six Months After the US Assassinated IRGC General Soleimani, Tehran Is Losing Its Grip on Armed Groups in Iraq." June 11, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/11/cash-strapped-iran-struggles-to-maintain-sway-over-iraq-militias, accessed October 9, 2020.

[40] Badran, "An Incorrigible State," 106.

2013, the effects of which cannot yet adequately be judged. Therefore, I use the 31st of December 2020 as the endpoint for data to be considered as part of the corpus. The frame then includes the relevant discourse participants' potential commentary on and analyses of Soleimani's death and the general tide change concerning Iran's network of influence, which constitutes a logical endpoint to the central, seven-year continuity within the hegemonial discourse that is the subject of this paper.

A second frame condition for inclusion in the corpus of literature is geographical: I include sources that are concerned with the Iranian engagement in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, on which the discourse is geographically centered and, to a much lesser degree, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The vast majority of material from the specified period that deals with Iran's network of influence is concerned with its engagement in these places. I also include data regarding Iran's alliance system in general, without geographical focus – but such publications are very few in number. This criterion notably excludes Lebanon, as well as the activities of Iranian forces and Palestinian allies outside of the region, such as in South America.

These exclusions require some further explanation. Not considering literature concerned with Lebanon, or specifically Iran's or the QF's activity there, does not mean excluding literature on Hezbollah, which I still include, based on the actor, when the item of literature is directly concerned with or has direct implications for Iran's wider alliance system. Hezbollah has been called the "blueprint" for Iran's "proxies", and, as Tehran's most long-standing and influential non-state ally, producing many structural and personal connections, most certainly has shaped the Islamic Republic's attitude and practice towards non-state partners elsewhere. However, Hezbollah's operations against Israel and its activity in Lebanon, in which it is an integral part of the social fabric and the political balance, though at the core of the organization's *raison d'être*, have had little relevant bearing on the proxy discourse after 2012. Instead, Hezbollah was primarily discussed through the lens of its engagement in Syria, and is therefore included as such, when it comes to the geographical delineation of the corpus.

In the case of Palestine, and Iran's ties to NSAAs outside the Near and Middle East, they also did not play any significant role in the discussion over the last seven years. Instead, they belong to another, older discourse on Iranian "proxies" placed in a significantly different geopolitical arena, that of the Cold War, and under significantly different paradigms, such as "state-sponsored terrorism" and clandestine assassination campaigns. As such, the Quds Force of the late 1980s and

early 1990s operated in a very different global environment and under a very different doctrine, one that was not focused on installing and aiding allied non-state armed actors – which is its central practice in the period this paper is concerned with. While these elements have been occasionally invoked in the discourse since 2013, mostly to insinuate some sort of 'terroristic continuity' and within a narrative continuity painting Iran as an 'obstacle to peace', the concrete practice of cooperation with Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad or even Mexican drug cartels is only a marginal footnote in the discussion.

A third necessary criterion for inclusion is that the text is either originally in or translated into English. This decision results from the research question aiming at analysing specifically the hegemonial discourse on the subject matter, as opposed to comprehensively including its entirety. In the specific case of this thesis's subjects, the presumption is that the hegemonial discourse participants, following my discussion of discourse hegemony above, are using English and that the forums holding the greatest sway in shaping the discourse are English-speaking. This presumption is guided by two factors: First, from the influential role of the United States, and the 'West' in general, in the Middle East, and the nature of US geopolitical interests in the region – but also, indirectly, from the dominance of English in global academia and its status essentially as a *lingua franca* of science and of international expertise. Norman Fairclough discusses this hegemonial potential of a particular language as a phenomenon of hierarchical "orders of discourse", in which "cultural hegemony in the sphere of discourse follows from the ideological potency of discursive practices and conventions (…)." He elaborates: "Hegemony in this sphere also includes, as Gramsci himself pointed out (…), the relationship between different language varieties (different languages, different dialects), and the emergency of a dominant standard variety."[41]

In essence, through a complex chain of mechanisms, the degree of political influence the United States has on the political realities in the region confers considerable power to the processes of knowledge generation that inform how this influence is being exerted. I discuss in detail later how expert opinions cannot be separated from and appear to translate fairly directly into policy decisions. Therefore, the greater the power – and responsibility – the US wields in the Middle East, the greater the power and responsibility the experts have who co-determine how exactly it is wielded.

[41] Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 95.

The flip side of this coin is the discursive marginalization of non-English observers and their analyses. While, say, Russian-language analyses might gain traction informing decision making processes in Moscow or possibly affect public opinion through reception in Russian media, this output is, on average, less likely to affect or influence the actual actors in the Middle East directly and probably will do so to a lesser degree than a US-based English language source would. Additionally, a comparable non-English source will much less likely achieve the reach and degree of reproduction an English language source does, especially given the tendency of the hegemonial discourse for self-referential cross-quotation, which I touch on as part of the discourse dispositif later on. Especially this latter effect also applies to Farsi material. Additionally, analysts that would publish in Farsi, because they are writing inside Iran for an Iranian audience (in any other case they would likely publish in English instead), would likely be subject to political limitations as to what and how they can research in the case of a politically sensitive issue like the IRGC, the QF and current issues related to them.[42]

As for the discourse participants whose output I would subject to detailed analysis, I selected four think tanks based in Washington, D.C., as well as a fifth in Britain: the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS), the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WI) and lastly the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), which is based in London, UK, but runs a major Washington office. These five were chosen for the following reasons: 1. They are all prolifically publicizing material on Iran. 2. They address the issue of Iran's regional relations in significant volume and within the defined time frame. 3. They have the ear of policymakers (their experts giving testimonials before Congress, having advisory roles in the Pentagon and so on), as I demonstrate later. 4. They are often cited by both each other and other think tanks as well as external actors writing on the matter, such as the media and academia. The fact that they also all share a similar theoretical and disciplinary framework of defense, security, foreign policy and international

[42] While I do not want to reproduce stereotypes of radical Islamic censorship and oppression in Iran, there has been significant, legitimate criticism of freedom of academia in the past. Academics have been imprisoned and sometimes flogged for charges such as insulting the President or disturbing public opinion. However, there are much less sinister ways of discouraging certain angles of academic inquiry, such as withdrawing funding, etc. that are well known in academia everywhere.
See: Amnesty International, "Silenced, Expelled, Imprisoned: Repression of Students and Academics in Iran" (Amnesty International, 2014).

relations was not a criterion for selection, but is a function of how issues surrounding Iran, through the lens of US policy, are most commonly understood. This selection stood at the end of the cyclical consolidation process I discussed in the preceding section.

The inclusion of the IISS requires some explanation. Analytically, and for my purposes, physical proximity to Washington and its decision-making apparatus is secondary to structural and ideological proximity. Though the IISS is based in the United Kingdom, it runs a Washington office, and ideological similarities abound. They are equally preoccupied with Iran and its network of influence in the Middle East, publish in the same formats and in English, share many of the same sponsors – as I discuss in a later section – and are narratively congruent with their US counterparts. Additionally, the IISS's inclusion serves to indicate, if not demonstrate, that the hegemonial discourse emanating primarily from Washington proliferates along political and ideological axes, radiating from the US to its global allies.

While only a relevant selection from these organization's output forms the main corpus of data and be subjected to detailed content analysis, that is not to say other discourse participants are entirely excluded from the study. Often the reciprocal interactions of diverse sources produce key events in the hegemonial discourse. In the examples provided in the introduction, for instance, an influential politician's statement in a talk show and a widely received journalistic article gaining a surprising amount of traction with the right audience might well have influenced the subsequent direction much of the Washington-affiliated policy advice groups took in their analyses. However, the shared narratives of the hegemonial discourse appear to most clearly crystallize in the latter group. This might be in part due to their preferred literature formats being comparatively short in nature (policy briefs, reports etc.), but also due to their particular place and role in the knowledge production processes on the issue, occupying a crucial junction between the other participants, equipping them with considerable formative power over the discourse.

Among the output of the five organizations, there are of course many different types of literature, from single-page briefs to blog posts and video-talks to book-length reports. Most of these items are accessible through the organization's internal search engines integrated within their primary websites, which is how I found and accessed all the texts for the detail analysis. I decided to build the corpus from the pool of briefs and reports, specifically, because they contain relevant

information in the most condensed form and are, by nature, aimed at policy- and decisionmakers, thereby depicting most accurately the subject matter of that discursive intersection.
After these criteria were set, I limited the size of the corpus by approximating a point of saturation while reading through and coding the pool generated by the criteria outlined. The fifth text per organization usually proved to already contain almost no statements that were not already adequately represented by the other four texts, only adding minor elements or taking a slightly different approach to issues already discussed. This is most likely due in part to each of the think tanks having only a small number of resident experts (usually between one and three individual authors) publishing on Iran, each with a slightly different focus that informs their analyses. Therefore, I chose five items of literature per organization as the approximate point of saturation, resulting in a final corpus size of 25 items to be coded line by line. I have outlined my Grounded Theory approach to this, the progression of search terms etc. that formed the process of narrowing down the field to a consistent corpus above and, as such, this selection was the product of the research process from the exploratory reading through narrowing the circle of relevant literature based on both theoretical frame and content.

The question remained: How to determine which 25 texts to select from the few dozen documents per organization that remained after these limitations were applied? In order to capture the complex interactions that constitute and shape the hegemonial discourse, inform its narratives and dispositif, I decided against further rigid selection criteria, as more traditional discourse or content analysis methodology might ask for. Such criteria, for example the explicit reference of a certain combination of terms in the title, would likely exclude some material that is highly relevant – and definitely include a lot of material that has nothing to add to the analysis. Instead, the final corpus for this work was delineated by a continual, informed arbitration based on the reading process and systematic engagement with the material. Many of the characteristics that make a source relevant to the analysis of the nature and content of the hegemonial discourse were not reliably identifiable with strict, ‘check-markable’ criteria, but easily identified by the researcher in contextual information. The core interest of this paper is a good example for this: Very few, if any, resources talk about an “Iranian proxy policy” in these explicit terms, but even after rudimentarily scanning the literature on related and surrounding issues, it becomes clear that most sources do in fact describe or strongly imply the existence of something that could be adequately described as such.

The list of keywords necessary to encompass all these texts only based on specific used terminology would be unnecessarily and unproductively long and include numerous texts past analytical saturation. The conscious reader, however, could quickly identify that the sources are concerned with a common issue, even if they use discrepant terminology. Titles, terminology and theoretical and disciplinary approaches vary significantly among sources which context-sensitive reading clearly identifies as situated within a shared discourse.

Therefore, I decided to make the final selection of 5 items of literature per organization manually, following the principle of informed arbitration. I scanned the few hundred texts output by the respective search engines by headline and, if any appeared promising, I assessed them individually to determine how closely the item in question was concerned with Iran's network of influence. For example, in a report titled "Shia militias in Iraq", [43] it would be almost impossible to not mention Iran's role in the matter to a significant degree. Upon further investigation, the second sentence already states: "Part of Iran's strategy in Iraq has been to empower Shia political parties, which has involved the mobilisation of Shia militias in Iraq", which places the subject of the report, in its narrower sense, square within the wider context of the Iranian 'proxy policy'. Therefore, I selected the article for detail analysis down the line. In a more ambiguous case, which was also a common occurrence, the report's title would refer simply to "Iran's Strategic Thinking". However, the first page, summarizing key findings as bullet points, immediately states: "Iran's foreign and security policies are shaped by dual factors of national interests (expediency) and ideology. […] The soft- and hard-power activities employed by Iran's Resistance Network of proxies and partners, such Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shia militias, represent both these factors in Iranian strategy",[44] and continues in this vein. The report was clearly relevant to the issue being researched and was therefore selected for detail analysis. As an aside, this pattern of elevating Iran's "proxy" activities to a position of 'national strategy' or overall "doctrine" is found repeatedly among the data and is discursively significant in itself. These examples illustrate how rigid selection by keywords or other methods would struggle to identify the most pertinent texts for detail analysis, a task that is easily accomplished by an informed reader. While there is an element of selection-by-presumption that could possibly entail confirmation bias or cherry-picking, the arbitration is only applied to

[43] "Shia Militias in Iraq," Strategic Comments 23:3 (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017).
[44] J. M. McInnis, "Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution" (American Enterprise Institute, 2015).

confirm that a text is in fact concerned with the object of analysis to a significant degree, not to confirm that certain narratives are present in the text.

Material must adhere to two major criteria in order to be selected for the corpus: First, in their specific, contextual constellation the factors I just discussed must situate the work in question as particularly analytically relevant to the hegemonial discourse. This is not a rigid selection process but one of systematically informed arbitration along criteria that more clearly emerged over the course of the analysis. Second, the work must add to one of the central narratives of the hegemonial discourse. Since part of what makes a narrative hegemonial is the frequency and consistency with which it is reproduced by the discourse participants, the hegemonial discourse necessarily produces repetition with relatively little iterative addition. Therefore, many pieces of literature largely reproduce one of these narratives or narrative elements without adding substantially to it and are treated as irrelevant for this thesis. The items I discuss in the detailed analysis are therefore considered key texts that are both representative of and formative for specific key narratives in the hegemonial dispositif.

3.2 Coding and Category-Building

This paper uses content analysis and discourse analysis, not as two distinct and separate methods, but in combination to form a hybrid model. Particularly the identification of discursive statements sits at the junction of these two methodologies. In the specific case of this thesis, I code the materialby discursive statements, and then categorize those statements by the larger narrative they communicate, presenting a degree of abstraction from the corpus data. I have drawn techniques for coding the material and category building, which form the first steps in the analytical core process, from literature on qualitative content analysis and the Grounded Theory Method. In particular, I refer to Gläser and Laudel's model of "extractive qualitative content analysis"[45] and Udo Kuckartz' work on *a priori* and inductive category-building.[46] However, as opposed to the more theory-generating purpose of coding and category building on the Grounded Theory Method, in which the researcher is traditionally asked to only consider text-inherent information as far as possible, this work is more in keeping with the tradition of qualitative content analysis (QCA), in

[45] Jochen Gläser and Grit Laudel, "The Discovery of Causal Mechanisms: Extractive Qualitative Content Analysis as a Tool for Process Tracing," *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung* 20, no. 3 (2019).

[46] Udo Kuckartz, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*: *Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*, 3., durchgesehene Aufl., Grundlagentexte Methoden (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2016), ch. 4.

which "next to manifest contents, also latent meanings" are analyzed and "category building can be conducted on the basis of both prior knowledge and the material."[47]

Guided by these principles, I carried out a first, exploratory pass of coding, utilizing categories I suspected to be core narratives represented in the discourse, based on my reading thus far. I expected these categories to require revision and subsequently evolve, based on the first coding pass, as some of them might prove to be over- or underrepresented or otherwise not accurately depict the content of the corpus material. My four initial categories, representing suspected core narratives, were: 1. Iran is an aggressive, expansionist power seeking regional hegemony via a concerted regional 'proxy policy'. 2. Iran is militarizing Shiism to mobilize actors abroad for their cause. 3. Iran acts within the logic of a regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia. 4. The Quds Force is the primary executor of that 'proxy policy'. I decided to purposely keep these categories inclusive to capture as many distinct sub-narratives each of them might include, and to gauge the degree to which these major streams are represented in the corpus. After this first pass, I planned to adjust the categories, guided by the principles of Grounded Theory. This meant exchanging the wider super-categories for several of their respective subcategories, in order to depict their concrete content in adequate detail, dropping them if the original category proved not to be appropriately relevant to the discourse, as well as merging and modifying the original categories if extensive overlap suggested it.

After the first round of coding, the first scenario turned out to apply to the first original category, the meta-narrative depicting Iran as an aggressive, expansionist power. The sub-narratives included in this category each proved highly prominent and sufficiently distinct to warrant splitting the original category. I therefore split the category along the most consistent elements employed narratively to explain Iranian expansionist impetus: A. Its Khomeinist, neo-Shiite state ideology. B. Its ostensive drive to "export the revolution" and C. Iran's perceived necessity for 'forward defense'. Additionally, I realized that characterizing Iran's network of influence as consisting of "proxy" relationships constituted a core narrative in itself. Throughout the literature there was a significant number of statements on Iran's relationship to its "allies", "partners", "proxies" and so forth, which, collectively amounted to the discursive construction of a seemingly cohesive and closely controlled "system" or "network" of relations. Since this was one of the ontological

[47] Nicola Brücker, "Kodieren – Aber Wie? Varianten Der Grounded-Theory-Methodologie Und Der Qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse Im Vergleich," *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung* 21, no. 1 (2020): 8.

presumptions at the base of this work, I had initially treated this presumption in the discourse as a sort of a given. However, seeing this process of discursive construction represented so clearly in the literature seemed to justify treating "Iran runs a system of 'proxies' as the primary tool for its regional foreign policy goals" as a primary category of its own. Category three, concerned with the Iran-Saudi rivalry, required only minor revision. In the corpus, this particular conflict was much more prominently discussed as a rivalry not between Iran and Saudi Arabia alone, but Iran and the Gulf States at large, with Saudi Arabia – but also the Emirates – playing a salient role. I therefore changed the category from discussing an Iranian-Saudi rivalry to an Iranian-Gulf one. Categories two and four required no major revision. There was consistent and significant representation of both narratives in the material, and no singular sub-narrative seemed so salient as to warrant being decoupled as a separate main category.

I thus ended up with seven final categories, each based on a distinct core narrative of the hegemonial discourse: 1. Iran as an intrinsically expansionist power due to its regional hegemonial ambitions. 2. Iran striving to "export the revolution". 3. Iran's national 'forward defense'. 4. Iran militarizing Shiitism in a regional sectarian conflict. 5. Iran in a regional power struggle with the Gulf States. 6. The Quds Force and Qassem Soleimani as the driving force behind Iran's network of influence. 7. Iran's "proxy" policy. I discuss all of these in detail in the main body of this thesis, following below.

3.3 The Discourse Analysis

This thesis is, methodologically, primarily a discourse analysis, since the research question inquires about the nature, emergence and production of the hegemonial discourse on Iran's allies and "proxies". I have explained my fundamental understanding of discourse as an encompassing constructivist perspective and a formative dimension of political reality in chapter II. This section lays out my approach to critical discourse analysis as a method and explain its application to this project.

Discourse analysis is not a methodology with well-established, rigid content, methods, techniques and practices. Keller writes:

> "The social sciences and humanities, as well, understand very different things under 'discourse'. This applies to the theoretical conceptualization with regards to disciplinary research interests, as well as to the methodological application in concrete research projects.

> [There is an] enormous diffusion of discourse-related perspectives in different disciplines and also across disciplinary borders."[48]

As such, there is little consensus as to the specifics of the practice, even within a single academic discipline – and several disciplines as well as many multi-, trans- and interdisciplinary projects utilize discourse analysis and produce literature on what it is and entails. Authors in philology have a significantly different perspective on the matter as those in sociology, for instance. Because of the resulting amorphousness of understanding, definitions and practices, it would therefore be somewhat misleading to name a specific author or group of authors as the source of the discourse analytical 'method' in this thesis. Instead, viewing the lack of more rigid guidelines as a strength, allowing for flexibility and context sensitivity with regard to the aims of any given study, I treat the sometimes confusing and contradictory academic debates on discourse analysis as an open toolbox from which to draw the tools needed for the task at hand.

As it stands, maybe unsurprisingly, an approach on discourse analysis derived from the political sciences provided the most fitting approaches for this thesis. This is most likely due to the discipline's natural interest in power. As Herschinger and Nonhoff put it in their article on discourse research in political sciences: "The central question is, how specific formations of discursive meaning (going under different names, such as ideologies, knowledge, story lines etc.) become invested with power[49], that is how do they establish themselves as appearing as »normal« or at least more plausible than others."[50] Due to the underlying assumption of my research question that the hegemonial discourse has a close relationship with a specific, geopolitical power-configuration that is highly relevant to developments in the Middle East, this approach is very informative as to the relevance and effects of the discourse on that specific configuration. I am therefore aiming to apply what Norman Fairclough calls "a 'critical' approach to discourse analysis in the sense that it sets out to make visible through analysis, and to criticize, connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations (ideologies, power relations) which are generally not obvious to people who produce and interpret those texts, and whose effectiveness depends upon this opacity."[51]

---

[48] Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 13.
[49] In the German original: "*machtvoll*", literally translating to "powerful" but carrying the meaning of "invested with power" more than a connotation of "mighty".
[50] Herschinger, Nonhoff and Angermüller, *Diskursforschung: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, 193.
[51] Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 97.

My discourse analysis consequently aims to identify three primary elements of particular importance to the political reality surrounding Iran's alliances: 1. Statements on the subject matter. This analytical step is significantly informed by qualitative content analysis, as I explained in the preceding section. 2. Patterns of such statements forming overarching narratives pertaining to Iran's network of influence. 3. Implicit content transported 'between the lines'. Additionally, while I cannot provide a comprehensive dispositif analysis, I discuss some implications of my results for the discourse dispositif which appears to be governing the translation mechanisms between acts of communication and manifest political action. The content-analytical coding of the literature in the corpus provides the raw data in the form of individual substantive statements. This process allows for a systematic analysis and interpretation of the explicitly communicated content, the implicitly transported notions and reproduced presumptions, as well as the surrounding circumstances possibly influencing the material. In practice, I group and abstract statements from the literature into the most prominent core narratives, contextualize them with each other and within the wider discourse on Iranian foreign policy and lastly interpret the role they likely play within that discourse to generate a comprehensive view of the content, context and stances of the hegemonial discourse on Iran's network of influence. This phase forms the central analysis and interpretation of the material, aiming to condense, abstract and 'make sense of' the data, as well as ultimately producing arguments to answer the research question.

3.3.1 Dispositif Aspects and Discourse Circumstances

Over the course of research, it became increasingly clear that the hegemonial discourse is informed and shaped to a high degree by the ideological, political and economic circumstances under which its knowledge production takes place. The emerging patterns could apparently only be explained by factors of dispositif. However, since I was conducting a discourse content analysis first and foremost, an analysis of the dispositif would have to remain somewhat superficial. I decided to add at least a rudimentary outlook on dispositif factors by pairing some of my observations with the – very scarce but fortunately insightful – secondary literature on knowledge production on Iran among US think tanks. This effort, which resulted in what is now chapter VI. of this thesis, is intended to offer a glance at what factors might be influencing the discourse and through which mechanisms they might be doing so.

The two major aspects of concern in this regard were economic dependencies of the think tanks – effectively who was financing their research and publications on Iran – and the interconnectedness of their authors, which seemed to lead to a sort of 'closed circuit', in which a relatively small number of authors feed off each other's material on the topic and refer to each other's publications to buttress their own interpretations.

In order to gain an overview of the first aspect, financing, I began by looking into the information the organizations I had selected are providing themselves with regards to donors and financiers. This already yielded significant, clearly patterned results which I discuss in section 6.2. To add to this, and because some of the organizations did not openly provide this information, I then looked them up on public 'watchdog'-type portals such as SourceWatch and InfluenceWatch, CharityNavigator, Powerbase or ConservativeTransparency. The results of this search were consistent and added to the emerging pattern of conservative corporate donors providing significant funding for all five organizations that provided my corpus data.

The second aspect – authors drawing from, referencing and citing each other's material– I could observe within my own data. I began to note when authors were quoting other authors from within my corpus or at least from within the narrow group of organizations I was considering, and which function these cross-references generally served. This showed a fairly consistent pattern in which authors appear to cyclically reproduce and reaffirm both a set of presumptions on Iran as a nation and of interpretations of Iran's policies. I discuss these results in chapter VI. as well.

IV. Literature Review and Discussion of Sources

Since explicitly summarizing and analyzing the literature that forms the discourse on the specific issue of Iran's alliance system is at the core of this thesis – and doing so in much greater depth than would traditionally be allowed for in a literature review section –, this chapter does not serve this traditional purpose. Instead, it fulfills several important functions preparing for the in-depth discourse analysis: First, I outline the unusual distribution of literature on the issue by type and origin. Then I discuss the key characteristics of this material, including their disciplinary approaches, their theoretical frameworks, empirical focus and so on. In the following chapters I trace these factors in detail in the source analyses of the subject matter. Lastly, I use this section

to discuss the origins and circumstances of the material I consider as data for the discourse analysis, as it is another key factor for understanding their often formative contributions to the wider discourse, which stretches out through the media, public statements by politicians, other experts and so forth.

Branching out searches in Google's general search-engine, its books and scholar subsections, several academic catalogues and databases, as well as considering the cross-referencing between the literature allows for a few telling core observations: The overwhelming majority of literature that is specifically, professionally concerned either with Iran's use of "proxies", or with the Quds Force, originates from authors associated with US-based think tanks, as opposed to university-based academics, and comes in the form of journal articles and policy briefs. The list of other literature discussing Iran's network of influence (under various terms such as "proxies", "surrogates", non-state "allies" etc.) or the Quds Force from after 2013, is in fact very short, even when including works whose primary focus is the IRGC in general as long as they dedicate significant coverage to one or both of these core issues: In 2016, Afshon Ostovar, currently an assistant professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, published *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*.[52] Ostensibly, his goal was to transcend an overly securitized perspective on the IRGC by situating the organization within the wider national history of Iran since the revolution, and the monograph largely maintains a much higher degree of critical distance and neutrality of inquiry when compared to most English publications on the issue. However, most of the core narratives of the hegemonial discourse are also reflected here: While Ostovar primarily provides an organizational history of the IRGC, he dedicates considerable space to discussing the organizations adherence to ideals of "exporting the revolution", which he sees as part of their founding ideology and, partially implicitly, partially explicitly, positions as the core reason for the organizations quasi 'bred-in' expansionism. At least by inference, Iran's current alliance system driven by the IRGC would therefore constitute one result of this expansionistic view of the country's role in the region, which is, in broad strokes, narratively consistent with the hegemonial discourse.

[52] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*.

In 2018, Nader Uskowi published *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*.[53] He is a senior fellow at the Snowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at the Atlantic Council and the book is a publicly available monograph most narrowly dedicated to the Quds Force and its activities. This work is remarkable for its grave inaccuracies and highly agenda-driven tone, in combination with the political clout of its author. I discuss it in some detail later on.

The 2020 publication *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*[55] by Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei is the one monograph that is, institutionally, a degree further removed from Security Studies – but at the same time the one most faithful retelling the hegemonial narrative on Iran's "proxies". Ofira Seliktar is a professor of political sciences at Gratz College in Pennsylvania and Farhad Rezaei is a fellow at the Center for International Policy Studies at the University of Ottawa. Both of them have apparently not previously been affiliated with US think tanks dedicated to foreign policy advice. However, their book reproduces what I later show to be the most dominant narrative elements in the most commonly used narrative structure: They refer to the organizational history of the IRGC in the same way Afshon Ostovar does, finding its mission of "exporting the revolution" to be at the core of the Guard Corps, and the formative basis of their organization today. They construct Hezbollah as the blueprint after which Iran's engagement in Syria, in Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere is modeled. The entire narrative is consistently underpinned by notions of an intrinsically expansionistic and hegemonial Iran.

The list of books dealing with the IRGC in general, the Iranian military and its history, or other related topics, as well as 'hot takes' on the Islamic Republics' socio-political uniqueness is much longer and boasts a more varied cast of authors. However, while these works occasionally touch on the Quds Force, Hezbollah and other "proxies", they generally do not add substantially to that specific sub-discourse, beyond what is covered (in much greater detail) in the more focused books mentioned above. While all three of them were published by independent publishers, both Ostovar and Uskowi are firm insiders to the 'Washington apparatus': Afshon Ostovar's current website displays an archetypical career for the type of author dominating the discourse. While his current employer, the Monterrey Naval Postgraduate School is a US Navy university, Ostovar previously

[53] Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*: *Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).
[55] Seliktar and Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*.

worked for the Department of Defense (DoD), the Center for Strategic Studies at the Arlington-based CNA and West Point.[57] Similarly, Nader Uskowi, now a senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, also held a fellowship at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, one of the most prominent US think tanks publishing on Iran, worked as "the senior civilian policy advisor to U.S. Central Command"[58] and a contractor for the DoD.[59] Similar pedigrees and personal histories apply to most authors from the corpus, which I come back to later, especially regarding the husband-and-wife analysts Frederick and Kimberley Kagan of the AEI. These details are relevant because they are indicative of the general positionality of the authors dominating the English discourse on the core issue of this paper.

In contrast to the remarkably short list of book-length works dedicating substantial attention to either the Iranian alliance system or the Quds Force, there is an abundance of journal articles, briefs and policy-advice material dealing with the subject matter. The overwhelming majority of authors are publishing for a vast array of US think tanks, meaning non-government, private and semi-private institutions providing (sometimes commissioned) research, policy-advice and lobbying for and in cooperation with policy and decision-makers. The details on these many organizations vary, of course, and an attempt at a generalized definition does not seem productive. However, as a whole, they are generally dependent on public money flowing their way from the various arms of government, as well as on private capital from foundations and, crucially, corporations. Therefore, for structural reasons alone, there is a natural proximity to the political system; the ebb and flow of politics in Washington, like in any other country, has great impact on what research interests stand to receive public funds and have hope of garnering public and political interest and traction. I discuss these aspects of interwovenness of politics and the expert-apparatus informing it in greater detail later. Here it suffices to note that the vast majority of discourse participants professionally move within this wider field of interaction between the US state-apparatus – specifically the Pentagon and State Department – and the legion of analysts and advisors in their orbit. This is also the reason for the formats utilized by the relevant authors, generally turning to

[57] See: Naval Postgraduate School, "Afshon Ostovar, Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Associate Chair for Research," https://nps.edu/web/nsa/-/afshon-ostovar-ph-d-, accessed August 30, 2021.

[58] "Nader Uskowi," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/nader-uskowi, accessed October 15, 2020.

[59] See: Atlantic Council Staff, "Nader Uskowi," Atlantic Council, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/expert/nader-uskowi/, accessed October 15, 2020.

short, focused texts aimed at providing actionable information, as is the practice of policy advice groups all too aware of their audience's professionally short attention span.

The disciplinary approach most commonly represented in this central type of literature is generally that of political sciences and international relations, with a highly 'securitized' angle – as a result of research being driven primarily by and viewed through the lens of US national interest and foreign policy. This trend guides the research interests and defines the theoretical paradigms of most analyses. It is represented both in the academic and professional backgrounds of most authors as well as in the character of the literature. As to the former aspect, authors usually boast degrees in Security Studies, Strategic Studies, International Relations, or more specialized fields such as Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies, or are intelligence service or military professionals. Often, these two elements overlap, with authors having both a professional background in those areas, and at least one degree from those or similar academic fields. In the latter case, the degrees were often awarded by military colleges.[60] The effects of these backgrounds and circumstances on the coverage of Iran's 'proxy policy' and the Quds Force, in terms of framing, conceptualization, theorization, narratives, explanatory patterns and drawn conclusions, are both pervasive and essential to the discourse analysis – and are therefore discussed in detail and in conjuncture with concrete examples later.

To reiterate, the overwhelming majority of literature on the concrete question of Iran's network of influence, an ostensible 'proxy policy', the Quds Force or even the IRGC in general, stems from authors working in United States think tanks in close contact with the government. Materials from the wider discourse, such as mainstream media, are therefore necessarily highly derivative of the literature produced by this stratum of experts. The sources to which neither of these two characteristics applies are very few and far between, and I have discussed them above. This, in conjunction with other factors I discuss later, contributes to the situation in which the authors that constitute the hegemonial discourse, as I have defined it earlier, have an inordinate amount of formative influence over the content and presentation of expert knowledge on the issue, as there is little knowledge production on it from other English sources.

[60] For illustration of these trends in author's career paths, see, i.e: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts, https://www.fpri.org/about/scholars/?keyword=&program=803 or https://www.csis.org/experts?&field_categories_field_regions%5B0%5D=785

V. The Hegemonial Discourse on Iran's Network of Influence and its Core Narratives

This chapter forms the core of this project, in which the narrative building blocks generated by the qualitative content analysis of the material are summarized, abstracted and restructured in such a way as to provide a clear image of the essential content of and circumstances surrounding the discourse on Iran's network of influence. The coding and category building represented the first important step of this process, categorizing statements that may have been disparate in detail, such as in their choice of terminology, by their shared narrative meanings. As I have explained in the chapter on methodology, a discourse analytical understanding of category building allows statements to be grouped not only by their word-for-word content, but also by their subtext. Thus overarching narratives can extracted from both the explicit content of the statements as well as from their implicit meaning.

Therefore, I lay out the core narratives and sub-narratives of the hegemonial discourse in this chapter, synthesized from a body of discursive statements drawn from the corpus. They cover a majority of substantial statements in the corpus and depict what any individual reader might take away from it. These narratives represent what the authors believe, or for other reasons might want to communicate to their audience. They are the central carriers of what is conceived to be expert knowledge of the current state of affairs surrounding Iran's policy in the hegemonial discourse. As I have explained in the chapter on theory, this does not mean, from a discourse-analytical perspective, that they are accurately (or inaccurately) depicting a specific reality, but instead a specific interpretation of the phenomenon that is not independent from the author's circumstances, such as political affiliations etc. To account for this, the last part of this chapter is concerned primarily with the discourse dispositif, the constellation of circumstances in which the statements and narratives are made.

The core narratives that group the discursive statements are most organically and which therefore form the substantial body of the hegemonial discourse's content are:

A. Iran is an essentially aggressive, expansionistic power that is actively seeking regional hegemony. The central reasons given for this are: Iran's neo-Shiite religious doctrine, its

intrinsic drive to “export the revolution”, a perceived need for ‘forward defense’ against a hostile stranglehold and a desire to restore historical ‘Persian greatness’ in some form.

B. To further these ends, Iran is consciously militarizing Shiism to construct a “Shiite Crescent” of political power.
C. Because of these impulses, and as part of the wider geostrategic context, Iran naturally finds itself in a regional rivalry with Saudi-Arabia and the Gulf States.
D. The Quds Force, led by Qassem Soleimani, is Iran’s primary and most effective tool in these regional struggles.
E. The QF systematically uses “proxies” throughout the region as the primary mechanism for achieving its goals.

Obviously, this streamlined abstraction is a simplification of these core narratives to a great extent and does not accurately depict either the breadth of their actual content and meanings. All of these narratives come with a number of sub-narratives and subthemes, and the statements they represent argue a vast array of points on a micro-level. However, factoring in the context of these statements, the respective authors, etc., they ultimately clearly feed into or support one (or sometimes several) of the core narratives or rely on one of them for their argumentation.

I now discuss, in detail, these core narratives, and the sub-narratives that play into them, and illustrate their internal logic with exemplary discursive statements from the primary sources. Additionally, I am going to hint at the occasionally represented counternarratives should they emerge in the content analysis.

5.1 Expansionism and Regional Hegemony

In many texts, the notion of Iran aspiring to regional political hegemony are usually construed as the Islamic Republic’s central reason for building and maintaining its network of influence. In this endeavor – and because of it – Iran is usually characterized as an essentially aggressive, expansionistic power, using coercive politics as well as warfare as their extension by other means, to dominate the region. As a representative example, J. Matthew McInnis, writing for the AEI in “Iran’s Strategic Thinking”, states:

> “Tehran seeks a preeminent, even hegemonic, role in Middle Eastern political and security affairs and maximum freedom to act in its surrounding region. These objectives reflect both

> a national sense of historical leadership in southwest Asia and a need to prevent being surrounded by more powerful states."[61]

He elaborates in another text that, in addition,

> "…by building partnerships and establishing proxies to confront the West, Israel and rival Muslim powers, the Iranian regime hopes to position itself as the vanguard of a new, just Islamic world."[62]

In the brief, matter-of-fact style most of the source material has in common, McInnis represents several essential positions commonly reproduced there: He invokes the notion that Iran sees itself as the natural leader of the region and notes that it actively aspires to achieve this leadership. He states that it seeks to "confront the West, Israel, and rival Muslim powers" and lastly, he posits that it "hopes to position itself as the vanguard of a new, just Islamic world". Lastly, he hints at how one of the motivators for Iran's aggressive stance is a perceived need to preemptively "prevent being surrounded" by US-influenced, Sunni powers. All these notions are very commonly represented in the discourse in fairly consistent forms. Together with other lines of argument, they serve to construct an image of Iran as an essentially expansionistic aggressor power. However, in their exact explanatory logic they diverge from one another, and I now discuss the narrative strands that McInnis hints at in detail.

The exact reasons for why Iran seeks hegemony, if not treated as an intrinsic value requiring no further explanation, vary throughout the literature, with the most commonly provided explanations being: a religious drive by an intrinsically expansionistic Khomeinist Shiism; a revolutionary, antiimperialist impulse to "export the revolution"; a necessity to combat a hostile stranglehold – formed by US sanctions, Sunni extremism and Gulf animosity –; and lastly a continuation of the Persian imperial history of overlordship. The first of these explanations, which is also the most common, intersects closely with the second core narrative regarding Iran's "nature" as an essentially Shiite nation, its utilization, mobilization and militarization of Shiism, and its attempts to establish a "Shiite Crescent". However, when the discussion of Iran's religious or theological doctrine serves primarily to explain or establish an ostensible inherent expansionism, I address the

[61] McInnis, "Iran's Strategic Thinking," 4.
[62] Danielle Pletka and Frederick W. Kagan, "America vs. Iran: The Competition for the Future of the Middle East" (American Enterprise Institute, 2014), 3.

respective statements in this first section, as opposed to the second. It remains, however, a place of overlap, first and foremost in the debates on *velayat-e faqih*, the "guardianship of the jurisprudent", which I discuss in detail below. Though the idea that Iran's theological positioning of its Supreme Leader as the political leader of all Shia Muslims is also discussed as a mechanism of religious mobilization of latent Shiite militancy and a legitimizing dogma, the principle is usually mentioned as the inherent (pseudo-)religious reason for the expansionistic predisposition of Khomeinist neo-Shiism, along with its revolutionary character. These narrative elements are interwoven and combined in manifold ways to construct a narrative mosaic of Iran as a nation-state that, in one way or another, by its very nature, cannot help but strive to establish hegemony from Kabul in the East to the Bab Al-Mandab in the South to the coast of the Levant in the West and is willing to risk all but open war – and possibly even that – to achieve it.

5.1.1 Religio-revolutionary Expansionism, "Khomeinism" and *Velayat-e Faqih*

The first two explanatory patterns I mentioned above both derive Iran's expansionist drive from its status as a revolutionary, theocratic nation-state: One attributes this drive to Khomeini's personal theology and religio-political thought as the central formative impulse of the Islamic Republic and its ideology, consequently imprinted upon the post-1979 state. The second narrative strain attributes Iran's expansionism to the nation's genesis as an essentially revolutionary state and resulting anti-Imperialist, anti-capitalist impulses in the spirit of the Cold War paradigm of socialist-communist world revolution. Authors argue that this impulse, even if eventually largely coopted by Khomeinist Islamist overtones, persisted in the revolutionary movement and found its way into the founding mythology and ideology of the IRGC (and eventually the QF), where it began to exert its influence. In conjunction, these two components make up what the literature generally calls Iran's urge to "export the revolution". Pletka and Kagan exemplify this line of argument, writing in "America VS. Iran": "Even if revolutionary fervor has died down since the 1980s, the Iranian regime is still built on the ideological premise of velayate-faqih [sic] – guardianship or rule of the jurisprudent – which should be spread and adopted by other Muslim societies."[63] Like many authors in the hegemonial discourse, they place *velayat-e faqih* in a central explanatory position, and narratively tie it to an expansionist impulse that they derive from the

[63] Pletka and Kagan, "America vs. Iran," 5.

theological essence of the concept. This is a common, but treacherously simplistic, reading of the Khomeinist Shiite theological underpinnings of modern-day Iran.

The life, work and theology of Ayatollah Khomeini are a generally well-researched issue, with a plethora of authors providing analyses from various disciplinary angles. The literature that is subject of this thesis, however, generally draws from this body very selectively and thus presents a homogenized image of "Khomeinism", to which specific aspects of Iranian national ideology, which inform its current policy, can then be traced back causally. In itself, the discursive act of establishing "Khomeinism" as an independent religious-ideological canon, an endeavor which analysts have furthered ever since the revolution, carries significant analytical weight and comes with significant implications. Selikhtar and Rezaiei, in "Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars" state: "[…] a deeper analysis of Khomeini's teaching revealed that it amounted to a radical revision of Shiism, known as neo-Shiism or Khomeinism."[64] This separation of "Khomeinism" from Shiism as a whole is crucial, because it allows authors to logically attribute religious characteristics to a specifically Iranian Shiism that can then be referred to as an explanatory factor for Iran's political actions, as is the case in the hegemonial discourse on Iran's network of influence.

Khomeini's adaptation of the concept of *velayat-e faqih* is generally treated as the most crucial of these factors. This is usually translated into English as either "guardianship" or "custodianship", sometimes also as "mandate" or "rulership" of the (Islamic clerical) "jurist", or the "jurisprudent". It is originally a concept with considerable theological intricacies, contested by different schools of Twelver Shiite thought and a varied history of interpretation and application. However, in this context, the term references the iteration canonized by revolutionary "Khomeinism", which evoked it primarily to justify the powers vested in the position of Supreme Leader after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.[65] Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Iran-expert Yasuyuki Matsunaga quotes from a 1985 publication by Khomeini, in which he situates the *velayat-e faqih* as follows:

> "The divine ordinances of Islam necessarily require the state and the divine mandate for their implementation. Without the state and the ruler with the divine mandate, the supremacy of

[64] Seliktar and Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*, 19.

[65] See: Yasuyuki Matsunaga, "Revisiting Ayatollah Khomeini's Doctrine of Wilayat Al-Faqıh (Velayat-E Faqıh)," *Orient* 44 (2009): 80–82 or Tanj Alaaldin, "The Origins and Ascendancy of Iraq's Shiite Militias," Hudson Institute, https://www.hudson.org/research/13993-the-origins-and-ascendancy-of-iraq-s-shiite-militias#, accessed August 30, 2021, 8.

> divine law cannot be maintained; nor is it possible to keep the affairs of Muslims from being disturbed. These necessities constituted the proof for the Imamat […]"[66]

Afshon Ostovar, in *Vanguard of the Imam*, describes the process of cooptation of the revolution by the Islamists, which followed the ousting of the Shah, as fundamentally characterized by the violent implementation of this dogma, carried out by the then newly established IRGC:

> "The IRGC led the campaign against Khomeini's revolutionary opponents, violently crushing the leftist and Marxist opposition. The IRGC's political ground war paved the way for Khomeini's greatest victory: the ratification of the Islamic constitution which cemented the concept of clerical rule (velayat-e faqih) as the foundation of Iran's revolutionary system (nezam)."67

This view is widely mirrored and expounded by the hegemonial discourse. It establishes *velayat-e faqih* as carrying intrinsically totalitarian aspirations backed by the political will to forcefully implement them, thereby analytically detaching the concept from the realm of theology and transplanting it into that of *realpolitik*, where it can serve as an explanatory moment for political expansionism. The next step in this logic is to explain the formative centrality of Khomeini's personal theology, ideology and politics for Iran's politics at large, amplified by the revolution and carrying continuously through the post-revolutionary period and the Iran-Iraq War until today, where it informs and legitimizes Iran's command of its "proxies".

In this enterprise, arguments surrounding *velayat-e faqih* naturally intersect with those positing Iran as fostering and mobilizing Shia militancy in the region and those concerned with a wider sectarian conflict, both of which I discuss later on. However, in claiming that the principle includes the primacy of the *faqih* over all Shia Muslims, or sometimes even the entirety of the Umma, authors see political expansionism as an almost inevitable quality of a state that is arguably founded on such a principle. In his book *Temperature Rising*, published in 2020, Nader Uskowi of the Atlantic Council escalates, evoking the idea of "the Shia nation" to be led by the *faqih*:

> "Iran's longstanding strategy has always appeared to be pursuing leadership of Shia populations and expanding its regional influence […]. Leading the Shia nation according to a militant interpretation of Shia Islam was the cornerstone of Iran's Islamic Revolution. The

[66] Matsunaga, "Revisiting Ayatollah Khomeini's Doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqıh (Velayat-e Faqıh)," 80.
[67] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 39.

founders of the revolution believed that the Islamic Republic's mission was to become the undisputed leader of Shias across the region, and as such a leader of the Islamic world."

Thereby, Uskowi ties the bow on the logical *tour de force* that derives Iran's political expansionism from the "Khomeinist" doctrine, as translated and transported by the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, and its crucial role in the (post-) revolutionary state formation process. In consequence, this narrative then justifies why Iran seeks to "export" the revolution to (at least) the region by establishing the revolution's ideology as essentially totalitarian, which in turn is then often evoked as the *raison d'être* of the QF or even the IRGC at large.

5.1.2 "Exporting the Revolution"

[68]

IRGC flag. Its primary emblem, the outstretched fist brandishing a stylized AK-type rifle, is reminiscent of 'classical' 20th century revolutionary symbolism. This heraldry is shared with all of its branches and many of its allies. Source: Wikipedia.org

Another of the most commonly recurring narratives employed to explain Iran's expansionism, is the notion that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as it was created by revolution, seeks to "export" that revolution in a manner similar to the 20th century concept of the Marxist communist world revolution. This, in turn, ostensibly explains Iran's 'proxy policy'. This logic is predicated on

[68] SpinnerLaserz, "The Flag of the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution Used in Ceremonies," Wikipedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ceremonial_flag_of_the_Army_of_the_Guardians_of_the_Islamic_Revolution.svg, accessed July 3, 2021.

several elements, which the literature more often than not treats as axiomatic presumptions. The first of these elements is that Iran is first and foremost a revolutionary state – and that something in the revolutionary state formation process (a phase sometimes thought of as ending with the Iran-Iraq War, sometimes as continuing throughout it) has instilled the Islamic Republic with an ideological drive to "export" its revolution to other polities. As an example, AEI's J. McInnis writes in "Iran's Strategic Thinking":

> "As a revolutionary state, Iran sought to change not only its own form of governance but also the governments and larger international political system surrounding it after 1979. The ideology that Ayatollah Khomeini and his fellow revolutionaries espoused and codified into the new Iranian constitution was universalist in its nature and deeply shaped their worldview." [69]

University of Hawaii's Farideh Farhi stresses how this revolutionary nature persists today and still acts as a driver for Iranian policy, affirmatively quoting General James Mattis as having said in 2016: "Recognize that Iran is not a nation state, rather, it's a revolutionary cause devoted to mayhem."[70]

The second presumption is that the IRGC, and more specifically the QF, are the structural product, representation, and bearer of this revolutionary impetus, either directly tasked with and/or inherently motivated to carry out this "export". In "An Evolving Way of War", Bucala and Kagan state that "Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini ordered [the IRGC's] formation in May 1979 primarily to secure the Islamic Revolution against internal and external threats, but also to export the revolution beyond Iran's borders."[71] Matthew McInnis similarly writes that "as both the defender and exporter of Iran's revolution, the IRGC is designed to fight at home and abroad simultaneously."[72]

However, the notion that the IRGC was conceived as the active "exporter" of the Islamic Revolution from its inception, as opposed to its (more reactive) guardian against counterrevolutionary forces, seems inconsistent with its organizational history. It seems more

[69] McInnis, "Iran's Strategic Thinking," 5.
[70] Farideh Farhi, "Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), 2.
[71] Paul Bucala and Frederick W. Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War: How the IRGC Fights in Syria" (American Enterprise Institute, 2016), 8.
[72] J. M. McInnis, "Iranian Concepts of Warfare: Understanding Tehran's Evolving Military Doctrine" (American Enterprise Institute, 2017), 17.

likely that the need for operational capabilities abroad gradually arose during the years following the revolution, especially in the dynamics of the Iran-Iraq War. This would be consistent with the emergence of the QF's organizational predecessors, Department 900 and the Special External Operations Department during the mid- to late 1980s. More on this in the chapter on the Quds Force, below.

Many sources quote the same 2016 interview with General Ahmad Qolampur in order to substantiate their claims that Iran seeks to "export the revolution", in which the general is quoted saying: "The Islamic Revolution does not have any borders… The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps does not have the word 'Iran' in its title. This means that it seeks to defend the Islamic revolution and its achievements without regard to particular borders."[73] However, the literature then usually locates the root causes for this stance not in Iran's current ideology or political landscape, but in its historical genesis as a revolutionary, Khomeinist state. We have already discussed this latter factor above, in the context of "Khomeinist Neo-Shiism". However, a significant part of the literature elects to instead focus on the former – the Islamic Republic's 'nature' as a revolutionary state – as the central explanatory factor for its desire to "export the revolution". This narrative focuses on the elements of leftist, anti-imperialist, Marxist revolutionary internationalism still prominent in the early phase of the revolution and argues that they persist and inform current Iranian politics. AEI's Matthew McInnis representatively stresses this continuity, saying that "Iran is still a revolutionary state" and "US policymakers must bear in mind that Iran's soft-power 'industrial complex', the interconnected external political, diplomatic, economic, religious, cultural, security and proxy activity, is related to its revolutionary nature."[74] The literature sees these essentially revolutionary factors institutionalized in the form of the IRGC and thus still effective today. Afshon Ostovar (discussing this issue in much greater detail than the literature in the corpus) says that "in its foundational charter the IRGC saw itself as much more than a military organization. It was above all the guardian of the Islamic revolution. It was a *revolutionary* organization. That distinction carried with it a certain ideological view of international relations which stressed resistance to imperialism and solidarity with other liberation

[73] As quoted in: Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, section: "Iran at War".
[74] J. M. McInnis, "Introduction: Looking at Soft-Power Competitive Strategies for Iran," in *America Vs. Iran: The Competition for the Future of the Middle East*, 3–7, 3.

movements, particularly those in Muslim societies,"[75] and calls the IRGC's dogma "a form of revolutionary or radicalized internationalism", stating that "a common characteristic of this type of internationalism is political or armed intervention, usually expressed through a revolutionary state's collaboration with like-minded armed groups as a means of influencing the internal political dynamics of foreign states."[76] By this logic, historical experience with 20th century Marxist revolutions and their doctrine of world revolution are leveraged to lend credibility to the narrative that the 'leftist DNA' of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, translated by and preserved through institutionalization in the IRGC, to this day affects Iranian foreign policy in such a way as to make it 'naturally' expansionistic. Since the *pasdaran* are thus already positioned to be the primary actors of "exporting the revolution", backed by propagandistic snippets such as General Qolampur's quote above, the Quds Force, tasked with operations abroad, becomes the spearhead of this effort. Once again, it must be said that the majority of the data does not engage in this discussion of historical causes, but merely mentions that the IRGC or the QF are striving to "export the revolution", once again treating this fact as an axiom and investing it with an air of 'common sense' by sheer repetition. As an example of this, and of how this condensation and simplification alters the causal relations that are communicated to the reader, consider this quote from Kimberley Kagan at the Institute for the Study of War: "Ayatollah Khomeini established the Quds Force in 1979 to protect Iran's Islamic Revolution and export it beyond Iran's borders."[77] Aside from being factually incorrect,[78] in one short sentence, Kagan construes the QF as a personal creation of Khomeini's with the singular cause of revolutionary interventionism. Even where the face-value statements Kagan makes are not plain wrong, they are so oversimplified and arrayed in a fashion that communicates major historical and analytical inaccuracies to the reader. This is one of the more extreme examples, but it is representative in the way short reports and briefs particularly tend to handle complex circumstances and causal configurations.

A logical prerequisite for the line of argument that Iran seeks to "export the revolution" is a set of implicit presumptions about the nature of revolutions and the states they produce. A central one of

[75] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 102.
[76] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 103.
[77] Kimberley Kagan, "Iran's Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government" (Institute for the Study of War; The Weekly Standard, 2007), 4.
[78] The exact 'founding' moment of the QF is unknown, but generally suspected to have been well after 1979, sometimes as late as "the early 1990s". See, for a brief discussion: Michael Wigginton et al., "Al-Qods Force: Iran's Weapon of Choice to Export Terrorism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (2015): 154, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/18335330.2015.1090053, accessed August 30, 2021.

these presumptions, as it is mirrored in the corpus, appears to be that any given state either transitions away from its initially revolutionary nature and transforms into a conventional nation-state – or remains otherwise a revolutionary state indefinitely, retaining a set of politico-cultural characteristics that accompany that 'phase'. As such, the literature often refers to "Iran's revolutionary culture"[79] to explain its foreign political behavior, in particular why the Islamic Republic ostensibly seeks to "export the revolution". The assumption that it must do so due to its own revolutionary nature stems from the characteristics the authors seem to associate with this nature: McInnis calls Iran "a revolutionary state constantly worried about potential instability and counterrevolution."[80]

Consequently, the literature also attributes further characteristics to Iran that are traditionally associated with the great 'revolutionary tradition' of the 20th century, such as anti-imperialism. This characterization goes back to and is often portrayed as a remnant of the initial phase of the Islamic Revolution between 1979 and 1982. The revolutionary coalition which displaced the Shah was an amalgam of political forces, containing, aside from Khomeini's Islamists, democratic constitutionalists associated with reformist opposition leader Bazargan, the communist Tudeh party as well as various other leftist and Marxist student organizations. Additionally, many Iranians supported the revolution simply out of antipathy for the Shah and *Savak*, the feared secret police service of the Pahlavi-regime, as well as a plethora of individual political configurations that had little or nothing to do with the Islamist impulse which Khomeini represented. Only after the Khomeinists side-lined and eventually dismantled the Bazargan interim government and appropriated the revolutionary state formation process, did the Khomeinists finalize their Islamist project. This process was accompanied by growing repression of the democratic and leftist forces, increasingly rendering them politically marginalized and powerless. However, the literature refers to this initial – and initially strong – leftist / Marxist revolutionary impetus to strengthen their claims that contemporary Iran still adheres, at least as remnants, to traditionally leftist world-revolutionary ambitions.

Authors often insinuate that the Islamic Republic still acts as a quasi-leftist revolutionary state seeking some form of 'global liberation of the oppressed', because of early Marxist influences that

[79] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 21.
[80] McInnis, "Iranian Concepts of Warfare," 1.

ostensibly shaped Iran's worldview or because decision-makers in Tehran still harbor genuine revolutionary motivations. This assumption is usually backed up by referring to Iranian officials employing such rhetoric more recently, such as general Qolampur mentioned above. The question then becomes, similar to the case of pan-Shia or pan-Islamic rhetoric, to what degree such statements are a legitimizing, ideological 'coat of paint' as opposed to an expression of genuinely held beliefs motivating policy. Ultimately, this question cannot be answered from the outside. But the former usually seems more likely than the latter, because it is far more consistent with the political realities of Iran currently being governed by a theocratic, arguably reactionary, establishment as opposed to a leftist revolution. In any case, the sub-narrative of "exporting the revolution" bears the risk of projecting revolutionary impetus onto intelligence and power projection activities that are not at all dissimilar from non-revolutionary states. The question of just how important a factor a genuine desire to "export the revolution" really was in the creation of these capabilities or in the current activities of the QF cannot be adequately answered. The fact of the matter remains, however, that the activities of the QF today, possibly even the IRGC, can be very adequately explained without revolutionary impetus as a factor, and are consistent with conventional power politics, despite the prominence of the revolutionary motif in the hegemonial discourse.

5.1.3 Expansion as Forward Defense

> "While there is a seductive simplicity in ascribing Iran's behavior to a voracious hegemonic drive, […] the Iranian leadership sees itself acting defensively rather than offensively. It is seeking to deter the strong rather than attack the weak. Furthermore, its more assertive deterrent posture is a reaction to heightened threats or threat perception."[81]

The fact that this quote by Farideh Farhi, which contradicts the narrative I discussed above and positions Iran as a strictly defensive actor, does not stem from the hegemonial discourse (as Farideh Farhi is not a Washington insider), is probably not a coincidence. Her stance in fact represents a counter-hegemonial narrative moment. Maybe somewhat oxymoronically, many corpus sources explain Iran's expansionist impulses not as a consequence of the Islamic Republic's ostensibly aggressive (post-)revolutionary *raison d'état*, but instead as the country's *realpolitik* response to

[81] Farhi, "Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals," 2.

continuous and continuously mounting outside pressure. These analyses stress that both policymakers and military functionaries in Iran perceive themselves as under constant, existential threat from a hostile conglomerate of outside forces, namely Israel, the United States and its Gulf allies. This perception is also rooted in Iran's revolutionary state foundation process and closely entwined with its fundamental national mythology, which blamed the US for meddling in Iranian affairs, the Mossadegh coup and their support of the Shah, establishing them as an enemy to the revolutionary state and its values. The latent reciprocal animosity in that period flared and culminated in the Tehran Hostage Crisis, which was the formative moment for Iran-US relations ever since. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq again brought the US-threat to the regime's continued existence into sharp focus: Kenneth Pollack recounts that, in the early 2000s, Tehran "worried that with hundreds of thousands of US troops on both sides, Washington might try to pursue regime change in Iran, too – something that many George W. Bush administration officials and their supporters considered or even advocated",[82] giving credence to Iran's existential fears.

The extensive and unwavering support the United States has given to Israel, a relation epitomized in Iranian political rhetoric by the expression of the "Great Satan" and the "Little Satan", has been such that, from an Iranian perspective, the role of and opposition to the one cannot well be conceived without that of the other. On its own, the origins of Iranian opposition to Israel are not clearly identifiable, even though today that antipathy has become a more or less axiomatically accepted fact. Seliktar and Rezaei, in *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*, make the argument that there is nothing predisposing either Shiite theological tradition or the Persian state to antisemitism, but instead characterize the anti-Israeli dogma of post-revolutionary Iran as another innovation of Khomeini's: "The lack of historical precedent did not bother Ayatollah Khomeini, who launched a full-throated attack on the Jews while in exile in Najaf."[83] They then go on to quote some of his antisemitic statements and continue, more insightfully, that these notions "could be viewed as part of a classic anti-Semitic repertoire popularized by Al-e Ahmad and Shariati, an opinion espoused by the extensive literature on the regime's anti-Semitism." "However," they say, "to the surprise of many, Khomeini's real radical innovation pertained to the place of Jerusalem and Palestine in

[82] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 4.
[83] Seliktar and Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*, 25.

the Shiite ideology."[84] As an aside, it is noteworthy that by talking about "Shiite ideology" here, as opposed to a more specific 'Iranian religious ideology' or maybe 'Khomeinist doctrine', the authors reproduce a quite common pattern of blurring the lines between specifically Iranian doctrine and Shiism as a whole – narratively paving the way for the notion of Iranian leadership ambitions over all Shia to appear logical. It was of course not in Ayatollah Khomeini's power to alter "Shiite ideology" as a whole by the stroke of a pen, as this quote might suggest. "Khomeini," the authors say with some hyperbole, "declared that [sic] the liberation of Jerusalem the central component of Iran's Islamic ideology [and] Shiite Islam to be the new Liberator of Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Zionist enemy, or Little Satan."[85]

Nonetheless, the fact that Seliktar and Rezaei (writing as academics without direct association with the 'Washington orthodoxy' of the hegemonial discourse) explicitly discuss the matter of Iran's hostility towards Israel and Jews in general at all is remarkable, since every single piece of literature in the corpus of this work treats the existence of that hostility as a *fait accompli* that does not warrant any explanation. In a productive sidenote, the authors briefly turn away from discussing a religious-ideological explanation by saying: "To the extent that the [Shiite] clergy referred to the issue of Israel, the topic was political and not theological,"[86] and they discuss in a single sentence the *realpolitik* purpose and ramifications of this anti-Israeli shift in Iranian doctrine after the revolution. They conclude, however, stating that "there is little doubt that redemptive anti-Semitism was an integral part of neo-Shiism."[87] Thus, in just a handful of pages, the authors span the logical gap between the realization that Shiism has no predisposition towards animosity against Jews or Judaism to providing an explanatory narrative for why the Islamic Republic is, in fact, so predisposed – which, in turn, is the axiom the sources so unquestioningly reproduce.

The third component of the supposed existential chokehold on Iran, as portrayed in the sources, is the threat originating from the Sunni Gulf States, which I discuss in detail later as a distinct core narrative in the source material.

The sources then pair these narratives, which explain why the Islamic Republic perceives these three parties to be fundamentally hostile to it with the assessment that Iran compares unfavorably

[84] Seliktar and Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*, 26.
[85] Seliktar and Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*, 26.
[86] Seliktar and Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*, 26.
[87] Seliktar and Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars*, 27.

to them in the more traditional areas of inter-state competition: Conventional military, diplomacy, economics and, to a lesser degree, soft power projection. The sources refer to an extensive pool of literature from sources from the military, defense and intelligence communities to comfortably argue this point.[88] Kenneth Pollack, writing for AEI, thus summarizes: "Ultimately, the new operating method of Iran's Axis of Resistance is a strategy born of necessity. It is a strategy of the weak, unlikely to succeed against the strong except when they are badly constrained by politics, diplomacy, or other exogenous factors."[89]

Together, these two elements, an immutable hostility and conventional superiority of Iran's enemies, serve as the second pillar of the defensive-posture-narrative for explaining Iran's ostensibly expansionist foreign policy stance, of which they ultimately see the establishment of the 'proxy policy' as a result. However – even though this angle also stresses that the 'proxy policy's' architects see it as an effective tool to combat a regional stranglehold in a situation where most other avenues of competition have been actively barred for Iran – the narrative is reliably cast by the sources in such a way as to still portray the resulting policy as expansionistic and aggressive, as opposed to defensive in nature.

5.1.4 Restoring the Persian Empire

There is a sub-theme in the corpus of literature and beyond that claims Iran's activity is aimed at or driven by an intrinsic desire to restore historical 'Persian greatness'. While it is not a core narrative, as it is not mentioned as often or consistently and not invested with as much explanatory power, there is nonetheless a clearly observable pattern in the corpus, which infers that:

> "The achievements and resiliency of the Persian state (and empire) until the Qajar dynasty and the continuing vibrancy of its culture give Iran a sense of inherent national greatness, however. Iranians expect to return to the position as natural leaders of the Middle East and

[88] See, for instance: Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War" which, in highly technical fashion, makes the argument that Iran's focus on "hybrid-" and "asymmetrical warfare" is a result of the inability to compete in conventional fashion. This line of argument is often found in literature from the military and intelligence communities discussing the IRGC and the QF, the reliance on which they see as Iran's attempt to circumvent this strategic conventional weakness. The more policy-advice oriented sources I analyse for this study sometimes mention this in passing, but are generally discussing Iran's 'proxy policy' at large, which they primarily view as a function of Iran's nature as a state and political intent, not as a result of strategic power-balance calculations.

[89] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 1.

play a primary role in Central Asia and the Caucasus."[90]

McInnis elaborates in another passage of the same text: "Iran's national consciousness is defined by its longevity and resilience as a nation and a civilization, along with modern Iran's inability to regain the relative power it possessed during the early centuries of the Persian Empire," insinuating a sort of inferiority complex resulting from the contrast between historical "greatness" and current impotence. Via this explanatory mechanism, authors infer a tangible effect of Iran's historical self-perception on its current political ambitions. Seth Jones, writing for the CSIS, reproduces this angle of historical continuities thus: "Iran has used its partners and activities in an attempt to establish a land bridge across the region […] These corridors resemble the Royal Road, the ancient land bridge built by Persian King Darius the Great in the fifth century BC."[91] WI's Hassan Mneimneh implies that such an attitude of 'historical revanchism' is still intimately felt by the leadership in Tehran, saying that "the [recent] extent of Iranian presence across the region made it possible for regime luminaries to boast to internal audiences that Iran had control over four Arab capitals, and that the Islamic Republic is in fact the 'Fourth Persian Empire' with a reach from Central Asia to the Mediterranean."[92]

However, this general line of argument creates considerable contradictions with the other core narratives brought forward by the discourse, such as Iran's revolutionary nature and its ostensible religious-ideological motivations. In emphasizing the dangers emanating from these factors, the authors usually rely on stressing the inconsistencies of today's Iran with the pre-1979 (Imperial) state, as opposed to possible continuities. Authors often, explicitly and implicitly, position 'being Muslim', 'being Shia' and 'being revolutionary' as the driving identity-related factors for Iranian expansionism, all of which are historically at odds with – or at least not conducive to – 'being Persian' or nostalgia for the Persian Empire (which expired with the much-hated last Shah).[93] Explaining Iran's policy with an inherent 'historical Imperialism' therefore seems logically at odds with explaining the same behavior through Khomeinist missionarism or lasting revolutionary

[90] McInnis, "Iran's Strategic Thinking," 3.
[91] Jones, "War by Proxy," 5.
[92] Hassan Mneimneh, "The Decline (and Fall?) of the "Fourth Persian Empire"," Policy Analysis / Fikra Forum (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2019), 3.
[93] I do not want to reproduce 'being Muslim', 'being Persian' etc. as essentialist categories with actual analytical value. I am referring, in a simplified way, to the discourse's implicit tendency to attribute analytical or explanatory value to categories of identity or 'nature' of the Iranian state, society or people, which it regularly does by inferring that such characteristics explain Iran's political behavior.

fervor. However, these contradictions do not stop authors from occasionally attributing Imperialist revisionism to Iran and Iranians as a secondary explanation for Iran's expansionist tendencies.

5.2 Iran as Abusing and Exacerbating Sectarianism

First of all, it is necessary to delineate this narrative from others with which it shares considerable overlap. This lies in the nature of the matter, as the discourse as a whole is permeated by an underlying debate on the role of religion and religiosity in Iranian matters of state and policy. While there is a plurality of ways it is framed and contextualized, religion is almost never absent from the discussion, either as an explanatory factor for Iranian foreign policy, as a formative factor regarding its 'proxy policy', or the activities of the QF. The underlying notion is that Iran, either actively and consciously, or as a side effect of their foreign policy, militarizes Shiism in order to further their political agenda. This debate moves on a spectrum, with some authors either stating or insinuating that religious ideology primarily serves Iran as a tool for mobilization and a legitimizing narrative with which the country obscures its 'real' power political motivation. The other pole are authors stipulating that religiosity and religious motives are an essential driver for Iranian policy in and of themselves. As an example for the former, I included the discussion on *velayat-e faqih* in the section on Iranian 'expansionism' because, the hegemonial discourse frames it as primarily a political issue in the narrower sense and almost never as one of religion, even though it relates to a theological principle. A similar case can be made for 'sectarianism' in the context of the Iran-Gulf rivalry, in which the sectarian divide is often treated as an explanatory component informing what is primarily a political competition, rather than the latter being a product of religious differences. Additionally, this angle forms its own core narrative in the discourse, which I discuss in the next chapter.

This section, conversely, explores how authors position Iran's 'essential nature' as a theocratic Shiite state as a driver for conflict between Iran and its "proxies" on the one hand and Sunnis in the region on the other and derive political trends from it. Anthony Cordesman, writing for the CSIS, exemplifies this trend, saying the entire region is caught up in a fateful "clash within a civilization," in which "both Iran and Arab regimes face a growing struggle for the future of Islam. This is a struggle between Sunnis and Shi'ites, but also between all of the region's regimes and

violent Islamist extremists."[94] Levitt, writing for the WI, affirms this view, saying that "Sunni and Shiite states and their clients seem to view the region's wars as part of a long-term, existential struggle between their sects."[95] Matthew McInnis, in an AEI report, implicitly subscribes to a similar appraisal of the situation in the region, and specifies Iran's role in this struggle:

> "Despite converting to the Muslim minority sect of Shia Islam only 500 years ago, Iran sees itself as the leader and defender of Shia worldwide. Tehran believes it has special moral responsibilities to protect the important Shia shrines in Iraq and Syria; larger Shia populations in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon; and smaller Shia populations elsewhere in the world."[96]

He thereby asserts that Iran has, by virtue of its religious identity, a quasi-natural hegemonial ambition. In saying that Tehran "believes" this, he implies that religiosity is not just a legitimizing veil for *realpolitik*, but the very source of this ambition, incorporated in the personal beliefs of at least the nation's political elite.

Aside from *velayat-e faqih* and the rivalry with the Gulf States, both of which I discuss elsewhere, this narrative of Iran militarizing Shiism, either actively or as a side-effect of their foreign policy, is primarily represented and expanded on by most authors that pick it up in three major ways. First, it is discussed in the context of Sunni extremism, mainly *Daesh*, which then ties back to the narrative focusing on Iran's defensive posture. Second, it is discussed under the umbrella term "Shiite Crescent", which is sometimes conflated with the "Axis of Resistance" and constructs a political unity based on and essentially informed by the members' Shiite faith. Third, the fact of Iran being Shiite and furthering a sectarian cause is ubiquitously woven throughout peripheral discussions, without being discussed explicitly, investing the argument with discursive authority through repetition in the expert apparatus.

[94] Anthony H. Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the "Clash within a Civilization"," Commentary (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014), 1.
[95] Matthew Levitt, "Waking Up the Neighbors: How Regional Intervention Is Transforming Hezbollah," Policy Analysis / Articles / Op-Eds (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/4073/en, 3.
[96] McInnis, "Iranian Concepts of Warfare," 4.

5.2.1 Combatting Sunni Extremism

The first of these cases relates back to the notion that Iran's 'proxy policy' is a product of its defensive posture toward a multitude of threats. In this particular narrative line, the literature stresses that the rise of powerful Sunni extremist groups such as *Daesh* (the Islamic State, ISIS), Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and the co-option of the Syrian opposition by *Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham* and other Islamist extremists has heightened what John Raine, writing for the IISS, calls "a traditional Shia perception of being an endangered minority". [97] The literature insinuates that Tehran is both driven by this perception, seeing a rise in highly organized Sunni extremism as an existential threat to itself and systematically "tapping into"[98] it in order to mobilize disenfranchised Shiite communities across the region as parts of its network of influence. This interpretation permeates both the discussion surrounding Iran's activities in Iraq and in Syria. In these contexts, this specific line of argumentation was at its height roughly between 2014 and 2018, when the influence of the Islamic State was most acutely felt in those two countries. However, the literature often discusses the wider issue independent from such developments in the abstracted form of (increasing) Sunni extremism. An IISS comment makes clear the narrative relation between this reasoning and the 'proxy policy', saying that "in mainstream Iranian political discourse, Iranian involvement in regional conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen is justified as the forward engagement of ISIS and Al-Qaeda before they reach Iranian territory"[99] and attests the Iranian leadership to act in defense against what they perceive to be a "Sunni global jihad executed by groups like ISIS"[100]. Marisa Sullivan, writing for the ISW, extends this line of argument to Hezbollah as the 'core proxy' of Iran: "[Hezbollah Secretary-General] Nasrallah portrayed the struggle in Syria not only as an extension of the resistance against Israel and the West, but he also cast the conflict in an increasingly sectarian light, as a fight against the takfiri (or Sunni extremist) threat."[101] Maxwell Markusen, writing on Iraq, reproduces this basic logic while also turning it on its head, framing Sunni extremism in Iraq as a reaction to Iranian meddling, shifting the blame: "Iranian-backed Shia militias continue to exacerbate Shia-Sunni tensions in Iraq, and their connection to Iran poses

[97] John Raine, "Iran, Its Partners, and the Balance of Effective Force" (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020), 1.
[98] Raine, "Iran, Its Partners, and the Balance of Effective Force," 1.
[99] Stevenson, "Shia Militias in Iraq," 1.
[100] Stevenson, "Shia Militias in Iraq," 2.
[101] Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," Middle East Security Report 19 (Institute for the Study of War, 2014), 16.

a useful recruiting tool for a sectarian-fueled Islamic State insurgency."[102] Narratively, all of these instances then serve two explanatory purposes: First, to stress Iran's nature as an expressly Shiite state which, by virtue of 'being Shiite', must perceive rising Sunni extremism in the region as an existential threat. Second, to explain by this logic a wider strategy of Iran's to mobilize specifically Shiite militancy across the region, thereby abusing and, in turn, exacerbating an underlying sectarian divide.

5.2.2 The "Shiite Crescent"

The next major pattern in which the theme of Iran promoting Shiite militancy is present in the corpus relates to the wider notion of what is sometimes called the "Shiite Crescent". Conceptually, it acts as the religious, or perhaps 'religionized', flipside of the "Axis of Resistance", with which it is largely geographically and analytically congruent, with none of the two being rigidly defined. While discussion of the "Axis of Resistance" is largely framed by a political and geostrategic logic, references to the Shiite Crescent stress how Iran shares a sort of 'fateful union' with other major actors in the region, primarily Hezbollah, the 'Alawite Assad regime and the Zaydi Houthis in Yemen, primarily by virtue of them being Shiite. John Raine uses a particularly succinct reduction of this motif, speaking of "[Iran's] form of Shia mobilization, based upon religious and political 'ley lines' that run to Iran."[103] Aside from once again axiomatically reaffirming quasi-natural ties between Iran and other Shiite factions, this quote is also interesting in its use of the term "ley lines". This is symptomatic for the almost mythical or primordial character that the literature often attributes to what it suspects to be the inexorable, quintessential 'nature' of Iran as a nation-state. Thereby, 'being Shite' is narratively positioned to appear to have sufficient explanatory power for, say, the form Iranian foreign policy takes, without having to go into any detail on how 'being Shiite' really translates into or informs foreign policy. The authors regularly assume a consensus with the audience over how Iran's 'nature' as a Shiite state must logically result in its support for Shiite militants abroad, must logically put Iran at odds with the Gulf states and so on. Elaboration on the concrete mechanisms in which Shiite beliefs, theological doctrine etc. might influence Iranian policy, however, are almost entirely absent from the literature – with the one exception of

[102] Maxwell B. Markusen, "The Islamic State and the Persistent Threat of Extremism in Iraq," CSIS Briefs (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), 1.
[103] Raine, "Iran, Its Partners, and the Balance of Effective Force," 2.

the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, which seems to act as a welcome stand-in for what is otherwise an analytical blank.[104]

This dynamic of narrative naturalization applies to both discursive strands, the "Axis" and the "Crescent", which also share considerable overlap. The terms are sometimes used practically interchangeably, due to their contested contents. This is in spite of the fact that the "Axis of Resistance" is a concept officially endorsed and used by Tehran and its allies, while the "Shiite Crescent" is an ideologically charged, externally applied interpretation. The term was coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan and has since been used to invoke the specter of a coherent zone of Shia power reaching roughly from Lebanon through Syria and Iraq, while the eastern end of the "Crescent" is variably located in Iran, Afghanistan, Bahrain or Yemen, depending on interpretation and intent of the author. The notion of a "Shiite Crescent" led by Iran appears to serve primarily as a causal explanation for why Iran would want to utilize "proxies" in the first place, which is, ostensibly, to establish and entrench the "Crescent" by strengthening Shiite factions within its constituent states, with the eventual goal of establishing Shiite rule. Consequently, the establishment of a Shia government in Iraq, the resurgence of the 'Alawite Assad regime in Syria and the support of Shia minorities such as the Houthis in Yemen are contextualized by the literature as steps to this end and Iranian successes in this regional project.

While ostensibly talking about the "Axis", AEI's Kenneth Pollack still implies that the alliance's most defining feature is their shared Shiitism:

> "[Between 2014 and 2016,] Iran's most important Shi'a allies were all challenged by serious threats that might have doomed them. Across the board, Tehran chose to back them as best it could and went looking for innovative ways to use its relatively weak resources and work within its significant constraints to save various Shi'a allies."[105]

In spite of not using the term "Shiite Crescent", Pollack thus affirms it as a political reality informed by religious undertones and frames it as part of the structural reasons for the 'proxy policy'. In doing so, he harkens back to another common argument I discussed earlier, stating

[104] There are a few notable exceptions in the corpus, such as a discussion of martyrdom being translated from a religious virtue into military doctrine to ostensibly instil the will for personal sacrifice, and some mentions of how Iranian propaganda systematically likens current conflicts to historical precedents from Shia mythology, such as the Battle of Karbala. These debates, however, are generally concerned with how religion informs Iran's political and military practice in detail, not its fundamental decision-making.

[105] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 6.

Iran's doctrine is a product of its inability to compete conventionally in the regional arena. Pletka and Kagan stress Iran's political pragmatism, while implying that the ostensibly Shiite ties created by both Iran with its partners transcend ethnic fault lines: "Shia populations in Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia are disenfranchised. Do they love Persia? Iran doesn't care, providing resources and diplomatic support where needed […]"[106]

By consistently referring to Iran's and its partners' Shiite religion and centering it as an explanatory factor for their political cooperation, such as in the narrative of the "Shiite Crescent", the literature both subscribes to and reproduces the notion of a (growing) sectarian divide in the region. The authors vary in whether they portray Iran's foreign policy as a cause for this or, conversely, the sectarian divide as the central driver for Iran's foreign policy. But they are generally consistent in treating 'Shia sectarianism', as represented in the notion of the "Shiite Crescent", as a crucial formative factor for Iran's foreign policy at large and, consequently, the structure of its network of influence in particular.

Lastly, it is remarkable how commonly and consistently this factor, that Iran and most of its allies are Shia, is mentioned throughout the literature, independently of the topic at hand. Religion is thereby very pervasively injected into the discourse, and possibly inflated in its explanatory value for political phenomena. As an extreme example for this injection, McInnis writes in "Iranian Concepts of Warfare": "Fighting jihad would later become a central concept in the IRGC's strategic thought and approach to warfare, especially in its proxy wars abroad." The only context he provides for this statement is the preceding paragraph, in which he mentions that the term mujahideen has precedent in Persian history up until "the 1970s revolutionary period". [107] How exactly the historical use of the concept of jihad translates into a "central concept" for the IRGC remains unclear. Another salient case is the notion of a "Shiite foreign legion" led by the Quds Force, which authors from several US think tanks have floated, mostly after the Assad regime had restabilized in late 2013.[108] This motif, suggesting hierarchical and structural unity of the actors

[106] Pletka and Kagan, "America vs. Iran," 11
It is possible that the author merely wants to say that the relation is purely pragmatic – but explicitly specifying that the actors are Shia and then using the ethnically connotated term Persia seems to be a purposeful juxtaposition.
[107] McInnis, "Iranian Concepts of Warfare," 11.
[108] The history of the term "foreign legion" in relation to Iran's regional partners is in itself interesting as a discursive dynamic. It appears to originate from an article by Michael Knights, titled "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria", published by the Washington Institute in June 2013. Before this, there are no search results on Google mentioning it. Since then, however, the term has been irregularly but consistently reproduced by other

Iran works with across the region, is represented in the corpus of literature as well: Matthew Levitt, writing for the Washington Institute, states that "Together with other Iranian-backed militias, Hezbollah will continue to head an emerging Shiite foreign legion working both to defend Shiite communities and to expand Iranian influence across the region."[109] Not only does he suggest a homogenous force, a "foreign legion", where in reality there is a complex network of actors with wildly varying degrees of cohesion and adherence to Iranian leadership, but also once again positions 'being Shiite' as the central characteristic of this force. Additionally, his rhetoric ties the narrative of the "foreign legion" back to Iranian expansionist ambitions discussed in section one of this chapter.

However, most examples for the injection of religion into the discourse are much more innocuous and consist of subtle but persistent trends such as placing the attribute "Shia" before "militias" or "proxies" etc. with great regularity, often when the question of the respective organization being dedicatedly Shia or not is in fact irrelevant or even wrong. Examples from both the corpus and the surrounding discourse are numerous, but on their own not worth quoting, since the only commonality relevant here is their indiscriminate use of the term "Shia" (or "Shiite") when discussing various phenomena, actors and structures relating to Iran's network of influence.
In an unusually differentiated counterexample, Pollack briefly mentions in "The Evolution of the Revolution", how, in occupied Iraq in the mid-2000s, "Iran was putting money on every number on the roulette wheel. It put more money on the Shi'a groups than the Sunni, but it wanted to make sure it won no matter whose number came up."[110] However, the ways in which Iran's 'proxy policy' does benefit Sunni and other non-Shia actors remains largely obscured, and the vast majority of sources consistently call the respective actors "Shia militias". Divergences from the usually well entrenched image of Iran leading a coherent band of Shiite forces pitted against Sunnis were exceedingly rare within the corpus of data.

authors both from the WI and other think tanks, as well as very few outside instances. Initially, the term was mostly used regarding Iranian involvement in Syria, but has eventually transcended this context, acquiring the implication that it is a manifest concept in Iranian foreign policy. This development has taken place in a relatively restricted circle of authors and organizations, almost exclusively from security-oriented think tanks, spread over a total of maybe a dozen or two dozen publications. It serves as an interesting case study of a term developing ostensive analytical weight in a game of 'concept ping-pong' between discourse participants from within the same general circle, possibly suggesting an echo chamber.

[109] Levitt, "Waking Up the Neighbors: How Regional Intervention Is Transforming Hezbollah," 3.
[110] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 4.

This narrative practice also obscures the fact that not all Shia automatically support Iran or its purposes in the region. A rare mention of this is John Raine explaining how Iran's pan-Shiitism clashes with a "well-defined Shia Arab nationalism"[111] that is opposed to the idea of a Persian-led pan-Shiitism. Generally, however, and at least partially as a result of the discourse being so focused on Iran as the 'puppet-master' of its network of influence, differentiated views on the organizations and populations with which Iran cooperates often fall by the wayside and their exact motives and agendas remain undiscussed.

The core elements of this narrative strand therefore appear to be: A) That there is an essential bond between Iran and other Shiites in the Near and Middle East that is a direct result of their common religion and in which Iran is the leading partner; B) That 'being Shiite' naturally puts these actors politically at odds with Sunni interests; and C) That Shiite religious beliefs and doctrine directly inform Iranian foreign policy by dictating whom to support and informing why to support them. Firas Elias, writing for the WI, perfectly exemplifies the relation between these factors and the Iranian 'proxy policy':

> "It is sufficient to point out that the Iranian constitution constructs the Iranian army and Revolutionary Guard on this sectarian foundation. These forces are not only responsible for protecting and guarding borders, but also for carrying the 'burdens of its divine mission': jihad for the sake of God, expanding the rule of divine law, and the ideology of vilayet-e faqih."[112]

Connecting the theme of intrinsic Shiite religiosity with even more of the narratives I already discussed, he precedes this by saying:

> "Khomeini established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to become the 'long arm' of Iran in the region. The aim was to transform Iran's postrevolutionary military doctrine into a doctrine of revolutionary enthusiasm, 'Islamic' principles, and Shia ideology – allowing Iran to recruit volunteers fighting in the name of jihad."[113]

[111] Raine, "Iran, Its Partners, and the Balance of Effective Force," 3.
[112] Firas Elias, "Iranian Military Doctrine," Policy Analysis / Fikra Forum (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017), 2.
[113] Elias, "Iranian Military Doctrine," 2.

Therein he picks up the motifs of political expansionism, "Khomeinism", *velayat-e faqih* and "exporting the revolution", paints them as crucially informed by Iran's state religion and relates them as formative or at least explanatory for the activities of the IRGC, which in this context logically entail the mission of the Quds Force. I want to reiterate, however, that authors drawing explicit connections between Iranian religiosity and its network-of-influence policy in such a fashion is the lesser of two drivers behind the core narrative of Iran militarizing Shiitism. The subtle, pervasive injection of Shiite religiosity as an explanatory factor for other phenomena within the hegemonial discourse, which I have discussed above, is the much more influential discursive mechanism of the two. Even when no explicit argument is made for how religiosity might inform Iranian policy, almost every single text in the corpus reproduces this pervasive presumption of religion playing a significant role by consistently mentioning the Shiite nature of the network.

5.3 The Iran-Gulf-Rivalry

The third among the most prominent and most regularly recurring narratives within the hegemonial discourse surrounding Iran's 'proxy policy' revolves around the notion that Iran's foreign policy at large is crucially informed by a gradually intensifying "rivalry" with the Arab Gulf States in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular.[114] Once again, this section overlaps with the preceding ones on Iran's 'forward defense' mentality and on sectarianism and thus requires some clarification. Both of the latter issues naturally intersect in almost all analyses of Iran's differences with the Gulf-States from a power political perspective. Especially the tendency to invest religious factors with explanatory value for conflict in the Middle East, which we have discussed in the last chapter, also applies to the "rivalry" and is often cited as an explanatory factor for it. The difference lies in the causal relation the authors assume, and whether they see sectarianism as a driver for political rivalry or, conversely, the competition for political power as causal for the exacerbation of sectarian tensions. Writing for the WI, Matthew Levitt's stance serves as an illustration: "In

[114] In fact, considering terminology, the literature almost exclusively speaks of a "Saudi-Iranian rivalry". This is most likely an effect of Saudi Arabia being in an exposed role, particularly regarding Yemen, but also diplomatically in the Gulf Cooperation Council and regarding other issues such as the seaborne oil flow through the Gulf of Oman and the Bab el-Mandeb. However, most of the constituent arguments making up the concept of the "regional rivalry" also apply significantly to at least the United Arab Emirates, if not all the Gulf-States. In a few instances, a lean toward more ethnicity-based interpretation of regional fault lines even logically includes other Arab nations such as Jordan and Egypt. I therefore generally refer to the issue as the "regional rivalry" or the "Iran-Gulf rivalry" when I am not directly referencing the literature.

Syria and elsewhere, deadly proxy conflicts – between Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states, on the one hand, and Iran on the other – have been complicated by the dangerous overlay of sectarianism."[115] While he discusses the sectarian divide as a component of the "rivalry", he frames it as subordinate to what he characterizes as the primary source of conflict. In the same way that the mere mention of the sectarian divide between Saudi-Arabia and Iran serves as all the explanation necessary for Iran's involvement in Yemen to some sources, to others the mere notion of "bleeding the Saudis", without any mention of sectarianism, is enough to justify that involvement. Reminiscent of the block-mentality of the Cold War, in which the suspicion of growing influence of the opposing superpower in a third country was enough to justify the other's manifest involvement to counteract that influence, many texts discussing Iran's network of influence refer to a very similar logic to explain their reasoning. Another factor setting this narrative line apart from those that focus on sectarian conflict is that it more prominently features ethnicity as an explanatory factor, insinuating that the 'Arab World' is naturally defiant to what they perceive to be a "Persian" ambition of dominance, expressed in Iranian support for local Shiites. Geographically, the arguments often refer to Yemen as the locale where the "rivalry" is most visible and openly escalating into (armed) conflict. While possibly less influential and prominent as an explanatory motif than the preceding narratives, which relate more to Iran's nature as a state than power political calculus, this idea of a "Saudi-Iranian rivalry" is nonetheless an equally axiomatic and discursively important factor. This section discusses its application in the discourse, focusing on the many instances in which it is referenced as the most, or one of the most central explanatory factors for the existence and shape of Iran's proxy policy and network of influence.

To begin with an encompassing example, Farideh Farhi exemplifies the underlying logic of this narrative, writing for the CSIS:

> "Although the Saudis have sought to roll back Iran's influence in Syria and Lebanon, Iran has stood its ground; nor has it significantly entangled itself in Saudi Arabia's ill-fated operation in Yemen, despite charges to the contrary. Yemen has never held a vital position in Iran's national security calculations. In any case, Iran knows it cannot have the same level

[115] Levitt, "Waking Up the Neighbors: How Regional Intervention Is Transforming Hezbollah," 3.

> of influence in Yemen as it does in Iraq and Syria. As a result, 'Iran is happily putting minimal effort into Yemen to project power and poke Saudi Arabia at a minimal cost.'"[116]

It is noteworthy how "poking" Saudi Arabia, framed by rhetoric and terminology from a neorealist/geopolitics vocabulary, appears in this statement as a reason unto itself for justifying Iranian involvement. Like most authors writing on this issue in the corpus, Farhi does not elaborate further, how exactly this "poking" – others speak of "bleeding" Saudi-Arabia – benefits Iran's ostensible "national security calculations". Discursively, it is treated as a given that readers will understand and subscribe to the consensus that "bleeding" their opponent's resources is sufficient reason for a state to engage in a proxy conflict.

McInnis, in "America vs. Iran", provides another poignant and representative example, insinuating that the Islamic Republic's fundamental *raison d'état* 'naturally' puts it at odd with the Gulf States:

> "[…] Tehran's foreign policy incorporates sustained opposition to the United States, the West in general, Israel, and the rival Sunni Muslim powers, all of whom the Islamic Republic perceives as the primary political obstacles to its great national and international projects since 1979."[117]

He also introduces another element to the core narrative, introducing what the literature often calls the Gulf State's "Western allies". This line of argument constructs an image of the Gulf States and Iran's other opponents on the international stage as part of a politically cohesive sphere. This is based primarily in their political proximity to the US. Recently, this notion has arguably gained further traction due to significant signs of rapprochement between the Arab (Gulf) States and Israel. In any case, the logical geopolitical frame that sets this core narrative apart also seems to result in the analytical collusion of extending the "rivalry" from "Iran vs. Saudi Arabia" to "Iran vs. the Gulf States" to "Iran vs. the Gulf States, Israel, the US" and even "the West in general", conjuring up a 20th Century Cold War-like block or alliance mentality.

The question of primary responsibility for the smoldering conflict is varyingly addressed in the corpus, with a surprising number of authors seeming to lean towards characterizing Iran as merely responding to Gulf State pressures. In "The Evolution of the Revolution", Pollack discusses this,

[116] Farhi, "Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals," 5.
[117] McInnis, "Introduction: Looking at Soft-Power Competitive Strategies for Iran," 5.

and also once again picks up the point of sectarian conflict being a byproduct of the political rivalry:

> "Moreover, Sunni-Shi'a tensions were greatly exacerbated by a budding Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In this, the Saudis liked to play up the religious aspects because it was useful to them as the champion of 1.2 billion Sunni Muslims against barely 200 million Shi'a. However, it was arguably driven more by the fiercer Arab-Persian schism, with a layer of traditional great-power rivalry on top. The more the Saudis opposed Iran, demanded the Middle East choose a side, and treated Shi'a groups and governments as inevitable allies of Iran, the more they drove otherwise ambivalent Shi'a into the Iranian camp."[118]

Similarly, he attests that Iran's deepening support for the Houthis in Yemen was "triggered" as a reaction to Gulf State transgressions as well, additionally reproducing the Cold War logic discussed above: "The Saudi-Emirati intervention triggered a deepening of Iranian support to the Houthis. Tehran's motive is not entirely clear: Iran may have seen Yemen as a low-cost way to bleed the Saudis and Emiratis by bogging them down in a painful, fruitless conflict."[119]
Interestingly, this is also the only instance I encountered in the corpus that explicitly mentions that "Tehran's motive [for their involvement in Yemen] is not entirely clear" and the "low-cost way to bleed the Saudis" interpretation is based on speculation – though Pollack then also reproduces it.

In summary: In an interplay of constantly varying hybridizations with the other core narratives, sometimes more, sometimes less present, authors regularly tap into the neorealist interpretation of "regional rivalry" in order to explain Iran's proxy activity. This approach appears to be crucially informed by an application of a Cold War-esque logic of influence and counterinfluence to the tense relation between Iran and the Gulf States. This approach is additionally strengthened by its analytical synergy with the narrative of the sectarian fault line, with which it is closely intertwined. The greater the weight given to the sectarian divide, the more sense the rivalry seems to make – and the more accepted the existence of a naturalized rivalry between Iran and the Gulf States becomes, the more instrumental a mobilization of sectarian differences appears.

[118] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 5.
[119] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 6.

5.4 The Quds Force as the Primary Executor of the 'Proxy Policy'

120

Flag of the Quds Force, displaying the IRGC emblem above the designation "Sepah-e Qods", the "Jerusalem Force". Source: Wikipedia.org

In the wider discourse on Iran's network of influence, its partners in the region, and strategies of power-projection, a special narrative role falls to the IRGC Quds Force. It is made out to be the principal executor of Iran's 'proxy policy', sometimes its entire "foreign policy".[121] The literature collectively places it at the ominous center of the network of influence, with supposed puppet master Qassem Soleimani pulling region-wide strings. Calling Soleimani "Iran's most important intelligence and security official", a report by the IISS states that he "turned the [Quds] force into Iran's main instrument of influence in the region, compensating for the limitations of Iran's conventional military by coordinating a network of largely Shia militia partners that also plays a significant role in regional politics."[122] Many statements in the data mirror this narrative centrality of the 'proxy policy', which they characterize as the central mechanism by which the QF exerts

[120] SpinnerLaserz, "Flag of the Quds Force," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Quds_Force.svg, accessed July 3, 2021.
[121] See: Pletka and Kagan, "America vs. Iran," 5
This quote is representative of a regularly occurring overlap in terminology between "the IRGC" at large and "the Quds Force" in particular. The authors speak of "the IRGC", not the Quds Force, being "the principal executor of Iranian foreign policy [in] the Levant and Iraq [and leading] efforts to build political and armed proxy groups". However, given the entrenched consensus that the QF is the "wing" of the IRGC tasked with "operations abroad", and that claims such as these would make little sense if read with regard to the IRGC in its entirety, I assume this and other similar statements to apply to the Quds Force.
[122] "The Soleimani Killing's Regional Implications," Strategic Comments 26:2 (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020), 1.

Iranian influence. When referring to the QFs role of coordinating such "militia partners" in Iraq and Syria, AEI's Kenneth Pollack says that "Soleimani's improvisations [as acting head of the QF] have created a doctrine that did not exist previously and was probably never envisioned beforehand. Now that it exists, it is a playbook [for] the Iranians",[123] thereby both stressing Soleimani's personal importance and also reaffirming the underlying idea that a coherent political intent is at work, referring to the notion of a 'proxy policy' as a "playbook". An IISS report, stating "the mission of the Quds Force […] is to use intelligence and special-forces units to support primarily Shia militias across the Middle East",[124] suggests in its definitive wording that the implementation of this policy is the only – or at least by far the most important task – of the organization.[125]

These statements collectively represent another piece in the wider narrative logic permeating the literature: While the core narratives I discussed above ostensibly present the most prominent reasons for Iran's implementation of its network of influence, these reasons are the projected onto the Quds Force as both the primary executor of the resulting policies and, especially in the person of Soleimani, as a formative force behind them. Tony Duheaume, writing for Al-Arabiya, summarizes these strands in almost quintessential form, using habitually matter-of-fact language: "The Quds Force (QF) is the most secretive unit within the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, tasked with the export of the Iranian regime's own unique brand of Islamic revolution and fundamentalism, which it spreads through its proxies across the globe."[126]

This prominence of the Quds Force in the literature is remarkable and seems counterintuitive because the QF is, as Duheaume mentions as well, clandestine by its very nature, sharing significant operational characteristics with foreign intelligence services, and there is comparatively little publicly available information on its activities. Consequently, there is no consensus, either in the corpus or the wider discourse, even on basic data points such as the organization's founding.

[123] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 7–8.
[124] Fraioli, "The Soleimani Killing's Regional Implications," 1.
[125] Not only does this quote stress the centrality of the 'proxy policy' as the *raison d'être* of the QF, but it also represents a common trend among the corpus literature to omit the history of the western discourse surrounding the QF, which, particularly in the late 1980's and throughout the 1990's, discussed the QF almost exclusively in the context of assassinations and terrorist attacks, such as the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. The discourse since 2013, however, is missing this element almost completely.
[126] Tony Duheaume, "Quds Force' Extensive Record of Assassinations, Bombings," 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2017/10/20/Quds-Force-Extensive-Record-of-Assassinations-Bombings, accessed March 10, 2021.

The one concrete hint on this I have encountered in the corpus states: "In 1983, at the height of the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Tehran formed the Ramadan HQ, predecessor of the current QF."[127] Other sources nonchalantly speculate, sometimes wildly incorrectly, like ISW's Kimberley Kagan, who writes: "Ayatollah Khomeini established the Qods Force in 1979 […]".[128] Neither did the QF exist in 1979, nor was it "established" by Khomeini himself when it was eventually created in its current form. Most authors, however, content themselves with reproducing a vague estimate for a founding date, usually "in the early 1980s". As a sidenote, the Wikipedia entry on the QF is interesting in this regard. It states:

> "The predecessor of the Quds Force, known as 'Department 900', was created during the Iran-Iraq War as a special intelligence unit, while the IRGC was allegedly active abroad in Afghanistan before the war. The department was later merged into 'Special External Operations Department'. [sic] After the war in 1988, the IRGC was reorganized and the Quds Force was established as an independent service branch. It has the mission of liberating 'Muslim land'",

once again citing Nader Uskowi's book *Temperature Rising*, the striking inaccuracies of which I discuss in greater detail later on. The Wikipedia authors, however, in turn rephrased Uskowi's material, making it sound more concrete. In the book, Uskowi does not give a specific year, as the rephrasing makes it sound, saying only: "[…] in the postwar reorganization of the IRGC, extraterritorial operations and the associated components – recruiting, training, intelligence, and logistics related to operations abroad – became parts of an independent branch, known as the Quds Force."[129] He also does not, in turn, provide any sources for this information. This interaction is exemplary for the 'telephone' effect often observable between sources, especially concerning information being translated between different types of text and source. The instances of this usually stop short of being factually incorrect on their own, but by modifying, framing and presenting statements in specific ways, the resulting information eventually becomes vague, misleading or false. It can be communicated to the reader 'as fact' that the QF was founded by

---

[127] Farzin Nadimi, "Iran Appoints Seasoned Qods Force Operative as Ambassador to Iraq," Policy Analysis / Policy Alert (2017), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/3096/en, 2

[128] Kimberley Kagan, "Iran's Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government," Iraq Report (2007), 4; Kagan, "Iran's Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government," 4
She confuses the QF with the IRGC, which was indeed founded in May 1979. The QF however did not exist for at least a few years. She is the founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War.

[129] Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, Section: "The Quds Force as an independent Force".

Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, in the early 1980s (implying the QF was active during the Iran-Iraq War), in 1988 (implying it was not) or any number of a handful of contradictory variants, depending on which text they happen to read. While this might be an extraordinarily egregious example, this observation still seems to suggest a significant and perhaps surprising degree of unreliability in the expert knowledge on the matter.

Similarly, another point of contention among the sources regards exactly what type of organization the QF is. Authors often resort to strikingly vague terminology such as the "elite clandestine wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), responsible primarily for its foreign operations [...] centered on organizing, supporting, and at times leading local forces abroad […]"[130] The central elements of this passage, marking the QF as "elite", "clandestine" and tasked with "foreign operations" are widely encountered and reproduced both in the wider discourse and in the corpus. Two other common attributes are that the QF is called a "paramilitary" organization or, more common in the security sector, one akin to "special forces": In a CSIS Brief from October 2018, Brian Katz says that "Iran's operational approach is paramilitary, deploying the Qods Force (QF) – the special forces arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) – to train, advise, and enable local actors."[131] In this specific instance, the two characterizations even appear in conjuncture, despite them being contradictory by definition. Statements such as these, concerned with the QF as an entity, largely appear as conjecture and almost never go into further detail on organizational specifics. For instance, I have not encountered a single text that elaborated in any way on what makes the QF "elite", even though the term is widely used when referring to it. Seth Jones, also writing for the CSIS, provides one of the exceedingly rare instances in which organizational, in this case structural, details are discussed: "The IRGC-QF includes sections devoted to specific countries and regions, such as the Ramazan Corps (Iraq), Levant Corps (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel), Rasulallah Corps (Arabian Peninsula), and Ansar Corps (Afghanistan)"[132], also referring to Uskowi's *Temperature Rising*, who, again, does not provide a source. Both authors also fail to elaborate on what this structure implies or means in practice, aside from a geographical division of tasks.

[130] Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, "Quds Force."
[131] Brian Katz, "Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy & Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East," CSIS Briefs (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), 3.
[132] Jones, "War by Proxy," 2.

It is possible that one of the reasons as to why the QF as an actor managed to capture public interest and expert attention alike, despite the fact that so little reliable information on it is in circulation, lies in the person of Qassem Soleimani, providing a 'human face' to – and often narratively personifying – the QF and Iran's 'proxy policy' in a narrative arc spanning from 2013 to his death in 2020. In the wake of a widely received article in The New Yorker, titled "The Shadow Commander",[133] published in September 2013, Soleimani was discursively elevated to the position of the "principal architect"[134] of Iran's 'proxy policy'. This growing narrative, that attributed an unrealistic degree of importance to Soleimani's person, culminated in Donald Trump justifying his likely illegal killing by stating that Soleimani was "directly and indirectly responsible for the deaths of millions of people",[135] implying that killing him might stop or cripple Iran's activities abroad. The corpus reflects this tendency of depicting Soleimani as a singularly formative actor. For example, Kenneth Pollack writes for the AEI: "Before he died, Soleimani figured out the solution to Iran's problems circa 2014, devised its new doctrine for 'grey zone' or 'hybrid' warfare, taught it to the Quds Force and other members of the Axis of Resistance, and demonstrated how to make it work."[136] This general line of thinking has, since 2013, inextricably linked the discussion of the Iranian network of influence to Soleimani even more so than to the QF. This is probably because his personal politics, widely publicized for propaganda purposes in Iran and abroad, offered more tangible points of reference than the QF as an organization, as well as personalizing the story.

I explained earlier how the hegemonial discourse attributes a dual revolutionary role to the IRGC – it is cast as both the armed guardian of the revolution at home and its exporter abroad. The QF organizationally represents the latter aspect of this duality. However, while it is consistently touted as an essentially revolutionary actor, both in their objectives and their organizational 'DNA', the IRGC really has arguably become in its function more of a guardian of the status quo. Many authors remark on how "the IRGC controls between 20 to 40 per cent of Iran's gross domestic

[133] Filkins, "The Shadow Commander."
[134] Ali Soufan, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 10 (2018), https://ctc.usma.edu/qassem-soleimani-irans-unique-regional-strategy/, accessed August 30, 2021.
[135] Lyse Doucet, "Qasem Soleimani: US Kills Top Iranian General in Baghdad Air Strike," 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50979463, accessed March 8, 2021.
[136] Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution," 13.

product".[137] Most central among the many assets they control is the quasi-national construction conglomerate Khatam Al-Anbiya, the acting director of which, Saeed Mohammad, only very recently resigned from his IRGC post in order to run for president.[138] It seems contradictory to repeatedly stress how the IRGC profits from the current configuration of power in Iran, while, often in the same text, deriving its ostensible motivations from its revolutionary nature.

5.4.1 Growing Integration of Quds Force and IRGC Ground Forces

There is a side issue that bears brief discussion, relating to a trend which has been brought up more recently and hints to changes affecting the role of the QF as the vast majority of the literature posits it. Beginning in 2020, some authors began to argue that a higher degree of integration of both the IRGC ground forces (IRGC-GF) and the regular army, *Artesh,* into Iran's regional power projection efforts evince a reform the QF proxy model. In the corpus, this notion is primarily represented in a brief by Paul Bucala and Frederick Kagan, writing for the AEI's Critical Threats Project: "It is clear," they say, "that Western analysts must begin to rethink decades-old assessments of Iran's commitment to relying on the Qods Force and proxies to fight its battles abroad. We must open our minds to the possibility that post-sanctions Iran intends to become a significant regional military actor."[139] They argue that Tehran is aiming to use the existing network of influence as a foothold for growing application of their conventional forces, based on deployments of IRGC-GF and *Artesh* forces in Syria and Iraq, operating either independently or in conjunction with the QF or allied militias. While this can be read as relativizing the importance of the QF, this new narrative could also potentially act as a way to continue to portray Iran as a regional threat in a time where the QF is possibly diminishing in efficacy.

[137] Kasra Aarabi, "Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, https://institute.global/policy/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps, accessed July 26, 2021.
[138] Al Arabiya, "Saeed Mohammad, Head of IRGC's Biggest Commercial Enterprise, Runs for President," March 2021, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/03/08/Iran-military-Saeed-Mohammad-head-of-IRGC-s-biggest-commercial-enterprise-runs-for-president, accessed August 30, 2021.
[139] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 2.

[140]

A unit of, according to the source, Iranian army regulars in Syria. If true, the absence of insignia is noteworthy, serving to obscure such deployments and retain plausible deniability. Source: facebook.com/persian.war.news

In summary, it remains to reiterate that the body of solid, verifiable information on the QF's actual role in the region is surprisingly limited, in spite of it being an explanatory staple in the hegemonial discourse, narratively serving as the network's nexus and the system's primary executor. The role that is attributed to the QF and Soleimani in the discourse might be suggested by the material the discourse draws from, but it is in no way compellingly demonstrated. Ultimately, although discursively treated as common knowledge, the QF remains an obscure actor both concerning its organizational history and its current activity. This obscurity leaves spaces to be filled with speculation, interpretation, and projection, necessarily informed by the presumptions, convictions and agendas of the observer. As such, the literature variably finds the QF to personify most of the

[140] Unknown, "[No Title]," facebook/persian.war.news, https://www.facebook.com/persian.war.news/photos/1718522031738360, accessed July 7, 2021.

aspects of the wider explanatory logic I have discussed so far. It can flexibly play the narrative role of the exporter of the revolution, the organizational expression of Iran's defensive necessities, the spearhead of religious irredentism aimed at 'recapturing' Jerusalem from the Zionists and so forth. Owing to the information vacuum surrounding the force the line between such narrative interpretation and factual history is often impossible to reliably determine.

5.5 The 'Proxy Policy'

[141]

Gen. Hajizadeh speaks at a stand displaying Qassem Soleimani. Behind him the flags of Iran, the IRGC and some of its "proxies". Source: ArabNews.com

In the conceptualization of this thesis and early explorative reading, what guided my interest and line of inquiry was the impression that a coherent Iranian 'proxy policy' existed, encompassing and connecting Iranian involvement in Syria with that in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and other instances. Over the course of my reading, however, it gradually became clear that this idea of a coherent policy regarding Iran's network of influence was not a well-documented reality, as first impressions might have suggested. There was, in fact, no trace of documented political processes anywhere within the leadership or decision-making structure in Tehran, official government sources or legislative documents that could be clearly pointed to proving there was in fact such an overarching policy in place. I therefore began to question how, in spite of this absence,

[141] Arab News, "Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh in Front of a Range of Iranian Proxy Flags Alongside Official Iranian Flags on State TV." Arab News, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1615711, accessed July 3, 2021.

I had come to the impression that such a policy was at least a well-accepted fact among the sources I had been consulting. It turned out that what I had initially assumed to be a quite clear-cut 'proxy policy' proved to be a surprisingly elusive discursive phantom, born from the hegemonial discourse my impressions had stemmed from, perpetuated by specific discursive mechanisms, choice of terminology, and framing, as well as consistent reference to a set of specific assumptions about Iran's foreign policy.

These factors are most readily apparent in the literature's use of the term "proxy" when describing Iran's partners and strategy in the region, which serves a crucial discursive role. The literature applies it to actors as diverse as Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, the PMF militias in Iraq, the pro-government NDF militias in Syria and sometimes the Assad regime itself. The relationships between these parties and Iran are equally diverse and vary wildly in their concrete nature. Hezbollah, for instance, while springing from specifically Lebanese historical experiences, was funded by Iran from the very beginning, has maintained a close relationship and communications with Tehran for decades, publicly recognizes itself as the subordinate party in this relationship and adheres to the principle of *velayat-e faqih*. Contrary to this, the Yemeni Houthis politicized and militarized autonomously and independently from Iran only fairly recently, follow their own national agenda, and Iran's support for them appears to be opportunistic, pragmatic, plausibly deniable and non-committing. Also, they do not recognize *velayat-e faqih*. The NDF and PMF umbrellas, as well as other militias in Syria and Iraq that Iran supports, are pluralistic networks of highly varied actors with agendas of their own and in complex relations to one another, Tehran, their respective national governments, and so on. The degree of control Iran is able to exert over them varies as well, and also remains largely unclear. However, only very few texts make any effort to account for this variation in their use of terminology, instead usually calling all of them "proxies". In one instance, AEI authors Bucala and Kagan go as far as to add that "[the QF's 'loose management'] approach allows the "proxies" to establish themselves as credibly indigenous organizations,"[142] implying that they are not in fact indigenous to their

[142] Bucala and Kagan, "Iran's Evolving Way of War," 10.

respective political contexts, but a fully Iranian product, which is an absurd claim regarding most of Iran's partners.[143]

To reproduce here in full the examples for this general pattern of description from the hundreds of instances in the corpus alone would offer little additional insight, as the only relevant factor in this context is that the term "proxy" is used self-evidently and affirmatively,[144] as well as seemingly without much semantic value beyond a vague notion of control or superior political weight. As an example, Pletka and Kagan write: "The IRGC leads efforts to build political and armed proxy groups to expand Iran's reach and build a resistance to the West and Israel."[145] Similar examples are abundant.

In other instances, which use different terminology than "proxy", it seems applied almost at random or for shock value, for instance when WI's Hassan Mneimneh describes the partners as "vassals" of a "Fourth Persian Empire".[146] Almost never does it seem necessary to the authors to analytically justify their choice of terminology, usually "proxy", which indicates a perceived consensus on the semantic contents of the term. The only author in the corpus explicitly discussing the terms' applicability is CSIS' Brian Katz, who differentiates that "affiliated groups operate along a dynamic spectrum with Iran from ally to proxy – determined by the groups' capabilities, history, and influence with Iran"[147] and that "analyzing Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as Iranian 'proxy wars' is incomplete at best."[148]

Generally speaking, authors appear to be using the term "proxy" with an inherent reference to its history of use from the Cold War era, suggesting an analogy between Tehran's relationships to its partners and the relationship between Washington and Moscow to their respective non-state armed "proxy" actors throughout the world during the Cold War. This is in line with the fact that some authors also occasionally call the conflict between Iran and the Gulf States a "cold war." While the situation may be analogous in some instances, the implication that they would apply to all the actors termed "proxy" by the corpus of literature is incorrect.

---

[143] Possibly excepting a few organizations such as the Liwa Zainabiyoun and Fatemiyoun, who appear to be 'purpose-built' by Iran and set up in a way that has the benefit of appearing "indigenous".
[144] Pletka and Kagan, "America vs. Iran," 5.
[145] For instance: Matthew McInnis calling "Lebanon" an "increasingly important Iranian proxy […]" in Pletka and Kagan, "America vs. Iran," 11.
[146] Mneimneh, "The Decline (and Fall?) of the "Fourth Persian Empire"," 2.
[147] Katz, "Axis Rising," 1.
[148] Katz, "Axis Rising," 8.

In general, the term is used in a consistently vague fashion that invokes a greater degree of Iranian control over their partners, of greater political cohesion between them and of a more unified power political intent than is necessarily the case. While some sources occasionally describe Iran's support for regional actors as opportunistic, contradicting the idea of a coherent 'proxy policy', even those texts then often reproduce the notion of cohesion by their choice of terminology and adherence to the same underlying presumptions of Iranian intentions and strategy.

This discrepant use of terminology regarding the relationships between Iran and its partner organizations appears to be an expression of a lack of theoretical consensus in conceptualizing these relationships. As mentioned above, the literature I use as data most commonly refers to them as Iranian "proxies", but generally differs in its choice of terminology when characterizing the nature of the relationships further, if they elect to do so at all. "Proxies", "surrogates" "partners", "allies" and other, more incendiary terms such as "vassals" are used frequently and largely interchangeably. The definitory value the terms carry, such as a form of (contractual) obligation in the case of "alliance" or equal standing in the case of "partner" etc., seem to be largely ignored by the authors, and their choice of terminology is usually not discussed or justified. I came across only a handful of works addressing this question of terminology at all, and not a single one in the corpus. By far the most detailed among these, the approximately 200 page IISS "strategic dossier" on "Iran's Network of Influence in the Middle East" attempts a clarification, categorizing relations as either "partner", "strategic ally", "ideological ally" or "proxy" (as well as "state organ") and attribute discriminatory aspects to each.[149] This hints at the complexity of the political reality, in which the relations between Iran and its associates defy being analyzed under just one catch-all term due to their varying nature.

Despite its widespread use, I would therefore argue that "proxy" is at best an inaccurate descriptor in the context of Iranian foreign policy. From a theoretical standpoint, "proxy" is a distinctly underdetermined concept and there is no readily available body of academic literature on the issue, even though common usage of the term goes as far back as the height of the Cold War, where it was at its most relevant. More recently, after the emergence of the debate on "New Wars" in the 1990s, the question of proxy relationships has neither significantly advanced nor coalesced into a

[149] The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 1st ed., Strategic Dossiers (London: Routledge, 2019), https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier, 9

coherent theory. A few authors, first and foremost Geraint Hughes at King's College and Andrew Mumford at the University of Nottingham, have, in recent years, published a string of works attempting to reinvigorate the concept as an analytical frame for 21st century asymmetrical conflicts. US Army Major Amos Fox, working for various military academic institutions, also published a string of essays titled "In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare",[150] but it remains a contested concept without an established definition. For this thesis – which does not aim to analyze Iran's relations to its partners as phenomena, but instead the way the hegemonial discourse narratively constructs these relations – the important observation at the theoretical level is that the literature is discrepant, and doesn't refer to an established theoretical background in its choice of terminology. Instead, it seems to presume a certain consensus on some basic contents of the term, most centrally the element of control Tehran has over its ostensible "proxies", and works largely via an "instinctive" choice of terminology based on 'common sense'.

For this thesis, I chose to use "proxy" in quotation marks whenever I refer to positions in the corpus, and to use the more neutral and less clearly defined "partners", or, wherever possible, "relations", all without quotation marks, when referring to the phenomenon itself. Also, I adopted the use of "network of influence" from the IISS paper mentioned above because it strikes a balance between value-neutral and accurately descriptive. Calling Iran's relations with its partners and their relations among each other, such as between Hezbollah and the Syrian NDF groups, a "network" communicates an appropriate degree of cohesion and interaction, without implying strict control by or a central role of Tehran – while "influence" is a flexible enough term to account for the variety of forms of relationships within that network.

5.5.1 "Proxies" and the Iran 'Threat-Scape'

Where the other core narratives I discuss here – intrinsic expansionism, revolutionary impetus, religious hostility and so on – provide the audience with the *reasons* to perceive Iran as a threat, the dynamic I just explained serves to increase the perceived *severity* of that threat. The uniform application of the term "proxy", by way of its semantic implications of purposeful control, creates

[150] See: Amos C. Fox, "In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare" (The Institute of Land Warfare at the Association of the United States Army, 2019), https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-123-In-Pursuit-of-a-General-Theory-of-Proxy-Warfare.pdf.

a collective image of the Islamic Republic as a sinister spider at the center of a web of puppets ready to do Tehran's bidding. There is bound to be a significant difference in audience perception of the image of an Iran that has reciprocal, uneasy and complicated relations to a wide variety of actors with their own agendas, bound in complicated political constellations, and that of Tehran wielding its "proxies" like a sword, constrained only by external opposition. This tendency to heighten the sense of threat emanating from Iran by stressing the cohesion of its network of influence is observable throughout the literature, but is most poignant in a statement by Nader Uskowi, then of the WI, delivered in 2018 as an expert testimony before the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the US House of Representatives. In it, he states:

> "Iran's direct mechanism for supporting and directing terrorist organizations like Lebanese Hezbollah, the Taliban, and countless anti-American Iraqi militias, is a shadowy extraterritorial unit called the Qods Force. Its army of 200,000 organized, trained, armed, and motivated youth poses a significant threat to the American homeland and especially to U.S. forces stationed abroad. The Shia force, popularly known as the Shia militias, is also referred to as the 'Shia Liberation Army.' The SLA is not a ragtag militia force. Its members are recruited by Shia militant groups based on strict military and ideological profiles."[151]

This quote is striking both for reaching the most rarified air of US security policy decision-making, and for being both utterly incorrect and purposefully misleading. The term "Shia Liberation Army", which forms the centerpiece of this congressional testimony and is also a central premise Uskowi repeats in his more recent book, *Temperature Rising*, goes back to a 2016 interview with retired IRGC Brigadier General Ali Falaki, given to the website Mashriq News in Farsi. In it, speaking in no official capacity, Falaki claimed that Iran has created a "Shia Liberation Army", but gave almost no further information whatsoever on the organization, its size, purpose, or any other details or technicalities concerning it. There had not been any mention of this before the interview, and between 2016 and now, April 2021, no single other source has emerged to corroborate that anything even remotely resembling the organization Falaki announced and

[151] Nader Uskowi, "Examining Iran's Global Terrorism Network" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018), 1.

Uskowi, to this day, claims is active, ever materialized.[152] Not a single instance of this news item online, including those from high profile outlets like Al Jazeera, have ever given any other source for the information than that exact Mashriq News interview. Al Jazeera even reproduced Mashriq News' amateurish error of calling Falaki the "head" of the IRGC, which was well known to be Mohammad Ali Jafari at the time, which they corrected shortly after.
Undeterred by this discrepancy between his claims and verifiable reality, Uskowi moves past even the notion of "proxies" in emphasizing the threat the Iranian network of influence poses. He explicitly speaks of the QF as a "direct mechanism for supporting and directing" an "army of 200,000" fighters. In the course of both the congressional statement and his book, he takes these remarkable overstatements to even further extremes while providing almost no sources. This example serves to further illustrate the unreliability of expert information on the matter and indicates that that unreliability is, at least in part, the result of compensation by the experts in question for a very thin array of source material by interpreting in accordance with a set of preformulated stances.

When paired with the other narrative elements that collectively make Iran out to be a growing threat, either for US foreign policy interests or sometimes for some higher cause like 'peace in the region', the artificial appearance of cohesion the literature produces by framing the network of influence as concerted "proxies", takes on a secondary function of creating a more threatening overall impression of Iran. In the discourse, framing, choice of terminology, implicit consensuses and unspoken, shared assumptions work together to construct – between the lines – an image of an Iranian 'foreign policy of proxies' that, upon closer inspection, seems quite removed from the reality on the ground. That is not to say that the phenomena discussed do not have their representation in the sociopolitical realities of the region. It is not even to say that the 'proxy policy' does not exist or does not exist in the form the discourse suggests it to have. Nonetheless, it is remarkable, how, within the very clearly delineated discursive space I began to focus on, the notion of a 'proxy policy' had nonetheless obvious and consistent definitory substance, even though authors did not necessarily share the same terminology and were considering a variety of

[152] I can obviously only speak as to publicly available information, and there is a remote possibility Uskowi is partial to some sort of classified intelligence that is indeed confirming the existence of the SLA in some form. However, it seems impossibly unlikely that a 200.000 strong "army", with the threat potential Uskowi suggest it has, operating in the region for at least a few years, would leave not a single shred of evidence online.

phenomena. This was evident primarily in the core narratives I discussed here, to which the literature references and with which it works, no matter what the immediate matter of discussion might be. Texts on disparate phenomena, spread out over a geographical space spanning at least half a dozen states, so consistently share this set of premises that they collectively construct an overarching interpretation of larger political realities, such as Iran's foreign policy, its role in the region, political predispositions, Tehran's reasoning and logic – and ultimately of the way these factors relate back to Iran's national history. In this manner of cyclically reproducing specific interpretations of Iran's political behavior, referencing specific causes and rationales and inferring specific causal relations between them, the literature discursively constructs a hegemonial meta-narrative of Iran's role in the region that moves far beyond the particular phenomena every brief or report on its own might be discussing.

In the case of the rumored "SLA", this process transformed Falaki's interview, which appears not to have been much more than a tactical piece of propaganda of little consequence, into a key piece of expert testimony informing the highest circles of US foreign policy of the dangers of a coherent, highly capable, 200,000 strong army of religious and ideological radicals – a force which does not exist. This example is the most stunning instance of the general risks of miscommunication that are consistently present in the hegemonial discourse. Very limited original information (in this case a single, short interview lacking any context or corroboration) is transformed through reproduction by an apparatus of 'experts' and ends up appearing as reliable information to end users as influential as the Al Jazeera newsroom or US Congress decision-makers. When viewed relative to the entire discourse surrounding Iran's network of influence, the outcome of this problematic flow of information is the creation of a comprehensive 'Iran threat-scape', in which the line between reliable, factual information and information that is rendered inaccurate or false through a politically and ideologically charged system of expert translation and interpretation becomes irrevocably blurred. Did the Homeland Security Subcommittee believe, in mid-2018, that Tehran had the formidable "SLA" ready to be brought to bear against US forces in Iraq or Syria? And if this particularly outrageous piece of misinformation got recognized as such, do they and their peers perhaps believe that the NDF, the PMU and the Houthis are Iranian "proxies", with all the Cold War subtext that term entails? That the *Liwa Zainabiyoun* and the *Liwa Fatemiyoun* are on the cusp of flowing back into Afghanistan and Pakistan, sparking militant Shiite dissent? That

the “Shiite Crescent” or the “Axis of Resistance” loom large over the region, requiring (forceful) counterbalancing? The possible implications are distressing.

VI. The Hegemonial Discourse Dispositif

The discourse analysis I conducted in this paper, while illuminating as to the content which the discourse communicates, consequently leaves the reader with a second, pressing question: How is it possible that a body of ‘experts’, trusted enough to directly appeal to members of the US Congress in matters of foreign policy, can proliferate misinformation that is sometimes completely factually incorrect, regularly highly misleading – and almost always viciously antagonistic towards Iran?

It is well beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to answer this question, but the observations I have made do suggest some structural factors in the discourse dispositif that are conducive to the warping of information by the system of experts – such as extensive cross-quotation, close personal overlap between institutions and intimate ties to political decision-makers. Additionally, my findings appear to be consistent with the very few inquiries that specifically investigated the practice of expert knowledge production among Washington think tanks, which attest that the process is not primarily aimed at supplying unbiased, comprehensive information to the political apparatus, but rather first and foremost at serving other interests. While I cannot conduct a comprehensive dispositif analysis here, which would be necessary to understand the structural factors influencing the hegemonial discourse, I at least briefly summarize what hints the discourse analysis could provide – and refer to other authors’ work on the matter specifically, which provides far greater insights into the dispositif than I could at this point.

6.1 Cross-Quotation, Dissemination, and the Expert Echo Chamber

While the example of Falaki, Uskowi and the phantom “Shia Liberation Army” is an extreme one, the general dynamic is representative for the wider discourse on Iran’s “proxies” and its foreign policy at large. The echo chamber effect, which reproduces scarce information from limited sources via a closely knit apparatus of ‘experts’, appears to lead to and be exacerbated by the tendency of authors to cross-quote and draw from each other’s reports. It is not unusual for a single

data point, mentioned originally by an author from, say, the think tanks represented in the data corpus of this work, to reappear in other authors' texts, even within the small corpus size of only 25 items. I have given several examples for this in the preceding chapters. When considering the wider discourse, the effect is even more clearly visible, as the same data point often then appears in many tertiary outlets, such as newspapers and news websites, public debates or statements by politicians. In this context, an example discussed earlier comes to mind, in which Wikipedia quoted and altered information from *Temperature Rising*. Along these lines, in another instance of the telephone game, the fact that a datapoint might originate from only a single, sometimes unreliable source quickly gets lost, in part because it appears that the initial expert authors already tended to present their sources as more reliable than they might be, almost never discussing reliability or corroboration.

There also appear to be perceivable trends governing when exactly a certain issue is debated and how commonly, shared across think tanks, politics and the media, in which it is often unclear who informs whose coverage. In this context I have already discussed the introduction of Qassem Soleimani to the mainstream discourse, in which the coverage of his person and his role in Syria and Iraq catapulted him from obscurity to the discursive center stage in remarkably abrupt fashion. This suggests that the think tank 'experts' are part of the same cyclical distribution of attention shared by politicians and the media, and mutually influence each other's engagement with current issues in ever-changing configurations.

6.2 The Washington Expert System

In 2019, political anthropologist Negar Razavi, who has worked as an insider in this system and conducted an in-depth study on the issue, accurately called the expert-superstructure, of which all the organizations and authors I drew from are a part, "a wider system of knowledge production in Washington – one which has consistently rewarded ungrounded, ideologically driven assessments of the Islamic Republic at the expense of qualified, in-depth, and evidence-based analysis."[153] Writing on the website Jadaliyya for the Arab Studies Institute, she explains that competence is not a relevant criterion for being heard in the system of experts in Washington. Of the "top experts

[153] Negar Razavi, "The Systemic Problem of "Iran Expertise" in Washington," Jadaliyya, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39946/The-Systemic-Problem-of-%E2%80%9CIran-Expertise%E2%80%9D-in-Washington, accessed April 10, 2021, Section: Introduction.

working on Iran for the major DC-based think tanks between 2014 and 2016," she says, only "roughly one-third had PhDs and even fewer had done their dissertations on a topic related to Iran." Similarly, "around half of the Iran experts based at think tanks in DC could not read, write, or speak Persian at the time of my fieldwork. And a similar number had never once stepped foot inside Iran."[154] Instead, Razavi suspects that the "marketplace"-type competition between experts and think tanks, who rely on the flow of funding from government sources, determines whose testimony and advice is being heard:

> "We must first look to the unregulated market-driven forces expanding the 'policy expert industry' in Washington over the past few decades. This 'marketplace of ideas' has allowed a growing number of interest groups and foreign governments to provide unprecedented levels of funding to think tanks and policy research institutions as a means of legitimating their own interests within the establishment. Think tank experts taking money from donors with direct stakes in the outcome of their research are not legally required (or professionally expected) to declare these conflicts of interest even when they present their analysis as politically disinterested and/or 'objective.'"[155]

And she concludes that, specifically on the issue of Iran,

> "these structural factors (i.e., interest-driven funding for think tanks, government devaluation of subject-matter expertise) intersect with Washington's historical and contemporary grievances against Iran – some of which are legitimate, others rooted in deeper forms of paranoia and racism. Add to this, the outsized role of anti-Iranian foreign governments and interest groups in DC and we get an expert landscape on Iran where nuance, complexity, and grounded research continue to be abandoned, at best, and attacked, at worst."[156]

It is relevant to add on this aspect of "interest-driven funding that the clear trend among the institutions I considered for this thesis appears to lean toward conservative financiers with anti-Iranian foreign policy interests. As such, the American Enterprise Institute has received regular, large donations from foundations affiliated with Koch Industries, Exxon Mobil and other large

[154] Razavi, "The Systemic Problem of "Iran Expertise" in Washington," Section: What Kinds of "Iran Experts" Matter in Washington.
[155] Razavi, "The Systemic Problem of "Iran Expertise" in Washington," Section: A Systemic Devaluation of Expertise.
[156] Razavi, "The Systemic Problem of "Iran Expertise" in Washington," Section: A Systemic Devaluation of Expertise.

conservative donor groups.[157] The British IISS's sponsors as an official charity include among their largest donors BAE Systems, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin, as well as NATO and dozens of other weapon system producers and militaries from across the world.[158] The pattern repeats itself with the CSIS, which has large-sum donors such as Northrop Grumman and Saudi Aramco,[159] and the ISW being financed by corporations such as General Dynamics and several private military contractors.[160] At the time of writing, I could not find reliable information on the funding of the Washington Institute, but, according to Mearsheimer and Walt, it "is funded and run by individuals who are deeply committed to advancing Israel's agenda… Many of its personnel are genuine scholars or experienced former officials, but they are hardly neutral observers on most Middle East issues and there is little diversity of views within WINEP's ranks".[161] This appears to be confirmed by the consistency of its positions with the other organizations comprising my corpus. Ultimately, I cannot demonstrate here that the pattern of sponsors behind the organizations in the corpus has any consistent impact on the knowledge production on Iran. However, it seems highly inconsistent to assume that there is no structural connection between the pattern and the organization's output.

Razavi's observations are consistent with the discursive patterns I observed and seem to potentially explain many of them. The consistent portrayal of Iran as a state of inexorable qualities, all of which happen to suggest the Islamic Republic must inevitably be a violent, disruptive political actor in the region, paired with the impetus to heighten the sense of threat emanating from Iran, readily serve to legitimize Washington acting upon its "historical and contemporary grievances against Iran". This raises the question, to what degree the knowledge of a demand for such legitimizing expert knowledge, serving to justify US foreign policy interests, informed the research that forms the hegemonial discourse on Iran's network of influence.

[157] See: https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/American_Enterprise_Institute. Last accessed: 08.08.2021.
[158] See: https://www.iiss.org/governance/funding---membership-sponsorship-and-royalties. Last accessed: 08.07.2021.
[159] See: https://www.csis.org/corporation-and-trade-association-donors. Last accessed: 08.07.2021.
[160] See: http://www.understandingwar.org/our-supporters. Last accessed: 08.07.2021.
[161] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (London: Penguin, 2008), 175.

Razavi's study also suggests that the instances I encountered in Nader Uskowi's and Frederick Kagan's testimonials to Congress subcommittees, in which 'expertise' of dubious quality and ideological predisposition directly informs the decision-making process, are, in fact, symptomatic. She recounts: "One expert – who has never formally studied Iran, does not understand Persian, has never been to the country, nor has any technical expertise on nuclear technology – was called upon five times to testify before Congress as an expert witness on Iran between 2014 and 2015."[162]

In addition to servicing a demand on the Washington idea marketplace, another factor governing discourse participation appears to be the deep-seated personal relations between think tank authors and the political machine. The most prominent instance of this overlap surfacing was a brief (and ultimately inconsequential) media debate in 2012 on the intimate relationship between Frederick and, particularly, Kimberley Kagan and General David Petraeus, former head of ISAF and director of the CIA. The debate revolved around the two "neocon hawks" having undue influence over military affairs, by virtue of their personal connection to Petraeus.[163] Both Kimberley and Frederick Kagan appear repeatedly in the corpus and regularly in the wider debate. She is the president of the ISW, and he is an author for the AEI, describing himself as "one of the intellectual architects of the successful 'surge' strategy in Iraq".[164] While Petraeus has deferred to the Kagans as experts informing his course of action – making them "de facto senior advisers, a status that afforded them numerous private meetings in his office" – they in turn have quoted him as a source, informing or validating their expert analysis of Iranian policy: "General David Petraeus, commander of all Coalition forces in Iraq, has stated that 'the Qods Force [is] an Iranian special operations organization that answers directly to Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.'"[165] This example illustrates the reciprocal relation and cyclical nature of the flow of information between policy-making and the expert body in Washington when it comes to Iran (and other issues).

---

[162] Razavi, "The Systemic Problem of "Iran Expertise" in Washington," Section: What Kinds of "Iran Experts" Matter in Washington.

[163] See, for instance: Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Civilian Analysts Gained Petraeus's Ear While He Was Commander in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post Online*, December 2012, accessed August 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/civilian-analysts-gained-petraeuss-ear-while-he-was-commander-in-afghanistan/2012/12/18/290c0b50-446a-11e2-8061-253bccfc7532_story.html.

[164] "Frederick W. Kagan," American Enterprise Institute, https://www.aei.org/profile/frederick-w-kagan/, accessed July 27, 2021.

[165] Kagan, "Iran's Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government," 4.

These observations suggest a feedback loop in which decision makers call upon experts who are, for one reason or another, more likely to provide testimony that provides legitimacy to the policies they were already predisposed to enact – and in turn, these decision-makers provide information which supports the experts' line of argument, or, in cases like David Petraeus and James Mattis, appear as primary sources themselves in the function of a military or intelligence insider. Judging by the example of the Kagans and David Petraeus, this exchange occurs in a web of personal connections and favoritism that is often undisclosed and difficult to assess, and the ultimate influence of which on the analyses published by experts is impossible to gauge.

While I can only briefly discuss these factors potentially governing the hegemonial discourse dispositif, the aspects I touch on appear to be consistent with the results of my discourse analysis and the problematic aspects of expert knowledge on Iran which I have discussed in the previous chapters. The exact mechanisms by which politics and the expert system interact to produce knowledge on Iran's foreign policy and how that knowledge in turn informs policymaking remain to be analyzed.

VII. Conclusions

At the outset of research for this paper, I had intended to collect and systematically structure information on Iran's network of "proxies". I believed that the phenomena of Iranian involvement in different contexts, such as the Syrian War, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, which was usually discussed largely separate from one another, had enough 'connective tissue' to justify analyzing them under the unifying umbrella of an 'Iranian proxy policy'. I was under the assumption that, while the discrepant discourses on Iran's involvement abroad clearly assumed such a policy to exist, attempts to systematically analyze the constituent phenomena as such had not been made. I further suspected that there were essential technical commonalities between these phenomena, such as mobilization tactics, organizational and relational structure, and, centrally, the guiding hand of the Quds Force. Therefore, I planned on reviewing literature from the constituent expert discourses on Syria, Iraq etc. and synthesizing a body of information from them on the 'proxy policy' which ostensibly informed and affected them all.

Since these constituent issues are all recent and still developing, highly politically contested and subject to the 'fog of war' that often affects comparable conflict situations, I had expected certain

issues with the available material. I assumed source material to be scarce and to stem from a very narrow range of sources as access to primary information is limited. Soon, however, I realized that the process of knowledge production on the issue was so significantly affected not only by these factors, but also by the discursive circumstances in which it occurred, that synthesizing information from this discourse would only reproduce what I could not confidently say was a good faith array of factual information, but rather a significantly warped expression of a complex configuration of presumptions, convictions, structural factors and ideological influences.

An autonomous discourse crystallized from the literature, which had clearly identifiable, reliably reoccurring talking points, a clearly defined discursive space of origin and clearly discernible lead participants, as well as obvious patterns of framing and portrayal of the issues that suggested structural political biases. The realization that there were almost no options for acquiring opinions, analyses, and interpretations of the same events and trends outside this discourse, and the close relationship it had to the geopolitical hegemon in the region, the United States, then suggested to me that the discourse in itself was of a hegemonial nature, generating authoritative 'knowledge' and co-informing a reality that encompassed far more than just the activities of the QF or Iran's "proxy" relations.

I realized that reproducing these positions as quasi-facts by only recontextualizing them was not an option. Instead, I decided to shift my research to have this 'hegemonial discourse' itself as its object, analyzing exactly what contents it transported, how these were framed and what presumptions it reproduced. I therefore aimed for Norman Fairclough's "'critical' approach to discourse analysis", which he says "sets out to make visible through analysis, and to criticize, connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations (ideologies, power relations) which are generally not obvious to people who produce and interpret those texts, and whose effectiveness depends upon this opacity."[166]

As I have explained, this informed my selection of theory, methods, and data for the corpus. Focusing on a stratum of think tanks close to Washington as the core cell of a hegemonial discourse, I identified a range of central recurring narratives by way of content analysis and then interpreted their relevance for the hegemonial discourse and the content they communicated in the central discourse analysis. The most salient among these narratives were: First, Iran desires regional hegemony, either driven by religious, revolutionary or historical impetus, which it strives

[166] Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 97.

for by means of expansionistic policies; second, because Iran cannot compete with its adversaries in conventional arenas, it projects power through a 'system of proxies'; third, that Iran purposely exacerbates sectarian tension in the region by mobilizing Shiites against Sunnis to further these goals; fourth, that Iran is locked in a power political rivalry with the Gulf States, which either springs from the two aforementioned factors or results from them – or both; and, lastly, that the IRGC Quds Force is the primary executor of the network of influence. These narratives were consistently reproduced in specific contextualizations, with specific strategies of framing and clearly identifiable presumptions.

The discourse dispositif, as far as can be glimpsed from the limited attention I could pay to it here, appeared to suggest a connection between the interests of both US foreign policy makers and the stratum of think tank donors with regard to the timing, volume, subject matter and ideological tint of the analyses. Since the Biden administration replaced the Trump administration in early 2021, a 'traditional' Democrat interventionist establishment has been reinstated 'at the wheel' of foreign policy. Therefore, it is not likely that demand for the specific style of coverage on Iran, as analyzed here, will decrease in the near future. It is interesting to consider that in polities with regular democratic election cycles, the governing party and high-level officials such as ministers might change too quickly to 'live out' the consequences of their political decisions, while the underlying apparatus informing these decisions, of which the think tank experts are a part, remain in place. While any given US administration can therefore claim that responsibility for, say, the state of affairs in Iraq lies with the governments preceding it, going back at least to George W. Bush, many of the experts informing the Biden administration might already have been in similar positions back then. This implies a continuity of the hegemonial discourse and its core narratives that has a degree of independence from changes in government, even though certain ideas may of course gain or lose traction.

Either explicitly or implicitly, this hegemonial discourse supplies ideas invested with the weight of expert knowledge on Iran's foreign policy at large, its ambitions as a state, its strategies, as well as its very nature as a nation, connecting all these elements with a causal logic. Even though now, in 2021, the zenith of the 'proxy policy' appears to have passed, the core narratives attached to it in the discourse seem set to outlast it. In the run-up to the Iranian presidential elections in June, commentators were quick to point out that Supreme Leader Khamenei advised the Iranian people

in his Nowruz speech that a good president would have to be both "revolutionary" and "jihadi".[167] I have demonstrated how this pattern of attribution is omnipresent in the hegemonial discourse on Iran, and how some entrenched ideas of Iran as a nation, which both precede and transcend my subject matter, inform the analyses of its supposed 'proxy policy'. Throughout the core narratives and in the way they are presented in the discourse, post-1979 Western fears of Iran as an ominous theocracy and as a revolutionary firebrand situated on the crossroads of the international oil trade mix subliminally with deep-seated stereotypes of Muslim fanaticism, 'eastern despotism' and Middle Eastern instability. Together, these elements form the underlying canvas on which an ostensibly technocratic apparatus of experts that is intimately structurally tied to US power-politics develops its image of current day Iran and its policy. This appears to be a cyclical process, in which these predispositions and underlying logic inform expert analyses of Iranian politics, which in turn reaffirm the original inclinations. Nothing suggests that this cycle does not similarly affect other fields of knowledge production that work under similar circumstances. Aside from revealing the content and circumstances of the discourse on Iran's network of influence, and the way in which this discourse interacts with the wider view of Iran in the West, my research has therefore produced fascinating insights into the pitfalls of expert knowledge production in a politically charged, capitalist superstructure where truths can well be subject to the demands of the market.

[167] Omer Carmi, "Khamenei Continues Playing Hardball in Nowruz Speech," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-continues-playing-hardball-nowruz-speech, accessed April 10, 2021.

Bibliography

Aarabi, Kasra. “Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.” https://institute.global/policy/beyond-borders-expansionist-ideology-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps. Accessed July 26, 2021.

Alaaldin, Tanj. “The Origins and Ascendancy of Iraq's Shiite Militias.” https://www.hudson.org/research/13993-the-origins-and-ascendancy-of-iraq-s-shiite-militias#. Accessed August 30, 2021.

American Enterprise Institute. “Frederick W. Kagan.” https://www.aei.org/profile/frederick-w-kagan/. Accessed July 27, 2021.

Amnesty International. “Silenced, Expelled, Imprisoned: Repression of Students and Academics in Iran.” Amnesty International, June 2014.

Arab News. “Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh in Front of a Range of Iranian Proxy Flags Alongside Official Iranian Flags on State TV.” https://www.arabnews.com/node/1615711. Accessed July 3, 2021.

Associated Press. “Syria’s Diminished Security Forces.” 2013. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-28/228953-syrias-diminished-security-forces.ashx#axzz31ko8ddGF. Accessed August 30, 2021.

Associated Press. “Cash-Strapped Iran Struggles to Maintain Sway over Iraq Militias: Nearly Six Months After the US Assassinated IRGC General Soleimani, Tehran Is Losing Its Grip on Armed Groups in Iraq.” June 11, 2020. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/11/cash-strapped-iran-struggles-to-maintain-sway-over-iraq-militias. Accessed October 9, 2020.

Atlantic Council Staff. “Nader Uskowi.” https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/expert/nader-uskowi/. Accessed October 15, 2020.

Badran, Tony. “An Incorrigible State: Washington Should Stop Looking for That Elusive Moderation in Iran. The State Itself Is the Problem.” *Hoover Digest* 3 (2020): 106–7.

Berger, Miriam. “What Is Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps That Soleimani Helped to Lead?” *The Washington Post Online*, 2020. Accessed August 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/04/what-is-irans-revolutionary-guard-corps-that-soleimani-helped-lead/.

Brücker, Nicola. “Kodieren – Aber Wie? Varianten Der Grounded-Theory-Methodologie Und Der Qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse Im Vergleich.” *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung* 21, no. 1 (2020): [No page range].

Bucala, Paul, Kagan, Frederick W. “Iran’s Evolving Way of War: How the IRGC Fights in Syria.” American Enterprise Institute, March 2016.

Carmi, Omer. “Khamenei Continues Playing Hardball in Nowruz Speech.” https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-continues-playing-hardball-nowruz-speech. Accessed April 10, 2021.

Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. “Civilian Analysts Gained Petraeus’s Ear While He Was Commander in Afghanistan.” *The Washington Post Online*, December 2012. Accessed August 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/civilian-analysts-gained-petraeuss-ear-while-he-was-commander-in-afghanistan/2012/12/18/290c0b50-446a-11e2-8061-253bccfc7532_story.html.

Cordesman, Anthony H. “Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007.

Cordesman, Anthony H. “Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the "Clash Within a Civilization".” Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2014.

Reuters. “Coronavirus and Sanctions Hit Iran’s Support of Proxies in Iraq.” 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY. Accessed October 9, 2020.

Daragahi, Borzou, Spiegel, Peter. “Iran’s Elite and Mysterious Fighters.” *Los Angeles Times Online*, 2007. Accessed August 30, 2021. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-feb-15-fg-quds15-story.html.

Doucet, Lyse. “Qasem Soleimani: US Kills Top Iranian General in Baghdad Air Strike.” 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50979463. Accessed March 8, 2021.

Draucker, Claire B., Martsolf, Donna S., Ratchneewan, Ross, Rusk, Thomas B. “Theoretical Sampling and Category Development in Grounded Theory.” *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 8 (2007): 1137–46.

Duheaume, Tony. “Quds Force’ Extensive Record of Assassinations, Bombings.” 2017. https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2017/10/20/Quds-Force-Extensive-Record-of-Assassinations-Bombings. Accessed March 10, 2021.

Elias, Firas. “Iranian Military Doctrine.” Policy Analysis / Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2017.

Encyclopedia Britannica Editors. “Quds Force.” https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quds-Force. Accessed August 30, 2021.

Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London, New York: Longman Publishing, 1995.

Farhi, Farideh. “Iranian Power Projection Strategy and Goals.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2017.

Filkins, Dexter. “The Shadow Commander.” *The New Yorker Online*, 2013. Accessed August 30, 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander.

Fox, Amos C. “In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare.” The Institute of Land Warfare at the Association of the United States Army, February 2019. https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-123-In-Pursuit-of-a-General-Theory-of-Proxy-Warfare.pdf.

George, Susannah. “Breaking Badr.” Dispatch, Foreign Policy, 2014. https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/.

Ghaddar, Hanin. “Iran’s Foreign Legion: The Impact of Shia Militias on US Foreign Policy.” Policy Notes, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-impact-of-shia-militias-on-u.s.-foreign-policy.

Gläser, Jochen, Laudel, Grit. “The Discovery of Causal Mechanisms: Extractive Qualitative Content Analysis as a Tool for Process Tracing.” *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung* 20, no. 3 (2019).

Glasze, Georg, and Mattissek, Annika. *Handbuch Diskurs Und Raum: Theorien Und Methoden Für Die Humangeographie Sowie Die Sozial- Und Kulturwissenschaftliche Raumforschung.* Sozialtheorie. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015.

Herschinger, Eva, Nonhoff, Martin, and Angermüller, Johannes. *Diskursforschung: Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch: Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch.* DiskursNetz Band 1. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014.

Jones, Seth G. "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East." CSIS Briefs, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2019.

Kagan, Kimberley. "Iran's Proxy War Against the United States and the Iraqi Government." Iraq Report, 2007.

Kagan, Kimberley. "Iran's Proxy War Against the United States and the Iraqi Government." Institute for the Study of War; The Weekly Standard, August 2007.

Katz, Brian. "Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy & Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East." CSIS Briefs, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2018.

Keller, Reiner. *Diskursforschung: Eine Einführung Für SozialwissenschaftlerInnen.* Qualitative Sozialforschung. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2011.

Kuckartz, Udo. *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. 3., durchgesehene Aufl. Grundlagentexte Methoden. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2016.

Levitt, Matthew. "Waking up the Neighbors: How Regional Intervention Is Transforming Hezbollah." Policy Analysis / Articles / Op-Eds, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 2015. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/4073/en.

Mahan, Abedin. "Iran: Expert Discusses Iran's Quds Force and U.S. Charges Concerning Iraq." https://www.rferl.org/a/1074751.html. Accessed August 30, 2021.

Markusen, Maxwell B. "The Islamic State and the Persistent Threat of Extremism in Iraq." CSIS Briefs, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2018.

Matsunaga, Yasuyuki. "Revisiting Ayatollah Khomeini's Doctrine of Wilayat Al-Faqıh (Velayat-E Faqıh)." *Orient* 44 (2009): 77–90.

CNN. "McCain: Hezbollah Is Slaughtering People." June 9, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nxY3n2PoSU. Accessed August 30, 2021.

McInnis, J. Matthew. "Introduction: Looking at Soft-Power Competitive Strategies for Iran." In *America Vs. Iran: The Competition for the Future of the Middle East*, 3–7.

McInnis, J. Matthew. "Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution." American Enterprise Institute, May 2015.

McInnis, J. Matthew. "Iranian Concepts of Warfare: Understanding Tehran's Evolving Military Doctrine." American Enterprise Institute, February 2017.

Mearsheimer, John J., and Walt, Stephen M. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. London: Penguin, 2008.

Mneimneh, Hassan. "The Decline (And Fall?) Of the "Fourth Persian Empire."" Policy Analysis / Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2019.

Nadimi, Farzin. "Iran Appoints Seasoned Qods Force Operative as Ambassador to Iraq." Policy Analysis / Policy Alert, January 2017. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/3096/en.

Naval Postgraduate School. “Afshon Ostovar, Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Associate Chair for Research.” https://nps.edu/web/nsa/-/afshon-ostovar-ph-d-. Accessed August 30, 2021.

NPR Online. “Meet the Iranian Commander Pulling Strings in Syria's War.” https://www.npr.org/2013/09/25/226104144/meet-the-iranian-commander-pulling-strings-in-syrias-war?t=1594551901514. Accessed July 12, 2020.

O’Bagy, Elizabeth. “The Fall of Al-Qusayr.” Backgrounder, Institute for the Study of War, 2013.

Ostovar, Afshon. *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Pletka, Danielle, Kagan, Frederick W. “America Vs. Iran: The Competition for the Future of the Middle East.” American Enterprise Institute, January 2014.

Pollack, Kenneth M. “The Evolution of the Revolution: The Changing Nature of Iran's Axis of Resistance.” American Enterprise Institute, March 2020.

Raine, John. “Iran, Its Partners, and the Balance of Effective Force.” International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2020.

Razavi, Negar. “The Systemic Problem of “Iran Expertise” in Washington.” https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39946/The-Systemic-Problem-of-%E2%80%9CIran-Expertise%E2%80%9D-in-Washington. Accessed April 10, 2021.

Reckwitz, Andreas. “Ernesto Laclau - Diskurse, Hegemonien, Antagonismen.” In *Kultur. Theorien Der Gegenwart.* Edited by Dirk Quadflieg, 339–49. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006.

Al Arabiya. “Saeed Mohammad, Head of IRGC’s Biggest Commercial Enterprise, Runs for President.” March 2021. https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/03/08/Iran-military-Saeed-Mohammad-head-of-IRGC-s-biggest-commercial-enterprise-runs-for-president. Accessed August 30, 2021.

Saul, Jonathan, Hafezi, Parisa. “Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad.” https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/iran-boosts-military-support-in-syria-to-bolster-assad-idUSBREA1K09U20140221. Accessed July 12, 2020.

Seliktar, Ofira, and Rezaei, Farhad. *Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars.* Middle East Today. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Sharro, Karl. “Qassem Suleimani Iran’s Shadowy Commander Who Has No Shadow.” http://www.karlremarks.com/2014/10/qassem-suleimani-irans-shadowy.html.

“Shia Militias in Iraq.” Strategic Comments 23:3, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2017.

Soufan, Ali. “Qassem Soleimani and Iran’s Unique Regional Strategy.” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 10 (2018): 1–12. https://ctc.usma.edu/qassem-soleimani-irans-unique-regional-strategy/. Accessed August 30, 2021.

SpinnerLaserz. “Flag of the Quds Force.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Quds_Force.svg. Accessed July 3, 2021.

SpinnerLaserz. “The Flag of the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution Used in Ceremonies.” https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ceremonial_flag_of_the_Army_of_the_Guardians_of_the_Islamic_Revolution.svg. Accessed July 3, 2021.

Strobel, Warren, Hosenball, Mark. “Elite Iranian Guards Training Yemen's Houthis: U.S. Officials.” March 2015. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-houthis-iran/elite-iranian-guards-training-yemens-houthis-u-s-officials-idUSKBN0MN2MI20150327. Accessed August 30, 2021.

Sullivan, Marisa. “Hezbollah in Syria.” Middle East Security Report 19, Institute for the Study of War, April 2014.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies. *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. 1st ed. Strategic Dossiers. London: Routledge, 2019. https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier.

“The Soleimani Killing’s Regional Implications.” Strategic Comments 26:2, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2020.

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “Nader Uskowi.” https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/nader-uskowi. Accessed October 15, 2020.

Unknown. “[No Title].” https://www.facebook.com/persian.war.news/photos/1718522031738360. Accessed July 7, 2021.

Uskowi, Nader. “Examining Iran's Global Terrorism Network.” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2018.

Uskowi, Nader. *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

Vakil, Sanam. “Shaken, Not Deterred.” *Hoover Digest* 3 (2020): 111–12. https://www.hoover.org/research/shaken-not-deterred. Accessed July 22, 2021.

Wigginton, Michael, Burton, Robert, Jensen, Carl, McElreath, David, Mallory, Stephen, Doss, Daniel A. “Al-Qods Force: Iran's Weapon of Choice to Export Terrorism.” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 10, no. 2 (2015): 153–65. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/18335330.2015.1090053. Accessed August 30, 2021.