

The Strategic Culture of Resistance

Iranian Strategic Influence in Its Near Abroad

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Abstract: Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the strategic culture of resistance has dominated Iran’s strategic objective and foreign policy preference formation. Iran is a revisionist state that lacks overwhelming military and economic dominance in its near abroad, as such two pillars have emerged to support and export their strategic culture of resistance: *adaptive resistance* (pragmatism) and *designed redundancy* (insulation and deniability). These two themes of resistance provide content and structure to their strategic influence campaigns. Strategic influence is the way in which elements of the strategic culture of resistance are executed in Iran’s near abroad. To combat and defeat strategic influence campaigns, it is necessary to understand both the strategic cultural factors at play and the strategic influence campaigns that Iran deploys.

Keywords: Iran, strategic culture, strategic influence, influence operations, information operations, proxy strategy

Strategic influence is a way of operationalizing strategic culture. The author agrees with Jeannie L. Johnson and Jeffrey A. Larsen that “Strategic Culture is that set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and writ-

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ten), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.”¹ And the author agrees with Colin S. Gray and Fredrik Doeser that strategic culture is not determinative; rather, it shapes the space of possible priorities, decisions, “whatever the mix of factors that we believe have produced a decision and its consequent strategic behavior, all of the people and the organizations within which they function are more or less distinctively encultured.”² In other words, “strategic culture structures what options are considered to be appropriate, effective, and productive by a specific actor in decisions to participate in military operations, thereby influencing, but not determining, the actor’s behavior.”³ Strategic culture is precisely important in that it provides a shaping context for decision making, for prioritizing strategic objectives, and foreign policy preferences.

Many Iranian elite decision makers, for example, continue to see Iran as a revolutionary state, locked in an existential battle against the United States and its proxies in the region, primarily Israel and Saudi Arabia. These perceptions and values are products of a strategic culture born and steeped in resistance. Yet, this strategic culture of resistance is not determinative. Adaptive resistance (described below) defines how Iran remains a highly agile and pragmatic actor. Designed redundancy (described below) defines how the elite insulate themselves from outside pressure by creating duplication in their governance structure, which occludes their decision-making process and also prevents any one faction or organ of state to dominate. This principle extends to their operations, for example, using multiple proxies in the same region, increasing plausible deniability. Designed redundancy and adaptive resistance are twin features of Iran’s strategic culture of resistance. They had to be adaptive and duplicative to survive and thrive in a hostile environment. These same principles, however, often generate new ways of thinking about resistance among the elite. As the revolutionary generation gives way to a younger crop of leaders, eager for progress and change, Iran observers should be looking for signs of change in their strategic culture.

Yet, there is no guarantee that the strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) will change. This is largely because of the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a force of strategic culture continuity at home and abroad. In their doctrine and practice they embody the principles of Carl von Clausewitz: “The object in war is not usually to destroy the enemy physically, rather is it [*sic*] to subordinate his will to ours.”⁴ In fact, the IRGC states so explicitly in their doctrine:

In order to achieve ideological, political, security and economic self-reliance we have no other choice but to mobilize all forces loyal to the Islamic Revolution, and through this mobilization, plant such a terror in the hearts of the enemies that they abandon the thought of an offensive and annihilation of our revolution.⁵

Note that planting “terror in the hearts of the enemies” *is* strategic influence, because to sow terror is to destroy the will of the enemy. This indicates how deeply ingrained strategic influence is in the IRGC and IRI’s strategic culture of resistance, as this article will demonstrate below. It is also important to note that Islamic resistance, thusly conceived, cannot be entirely defensive but requires an offensive and internationalist component. And it is correct in the author’s estimation to think of strategic influence as an operationalization of this broader principle. In other words, “Strategic Influence is the use of the elements of national power—diplomatic, military, economic, *with and through information*—to shape the information and operational environment in order to erode the will of the enemy. . . . This ‘new’ way of war is predicated on building narratives, activating identities, mobilizing proxies, and disorienting targets through the use of information in service of strategic goals.”⁶ Therefore, eroding the will of the enemy is the goal of strategic influence, but knowing the will of the enemy requires understanding their strategic culture.

If Iran’s strategic culture is one of resistance, then actions that reinforce the will to resist are counterproductive and actions that erode the will to resist are desirable. This may seem tautological, but it is not. After 40 years of sanctions and targeted kinetic strikes, the United States has not eroded Iran’s will to resist; rather, they have reinforced it. This would indicate that the United States does not understand Iran’s strategic culture and therefore cannot design their strategic influence campaigns to counter Iran at home or in their near abroad. Iran’s influence grows in the region despite many setbacks precisely because their narratives of resistance resonate with many who see themselves as oppressed. Iran has demonstrated and continually messages that through resistance comes triumph. Thus, the raised AK-47 Kalashnikov rifle that appears in the IRGC logo appears in the logos of the various militias that form to resist and potentially triumph over the United States and its proxies. Whether one believes this to be true or not is almost irrelevant; it is effective.

However, if we agree that strategic culture is important, and it is hard to imagine anyone but the most materialist among us thinking it is not, then why introduce the concept of strategic influence? What value does it add? Strategic influence relies on strategic culture in two significant ways. First, strategic culture, as described, sets objectives and limits on what strategy and operations seek to achieve and how. For example, Doeser explains how strategic culture shaped the Finnish government’s decision not to participate in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) Libyan campaign in 2011: “In the Finnish case, strategic culture made a difference by informing decision-makers that participation in OUP would be inappropriate, since, *inter alia*, it would entail a deviation from Finland’s long-standing policy of refraining from military-demanding operations.”⁷ Second, strategic culture provides the content of narratives that justify strategies and operations and are used to activate identities and mobilize audiences. For example, Michael J. Boyle and Anthony F. Lang found two competing strategic culture models operating in U.S. decisions re-

garding interventions—limited and vindicationist; they differ in the degree to which the United States seeks to remake the conquered country into its own image (vindicationist), usually through the drafting and implementation of an American-like constitution. However, “in practical terms, both ‘ways of intervention’ operate like culturally embedded scripts that policymakers can access during interventions.”⁸ In the case of a revisionist state like Iran, resistance provides both the language for justification and the content of its messaging. That is, resistance is the *stuff* of strategic influence.

When strategic culture is operationalized in strategic influence, particularly through narrative, the temptation may be to dismiss the cultural aspects as convenient tropes that are manipulated for practical gain. This could lead to a fundamental misunderstanding of one’s rival. A tactical retreat is not a surrender. An adaptive resistance strategy remains committed to resistance but is not irrational or suicidal. Because culture in general, and strategic culture in particular, are communicated through narratives is not to say that they are artificial and constructed to purpose. “Those cultures emerge and change as a kind of natural phenomena. They are the ever evolving product of the many efforts peoples make to explain their past, understand their present, and anticipate their future.”⁹ Therefore, Iranian strategic influence relies on narratives and targeted kinetic actions to bolster elements of their strategic culture of resistance. And to further Gray’s point, if strategic influence is the operationalization of strategic culture, then understanding one will shed light on the other and provide genuine insight into the decision-making processes of the observed.

But more to the practical point of understanding, anticipating, and countering Iran’s strategic influence campaigns in their near abroad, it is imperative to understand Iran’s strategic culture, its perspective on its own identity, its perceived role in the world, and its historical and contemporary challenges and goals. To do so means attempting to think as Iran’s leadership thinks, to understand their history as they do, to understand, ultimately, their mythmaking and myth-propagation as foundations for their strategic influence. Myths are key to strategic influence because the mobilization of audiences is in large part why strategic influence is used; myths create narratives, themes, and frames that enable influence. Therefore, understanding foundational myths, cultural myths, and the like enables a more accurate representation of Iran’s influence campaigns. To do so is not to believe but to understand Iran’s projected perspective, which is essential to success.

As noted, for Iran there are two main drivers in this strategic policy making process: adaptive resistance and designed redundancy. The author found the term *resistance* used throughout the discourse of Iran’s political elite. The IRI was born from revolution, but the revolution was more than just a replacement of the local ruling elite; it was an act of resistance against the global order. At that time, the global order was bipolar, and resistance was encapsulated in the slogan, “neither East nor West.”¹⁰ From that time forward, there has been a strong anti-U.S. and anti-Western ideological strain captured in the

term “Westoxification.”¹¹ In a profound sense, the rhetoric and praxis of the Iranian revolutionary regime have developed as a rejection and counterweight to Western, primarily U.S. power. Their rhetoric (i.e., their use of history and victimization) and their praxis (i.e., their use of political and military proxies) are in service of influence strategies designed to humiliate the United States and reconstruct the regional and global order. Understanding the depth, breadth, and strength of anti-Western sentiment is critical to developing a more efficacious orientation toward the Iranian political elite. Yet, to say that Iran is a revisionist power intent on changing the status quo in the Middle East and beyond is not to say that they are radical or irrational. On the contrary, their approach to strategic influence requires them to be pragmatic: to triumph where possible and to turn defeats into rhetorical victories where necessary. Further, their ideological focal points at any given time are reflective of their goals and the current, usually local, political realities on the ground. That is, their resistance is ideological, but it is adaptive. This characteristic of Iran’s strategic culture goes beyond rhetoric; the form and substance of its decision-making structure is also adaptive, albeit consistently anti-Western and revisionist.

A thorough examination of Iran’s decision-making structure reveals an intricate and multilayered structure of checks and balances—designed redundancy. Designed redundancy serves three key purposes. First, it is designed to obfuscate the decision-making process to the outside world to prevent external interference. Second, by dispersing powers throughout the system, designed redundancy works to prevent any one institution or faction from taking over the entire system. Third, in operations, by using multiple proxies, designed redundancy enables plausible deniability. Two outcomes of this designed redundancy are consensus decision making and, since consensus is desirable if not necessary in most cases, the ability for key actors to veto. As such, designed redundancy makes the Iranian system resistant to change and influence, even as its external strategic policies are adaptive. Consensus, however, can often be easy to derive and maintain, is resistant to change, and antithetical to U.S. interests or desires. Consensus is easier to reach when it is based on shared cultural values. For example, even those actors Western media outlets refer to as “reformers” strongly defend Iran’s right to a peaceful nuclear program, including domestic enrichment. In this case, as in other cases of technological advancement and economic development, there is widespread agreement among the political elite and often public sentiment supporting it. Part of this is the belief that the United States is an enemy of Iran and is trying to keep it from progressing. Part of it is predicated on an understanding of Iran’s historical role as a leader of human rights, mathematics, science, and technology.¹²

These two defining characteristics of Iran’s strategic policy making—designed redundancy and adaptive resistance—are prominent in Iranian strategic influence. Who is driving policy is not always clear to outsiders, and it is not always clear which factions have formed a consensus, or which factions oppose it. It is not always clear, either, whether foreign policy outcomes such as

the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action are a rapprochement with the West or an adaptation designed to gain time and influence for Iran to achieve their revisionist end goals—or both. These uncertainties, although the ideology of the observer may collapse them with a certainty all their own, are very much designed and create disorienting effects. Disorientation, along with narrative building based on myths, activating identities, and mobilizing proxies are the ways in which strategic influence works. The next section will explain Iran's strategic culture more in depth; the following section goes into the practical application of strategic culture through strategic influence.

Iran's Strategic Culture

Iranian strategic culture is built on a long history of both glorious empire and achievement but also persecution and victimization.¹³ This collective memory and this shared history paved the way for the 1979 revolution. In addition to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's charismatic power and the strong organization of the religious institutions, what gave the Islamic Revolution impetus was the blending of the religious and nationalist identities that his *velayat-e faqih* system embodied (rule of the jurispudent). That is, Khomeini was able to mobilize mass resistance through the deployment of cultural identity myths to build a system of resistance. This system was built to reject the shah and his government, but also to resist the West, especially the United States, the shah's puppet masters, as they would have it.

Resistance against oppression is the key theme of the IRI's strategic culture. It predated Khomeini's rise to power and could be found in the writings and lectures of Ali Shariati, a sociologist with strong ties to Western thought:

Among his western intellectual mentors, Shariati was most excited by the writing of Franz Fanon, whose *The Wretched of the Earth* so touched him and his friends that they translated it from French into Persian. It was from Shariati and his friends' translation of the title of this book as *Mostazafin-e Zamin* that Khomeini borrowed his rallying cry in support of the oppressed and dispossessed.¹⁴

But the recognition of oppression does not always result in resistance. It was Khomeini's charisma and leadership, his exhortation to revolution, his ability to take the teachings of Shariati and merge them with Shia theology to go from mobilization to revolution. That is, he was able to effectively unite two cultural frames into a single strategic culture:

Shia beliefs and mythologies form important foundations of the Islamic Republic's ideology. Its historical sense of grievance, for example, is heavily influenced by Khomeini's interpretation of the Shia as dispossessed, betrayed, and humiliated by the powerful and corrupt. Islam becomes a tool of resis-

tance; it is, as Khomeini often argued, the champion of all oppressed people.¹⁵

Khomeini saw resistance as an Islamic duty, for the IRI and Islamic peoples everywhere. Simply put, the culture of Islamic resistance that the IRI promotes is built on a shared history of oppression, usually by a despot supported by the West. This strategic culture of resistance is the fruit of their revolution, and it is the sum and summit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' *raison d'être*: "If our revolution does not have an offensive and internationalist dimension, the enemies of Islam will again enslave us culturally, politically, and the like, and they will not abstain from plunder and looting."¹⁶ This is justification for the Islamic Republic, the IRGC, and for strategic influence. Note well how the IRGC speaks to "cultural enslavement." The fight against "Westoxification" was a fight against modernity, atheism, agnosticism, capitalism, socialism, and other "isms" that imposed a foreign culture on Iran. And for the elite of the IRI that culture is denoted by Islamic resistance. This is a clear indication that culture and strategic culture are not just academic exercises but core motivations for decision makers. These points indicate how deeply ingrained strategic influence is in the IRGC and IRI's culture of Islamic resistance.

It is also important to recognize that Islamic resistance, thusly conceived, cannot be entirely defensive but requires an offensive and internationalist component. As Michael Eisenstadt puts it, "The 'resistance doctrine' exhorts its adherents to stand fast in the face of enemy threats, to push boundaries, and eschew compromise on matters of principle in the belief that in a zero-sum struggle, compromise is a sign of weakness that will be exploited by the enemies of Islam. It posits that victory is achieved by imposing costs and by *demoralizing the enemy*—through relentless psychological warfare, through terrorizing and bleeding its people and military, and by denying it battlefield victories."¹⁷ The IRI creates and exploits narratives of oppression, resistance, and triumph by recalling and recasting their history of overcoming overwhelming odds and emerging victorious. According to this narrative, triumph is a product of faithful adherence to Islamic resistance.

For Iran to increase the range and effectiveness of its strategic influence campaigns, its target audiences must "find consistency with deeply held cultural values."¹⁸ Islam is a system of cultural values, among other things, and Islamic resistance also has broad cultural appeal. The Islamic Revolution, furthermore, put action to the words that resistance and Islamic duty are one and that faithful adherence to Islamic resistance leads to triumph. However, the type of system that is in place in Iran—the governance of the jurispudent—is not attractive to the majority of Shia, let alone the majority of Muslims. Thus, Iran often draws on Persian culture, Islamic culture, and/or resistance culture to attract support.¹⁹ Here, we see one facet of adaptive resistance—narrative framing. To mobilize on cultural frames/myths, the IRI must adapt its message based on the

audience. Where adherence to the *velayat* system is at play, authority, obedience, and loyalty are called on to sustain and expand the range of influence, mobilize audiences, and erode the will of the enemy. Where adherence to the *velayat* system is not at play, but the audience is Muslim, it is to cultural frames/myths of Islamic triumph over Western hegemony and imperialism, with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 being the primary example and model to which Iran appeals. Where Islam is not at play, resistance is used in a broader nonaligned way to appeal to a widely held sense of victimization, exploitation, and humiliation. It is worth noting that Khomeini's rhetoric about imperialism dividing Iranians into two classes—oppressors and oppressed—is written into the constitution as a mandate to stand with all oppressed people worldwide, regardless of faith.

There is, though, another important reason for Iran's usage of various cultural frames. Given the various ideological perspectives of the factions and the key governance bodies they control and given the structure of the IRI—designed redundancy—various messages emerge:

Thus, we can see how the President performs one role in terms of representing Iran on the world stage, while the Supreme Leader maintains control over some important soft power tools, such as the Islamic Republic's international media operations and its cultural attaches and related cultural outreach centres through the ICRO [Islamic Culture and Relations Office].²⁰

Edward Wastnidge's article highlights key cultural initiatives from the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–97), Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13), and a brief foray into Hassan Rouhani's (2013–present). Except for Ahmadinejad, whose bellicosity earned him scorn at home and abroad, the presidents of Iran have favored openness to the West, trade, and discourse. The highlight of this was Khatami's dialogue among civilizations: “Khatami himself sees the concept as forming a ‘new paradigm’ in international relations, thus evidencing its efficacy as a foreign policy tool. This was an idea that came from a perception of Iranian civilisational weight and importance in the world, much in the same way that the Shah also sought to use similar narratives.”²¹ That Iran is a great civilization—a great Islamic civilization—is the central theme for this strategic influence narrative. It certainly resonates with their long history and many accomplishments in math, science, art, military prowess, etc. It also works well with the fact that Iran is disadvantaged in other areas—militarily and economically. By relying on culture, Iran can speak to great powers as equals rather than from a position of weakness.

It is this reality that ultimately makes former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad such an anomaly. His rhetoric against Israel and the United States recalled early revolutionary fervor and was a dramatic departure from the presidencies of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and now Rouhani. While many hard-liners in Iran and elsewhere appreciated Ahmadinejad's hard stance against Israel,

the cost to Iran's prestige around the world was significant. The ratcheting up of sanctions against Iran's nuclear program was made easier by his bellicosity, which drew ire from the international community as well as other factions in Iran.²² Nevertheless, cultural outreach was still an active part of statecraft during the Ahmadinejad years. In the aftermath of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran saw opportunity to further its cultural reach among Shia and Farsi speakers. For example,

Iran regularly draws on cultural commonalities such as the celebration of the Persian new year Nowrooz across the region, and invited regional heads to the first international celebration of Nowrooz in Iran in 2010. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran sought to establish a "Union of Persian Speaking Nations" between the three Persian-speaking states, which drew on cultural linkages as a means of furthering cooperation and making use of the common Persian bonds amongst them.²³

The continuity in cultural outreach, particularly Islamic cultural outreach, occurred because of the designed redundancy of the IRI's system. While the president of Iran appoints the foreign minister, for example, the supreme leader of Iran uses key advisors as envoys. But the arena of cultural affairs is so important to Iran's leaders that they have created an organization charged with carrying out Islamic cultural diplomacy. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) was founded in 1995 to unify Iran's Islamic cultural diplomacy and coordinate bilateral cultural initiatives with other states. As is common in the IRI, given the designed redundancy of the system, the ICRO is affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance but works "under the guidance of the Supreme Leader who directly appoints members of the ICRO's ruling council."²⁴ According to its website, the ICRO's aims are:

1. Revival and dissemination of Islamic tenets and thoughts with a view to reaching the true message of Islam to the people of the world;
2. Creating awareness among the people of the world as regards the principles, the objectives, and the stance of the Islamic Revolution of Iran as well as the role it plays in the international arena;
3. Expansion of cultural relations with various nations and communities in general; and the Muslims and the oppressed, in particular;
4. Strengthening and regulating the existing cultural relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and other countries of the world as well as global cultural organizations;
5. Appropriate presentation of the Iranian culture and civilization as well as its cultural, geographical, and historical characteristics;

6. Preparation of the necessary grounds for the unity among Muslims and the establishment of a united front among world Muslims on the basis of the indisputable principles of Islam;
7. Scholarly debates and confrontations with anti-religion, anti-Islam, and anti-revolutionary cultures with a view to awakening the Muslims of the world regarding the divisive conspiracies of the enemies as well as protecting the rights of the Muslims;
8. Growth, development, and the improvement of the cultural, political, economic, and social conditions of the Muslims.²⁵

These aims clearly demonstrate a commitment to revolutionary Islamic ideals. The ICRO's primary mission is to disseminate Islamic principles, but its second point clearly states that it is also about the IRI and its international relations. These first two points flow seamlessly into the third—outreach to Muslims and the oppressed of the world. For example, news articles on the ICRO website report on interuniversity cooperation with Iraq; cultural exchanges with Azerbaijan and the autonomous republic of Nakhichevan, among others; and much in the way of promoting Farsi and Islamic cultural values. However, in keeping with the other objectives listed above, there is also a great deal of outreach to non-Muslim countries. For example, in a show of continuity with the Khatami administration, there was an event featuring the dialogue among civilizations between Iran and China. Also, the head of the ICRO, Abuzar Ebrahimi Torkaman, and Polish deputy culture minister, Monica Smullen, met to explore avenues for reinvigorating and bolstering mutual cooperation in different cultural areas.

For Iran, this presentation of a softened foreign policy is important to mitigate the effects of the U.S. rhetoric about Iran being the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism and statements about Iran's intention to weaponize its nuclear program. Cultural exchanges are one way to mitigate the damage done to its image from these statements and restore standing. Cultural exchanges also pave the way for economic cooperation, particularly since the (once and future) lifting of sanctions. The message is consistent to a large degree, as Iran focuses on the greatness of their civilization, long cultural ties with various countries and cultures around the world, and the deep abiding values of Islam. However, they are also clear that resistance against oppression is a key part of Islam, including oppression against non-Muslims as well. However, strategic influence is not just about soft power; it is also about using kinetic action in service of eroding the will of the enemy.

The use of proxies should be understood as part of Iran's deliberate strategy to spread their influence throughout the Arab world, not just kinetic targeting. This is evident when one considers their use of framing: "Concurrent to the intensive use of proxies, Iran is deliberately trying to weaken regimes through information framing. Iran's addresses to the Arab world are framed to a specific

audience and with the tone of animosity toward the West and non-Muslims.”²⁶ Based on their own and the region’s experience with imperialism and colonialism and their more recent manifestations, Iran is able to portray itself and its allies, such as Hezbollah, as examples of successful resistance against the West. It is certainly true that “the use of allies and proxies is generally cheap, reduces risk, and acts as a force multiplier. It also provides some degree of deniability—plausible or implausible.”²⁷

But it is much more than that: the use of proxies in this way demonstrates the ideological message that resistance against the most powerful forces in the world and in the region (e.g., the United States and Israel) can be successful. It serves Iran’s triumphalist message that emerges from its history, is encapsulated in its strategic culture, and embodied in its complex governmental structure. Therefore, while the focus on proxies for hard power deployment on the cheap is important, again, strategic influence demands that the importance of messaging cannot be overlooked, indeed, should be the focus. “Iran’s support for [Hezbollah] . . . could deliver two important foreign policy goals: the capacity to fight Israel through a proxy . . . and the expansion of Shiite Islam’s influence in Lebanon through Hizb’allah’s developing role there.”²⁸ It is precisely this intimate, intricate mingling of force and meaning that is the *stuff* of strategic influence.

It is with this understanding that the author reinterprets this approach. In other words, Iran must rely on proxies and messaging because “Iran’s conventional military readiness, effectiveness, and capabilities have declined since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and Iran has not been able to find a meaningful way to restore its conventional edge in the region.”²⁹ Moreover, Iran would be foolish to rely on a large conventional force that could not survive a direct confrontation with either the United States or Israel. Rather, through the use of proxies and messaging, it uses asymmetric tools to achieve strategic goals with deniability, reduced risk, and at significantly reduced cost. Through Islamic resistance, Iran’s strategic influence goals are to make the Middle East a hostile operating environment for the United States. Part of this strategy includes “characterizing the United States [as the Great Satan], [in which] Iranian revolutionaries were trying to emphasize the fact that America led Iran astray from its correct religious and spiritual path.”³⁰ By extension, Iran is saying that the United States has done so to other Muslim nations and, in fact, continues to do so. Again, because the United States is the “Great Satan” according to Iran’s messaging, it is the duty of every able-bodied Muslim to resist it. The direct challenge to Saudi Arabia should be clear. Saudi Arabia cannot be both keeper of the holiest sites of Islam, defender of the faith, and ally to the Great Satan. But Iran is careful not to directly attack Israel or Saudi Arabia. Against a near-power-rival such as the Saudis, Iran prefers asymmetrical and rhetorical approaches.

The danger is to misunderstand the asymmetric/proxy approach as a weakness. The other danger is to misunderstand groups such as Hezbollah as strictly a proxy group, militia, or terror group. Since the Iranian revolution, the IRGC

and Quds Force have been actively establishing resistance forces, such as Hezbollah, throughout their near abroad:

Iran has tried to create militia proxies to expand its influence. And where these militias can be found, one can also find Iran's culture of resistance, jihad, and martyrdom being propagated as a first step toward institutionalizing Iranian influence in those societies, with participation in politics as the next step.³¹

Thus, the material disposition of groups armed, trained, and funded by Iran is incomplete without manifestations of the triumphalist and resistant narratives.

Reinforcing Iran's role as the main defender of the Islamic faith, Major General Qassem Soleimani, the former chief of the IRGC's Quds Force, spoke at an Iran–Iraq war veterans' ceremony and praised the Islamic Republic's decades-long effort to take the mantle of the Palestinian cause and boasted that Tehran's influence in the Middle East has expanded because of the Syrian Civil War. He excoriated Saudi Arabia, as is often the case among Iranian elites, for being puppets of the United States, for betraying the Palestinian cause, and therefore betraying Islam:

If there's a lot of oil in a country . . . but mad logic rules, terrible events happen, and mad things like war with Yemen happen and these ignorant individuals are incapable of extinguishing this fire . . . Soleimani then chastised "some Arab countries" that are "surrounding" the "oppressed" Palestinians. Tehran has accused Arab states of "selling out" the Palestinian cause, because these same Arab nations have expanded ties with Israel over shared concerns about Iranian power.³²

The central point here is not that these speeches and messaging efforts produce massive defections from the West or conversions to Shia Islam in the Middle East. It is that Iranian strategic influence has had considerable success and demonstrable impact. How they operationalize strategic culture through strategic influence is the subject of the next section.

Strategic Influence Application

Iran seeks opportunities to operationalize its strategic culture of resistance throughout their near abroad and to forge international partnerships with countries like Venezuela and North Korea, as well as near-peer rivals to the United States, China, and Russia. Resistance as a theme for narratives and organizing militias dates to Iran's 1979 revolution and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s. What these events have in common is that they present opportunity structures that the IRGC/Quds Force exploit using strategic influence. They deploy discursive practices of resistance and arm, train, and fund resistance movements of various types and sizes and do not rely on an exclusively Shia identity. While it is certainly true that a shared religious

experience set the framework for Hezbollah's rise in southern Lebanon, it is dangerous to see it as strictly this and not to be able to recognize the commonality with movements the world over.

Despite the mobilizational value of the Shi'ite cultural heritage of oppression and suffering, which accorded Shi'ite politicization a distinctly communal character, the chief determinants of Shi'ite activism in Lebanon have been the same social, economic and political conditions which have spurred Third World radical and populist movements to action.³³

As Amal Saad-Ghorayeb goes on to explain, the initial Shia reaction was to ally themselves with nationalist and even socialist movements.³⁴ However, these movements in Lebanon, as in the broader Middle East, failed to coalesce or last very long because the secular nationalists were mostly seen as corrupt and as fronts for the West.³⁵ Anwar Sadat in Egypt, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and even the royal Saudis, though not secular, were seen as pawns of the West. The socialist and Communist movements faced as deep a problem because they had to defend not only secular but, in some cases, atheistic ideologies. Additionally, in places like Egypt and Syria where the ruling parties were nationalist and socialist the result was not empowerment and equality for the masses. Thus, frustration with other ideologies, coupled with constant misery and oppression, added to the political opportunity structures that Hezbollah was readily able to seize.³⁶

Concerning the two other major opportunity structures, the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, both can be said to have had a disproportionate impact on the Shia of the south.³⁷ According to Saad-Ghorayeb, the Shia in the south suffered the most fatalities of any other group in the 15-year civil war. And there were the other indignities of the poor during war; more than 100,000 Shia were evicted from Ras al-Naba'a, Beirut, in August 1976.³⁸ But it is the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in 1982 that is the most direct cause of Hezbollah's rise. They inflicted massive damage to 80 percent of Shia villages, including the almost total destruction of seven; they also killed more than 19,000 people and left 32,000 injured.³⁹ Not only did the civil war render the central government impotent to protect the Shia, the Israeli invasion had a religious and imperialist connotation that made the rise of a Shia religious resistance all but inevitable. The invasion may have catalyzed the rise of Hezbollah. Saad-Ghorayeb explains, "Expressed more explicitly by Nasru'llah, 'had the enemy not taken this step [the invasion], I do not know whether something called Hizb'allah would have been born. I doubt it'."⁴⁰ Yet, Lebanese Hezbollah claims not to want to impose Sharia or the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine in Lebanon. From their perspective, they seek to educate and lead by example. By creating a state within a state, by providing social services, by defending the weak, by resisting the oppressors, they are demonstrating the value of Sharia and the *velayat-e faqih* system. What Lebanese Hezbollah claims to do is prevent the United States and its allies from making Lebanon an oppressed colonial outpost or snuffing out the practice of

Sharia, where it is practiced. While Hezbollah as militia is not formally recognized as a part of the Lebanese military, their political participation guarantees the power of veto. This practice of maintaining the power of veto is a key feature of the designed redundancy aspect of Iran's strategic culture discussed above.

It is the author's contention that Iran is seeking to deploy a version of this model in Iraq. It does not seek outright control of Iraq. That is, it does not seek to fly its flag, so to speak, and overtly control the government in Baghdad. Rather it seeks a significant presence to influence decision making, enough freedom of movement for its agents to pursue Iran's strategic interests, and the ability to block events contrary to its interests—enhanced control of the northern Persian Gulf and a direct line of supply and support, a land bridge, to Lebanese Hezbollah, the Mediterranean, and the border with Israel. Iran is seeking to establish an arm of adaptive resistance to function with designed redundancy within the Iraqi system. Hezbollah remains a popular/populist movement and social mobilization influencer because of its myths of origin (much like the IRGC and the Popular Mobilization Forces [PMF], born out of conflict to serve the oppressed Shia) but also because it is “among” the people and of the people. This is what Iran was able to achieve in Lebanon with Hezbollah, and it is reasonable to expect it to want to replicate that success in Iraq. This is their motivation for supporting the PMF and its constituent militias. Yes, they are a highly cost-effective method of escalation control and plausible deniability, but their primary value lies in being an influence leverage point. In inciting and supporting Shia resistance in Lebanon, Iran has discovered a counter to the economic and military superiority of the West and its Middle Eastern allies through asymmetric political, military, and information warfare. The same model of resistance via proxy forces has been implemented in Iraq to great effect. The Popular Mobilization Forces, as a conglomerate of various factions, is certainly a proven military force; however, it is also an effective way to maintain unity of identity and effort among the various political wings as well.

In the case of Iraq, the opportunity structure is the chaos that began with the U.S. invasion in 2003 and continued through the recent battle against Daesh (a.k.a. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS). While Iraq is a Shia-majority country, it was not until the fall of Saddam Hussein that they gained the right of self-representation and only through the intervention of Grand Marja Ali al-Sistani that they gained one person, one vote self-rule. The methods by which Hussein and his Sunni ruling elite maintained control over a population that was more than 60 percent Shia could fairly be described as brutal oppression. Hussein, recognizing that the main opposition to his rule was not force of arms but ideas, spent a great deal of time suppressing political dissent and disrupting religious organization. This included assassination of key religious figures, closing of mosques, and other tactics and techniques.⁴¹ It is no surprise, then, that post-invasion Iraq was plunged into a brutal civil conflict with widespread retribution against former Ba'ath party members and brutality against Sunnis in what began to look like ethnic civil war. In the immediate

aftermath of the invasion, the United States was ill-prepared for the Sunni insurgency or the Shia retribution. The fall of Saddam Hussein was a great boon to Iran. Then, just a few years after the U.S. withdrawal, Daesh emerged as an existential threat to the Shia population as well as to the Iraqi state. These events are opportunity structures that afford Iran inroads to organize resistance mobilization just as they used the opportunity structures that emerged with the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

These opportunity structures are what the IRGC and its Special Forces wing, the Quds Force, prefer for their recruiting, training, and operating missions. Among the Shia, there was a mixture of fear and potential triumph, but a strong desire for becoming masters of their own destiny. So began the Shia resistance in Iraq. And with it came the various anti-Coalition insurgent groups, including Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Jaysh al-Mahdi, and the Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development, among others. Much of this was expressed in religious, quasi-messianic terms; for example, revenge for the murder of Hussein, the son of the fourth Caliph Ali, a martyr to the Shia was a common theme. The Shia Revival had come to Iraq, and the IRGC and Quds Force were leading the charge, just as they had done in Lebanon with Hezbollah. However, the connection between Hezbollah and Iraq is not merely metaphorical but actual as well. On 17 June of 2014, in response to Grand Marja al-Sistani's fatwa to defend the Shia holy sites of Iraq against Daesh, Hezbollah commander Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah said, "We are ready to sacrifice martyrs in Iraq five times more than what we sacrificed in Syria to protect shrines."⁴²

Hezbollah, of course, has had some presence in Iraq since the anti-Coalition insurgency in the early 2000s when they established Unit 3800.

Hizb'allah created Unit 3800, whose sole purpose was to support Iraqi Shiite militant groups targeting multinational forces there. According to U.S. intelligence, Unit 3800 sent a small number of personnel to Iraq to train hundreds of fighters in-country, while others were brought to Lebanon for more advanced training.⁴³

Then-Quds commander Soleimani credited Nasrallah for being a major factor in the PMF's success; he "praised Lebanese Hizb'allah for 'transferring experience to' the PMF: 'I should kiss the hand of the great sayyid Hassan Nasrallah'."⁴⁴ Just as in Lebanon in the late to mid-1980s, the IRGC and Quds Force were busy funding local and national politicians, militias, clerics, businessmen, and others. They funded Christian militias, Sunni groups, and competing Shia groups. They funded new groups and groups that had been resisting since the rule of Saddam Hussein.⁴⁵ Many of these groups changed names, leaders, some resisted arming themselves, and some grew more powerful through training against U.S. and Coalition forces. The IRGC supplied the resistance fighters with relatively cheap but fairly sophisticated weapons with which to harass and kill "occupying" forces.

There are two other points that should be noted. Like in Lebanon, the Shia movement now had another Arab face. Iran's Persian heritage, often a handicap in the Arab-dominated Middle East, could be overcome through having strong Arab allies. In the early days of the resistance in Iraq, there was reluctance by some in Iraq to fight alongside Iranians. Hezbollah was brought in to work alongside their Arab, Shia brothers. But Iraq is significantly different from Lebanon, offering a greater opportunity. Unlike Lebanon, Iraq is an Arab state with a large Shia majority. Secondly, the formal alliance, or deep influence model that Iran seems to be pursuing in Iraq indicates a potential domination of the northern Persian Gulf, a threatening posture to Kuwait and the other smaller Gulf states, and also a key building block to extending a direct supply line to allies in Syria and Lebanon.

For the IRGC/Quds Force, the Lebanese Civil War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the rise of Daesh are opportunity structures. They present opportunities to deploy strategic influence lines of effort such as 1) narratives of oppression, resistance, and triumph; 2) identity activation, where the narratives recall a shared history of suffering and oppression as Shia, memories of the martyrs, etc.; 3) mobilization where the masses receive social services, health care, even such mundane but important factors as garbage removal; and 4) disorientation, as the United States and its allies continue to see these social movements strictly through an anti-terror lens and Iran as a state sponsor of terror rather than through the lens of strategic culture and strategic influence. Understanding strategic culture and the mechanisms of opportunity structures can also help analysts, planners, and scholars understand where Iran's strategic influence campaigns have failed.

Although time and space restrictions preclude a deep dive into these two examples, they are important to note. In the early 1980s, Iran's IRGC attempted to establish a resistance movement in Bahrain but failed. A potential explanation lies in the nature of the difference in the opportunity structures in Lebanon and Bahrain. According to Sidney Tarrow, there are five key features of a political opportunity structure that enable social movements to emerge: "1) the opening of access to participation for new actors; 2) the evidence of political realignment within the polity; 3) the appearance of influential allies; 4) emerging splits within the elite; and 5) a decline in the state's capacity or will to repress dissent."⁴⁶ Each of these five features were present in Lebanon but not in Bahrain. Because there were no splits within the elite and no decline in the state's capacity or will to repress dissent, Quds Force attempts to erect a resistance movement failed. The Bahraini elite held firm with Saudi support.

A more recent example is the failure of Iran to achieve significant influence over the Kurds in northern Iraq. While it is true that there have been many instances of cooperation, particularly in fighting Daesh, the Kurds remain steadfast allies of the United States and deeply suspicious of Iranian motives and behavior in Iraq. Part of the explanation for the cooperation between these actors lies in the fact that the Kurds and the Iranians shared animosity to both

Saddam Hussein and Daesh, enabling cooperation. However, the Kurdish Regional Government does not share Iran's animosity to the United States; rather, they consider the United States allies. This implies, in part, that U.S. work with the Kurds created a buttress against Iranian influence. It also implies, in part, that identity, rooted in strategic culture, is an important factor in strategic influence. Calls to keep alive the long-suffering and oppression of Shia at the hands of Sunnis are not effective to Sunni audiences. For Kurds, who have suffered oppression at the hands of the Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian governments, calls to resist against the West, especially the United States, are also less effective. To be clear, then, the strategic culture of a state or people must align for strategic influence to be most effective in exploiting opportunity structures.

Conclusion

This article concludes with a few observations that have been made and supported throughout this work. To bolster allies and weaken and defeat adversaries requires a deep understanding of their strategic culture. One must first know oneself. Then one must know, deeply and thoroughly, one's adversaries. Past attempts to grapple with culture have brought great insights and some disappointments. While strategic culture is not the only discipline one must master, it is indispensable to security studies. Strategic influence, in turn, is the way strategic culture is operationalized. This is so in two significant ways. First, strategic culture gives context and meaning, sets limits to, and helps determine appropriate goals and choices for decision makers, including those designing strategic influence strategies or campaigns. Second, culture in general and strategic culture in particular provide content for strategic influence campaigns. That is, strategic culture provides context to condition strategic influence strategy and content to inform campaigns.

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, a country born in revolution and committed to revising the regional and international order, a strategic culture of resistance provides context and content to its strategic influence campaigns. The IRI maintains aggressive cultural outreach programs; funds, trains, and equips various militia groups; and rhetorically and materially supports religious and political actors in the name of resistance and in the service of eroding the will of the enemy, the objective of strategic influence. By turning local populations against the United States, Iran seeks to make the cost of U.S. operations, in terms of lives and resources, too costly to continue. They seek to erode the will of the United States to continue operating in the region so that they could take what they see as their rightful place as regional hegemon. To do so they activate identities; deploy narratives of oppression, resistance, and triumph; disorient their rivals; and mobilize populations and proxy groups.

Iran has been fairly successful in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. The United States must be very careful not to think of Iran's inroads in these states in strictly counterterror terms. Defeating armed militants ought not be the desired end state. Iran is expending more time and effort in creating social movements of

resistance than they are funding and arming militants. In Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria militias and their social movement partners are building infrastructure, protecting religious institutions, serving as bodyguards to clerics, providing social services, disseminating information and propaganda, and otherwise empowering social movements. Defeats on the battlefield and economic pain will not erode Iran's will. It has not after 40 years; there is no reason to think it will do so now. Eroding the will of an adversary whose strategic culture is characterized by resistance to U.S. presence and hegemony in the region requires a strategic influence response.

A vital lesson we can learn from Iran's strategic influence campaigns, successful or otherwise, is to rely heavily on understanding the strategic culture of its targets. Resistance as a theme does not resonate well with every target audience, and Iran is careful to calibrate its messaging accordingly. Resistance is useful in what is sometimes referred to as the Global South or what was once called the Third World. That is, in states whose wealth and status does not reach the level of the West. The consistent theme that these states are not achieving their full potential, often despite vast natural resources, is because of Western neocolonialism. This narrative gains relative traction depending on other strategic culture factors such as a direct history of colonialism, exploitative economic relations, support for oppressive regimes by the West, and the like. That this is the contemporary history of Iran's near abroad has enabled them to mobilize as soon as opportunity structures emerge.

Being able to understand, recognize, and, ideally, predict opportunity structures is another lesson we should learn well. As noted above, Tarrow identified five features of an opportunity structure, but much work has been done since then to solidify this approach. One important consideration for future research would be tying the strategic culture literature to the social mobilization literature, especially around opportunity structures, but not exclusively. For those seeking to disrupt Iranian strategic influence campaigns, or those of other rivals, it is important to understand where strategic culture factors are causing division among the elite, for example. Iran is adept at seeing these, often creating or exacerbating them in order to gain more influence.

And what may be the most important lesson we can learn from Iran's strategic influence is the relationship between force and narrative. The use of force, whether kinetic (targeted strikes) or economic (sanctions), has proved to be insufficient to erode Iran's will. What is more, not enough effort is put into crafting narratives geared at dividing the Iranian elite or furthering the divide between the Iranian people and their government. Iran uses force in support of its influence. The United States often uses information and influence campaigns in support of its kinetic strikes and sometimes unartfully. Take, for example, the killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani. The messaging prior to and post kinetic action failed to gain traction or make an impact over the counter-messaging by rivals. Their narratives of U.S. hegemony, violence, violation of Iraqi sovereignty, vengeance, etc. rang out loud and clear. U.S. messaging was con-

fused, relying on claims of intelligence on something he was planning, claims of him being a terrorist mastermind, and other narratives. Whether killing of Soleimani was justified is not the point. The point here is that the payoff in influence terms was lost. This is too often the case with the United States' use of influence campaigns. The United States cannot defeat Iran if it is not fighting the same fight as Iran.

Conceptualizing strategic influence as the operationalization of strategic culture provides analysts, planners, and scholars a useful lens for understanding how states like Iran build and exert influence. Creating and/or exploiting opportunity structures like the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, or framing the rise of Daesh as a U.S. plot to continue dominating Iraq are what Iran does well. They use these opportunity structures to find allies who share strategic culture values and provide them adequate resources to achieve desired end states. These are not just armed militias—they can be religious leaders, political actors, and social service providers. But even their use of armed militias is far more nuanced than just kinetic action. For Iran to achieve its strategic goal of regional hegemony it must get the United States to quit the field. That is, it must erode the will of the United States to continue committing resources to the region. This is the ultimate goal of strategic influence and highlights the importance of strategic influence as an analytical lens for understanding the behavior of states like Iran, Russia, and China.

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