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Iran: Sponsoring or Combating Terrorism?

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Abstract

Iran has a longstanding connection with terrorism, in particular after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It has been recognised as both a victim and state sponsor of terrorism, but has predominantly been accused of supporting terrorism worldwide. Iran has been accused of training, financing, and providing weapons and safe havens for non-state militant actors, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. While Iran considers such groups as national liberation movements, they are by contrast designated as terrorist groups according to other countries. At the same time, Iran has suffered from terrorist attacks, though Iranian security has proven much superior to its neighbours, such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Regardless of claims relating to Iran as a victim or sponsor of terrorism, no official policy or document has been published by the government by way of a counter-terrorism policy because any stated policy would be subject to accountability, human rights and the rule of law. In practice, its focus is placed on the 'War by Terror' as an external instrument as opposed to internal 'Counter-Terrorism'. By analysis of official documents, statements, and laws, both Persian and English sources, this article aims to clarify Iran's counter-terrorism policy and framework, and the actual practices of Iran in the Middle East.

Keywords: counter-terrorism, war by terror, Iran's policy.

Introduction

After the Islamic Revolution, the issue of terrorism became a crucial topic in Iranian society, continuing to be so until today, both as a victim and state sponsor at the same time. The accusation of terrorism against Iran arises in connection with different eras and types of

involvement. One prominent aspect is Iranian support for non-state militant actors, especially Hamas and Hezbollah, including hostage-taking by the latter¹ and the involvement by both in militant activities in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria,² although the official line is that the legitimate governments of Lebanon and Syria requested support from Iran.³ Iran has been accused of training, financing, and providing weapons and safe havens to non-state militant actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and other Palestinian groups. Though Iran justifies its support of such groups based on their right to self-defence, labelling them as ‘national liberation movements’ in the face of Israeli occupation, they have been designated as terrorist groups by a number of countries and international bodies.⁴ Consequently, Iran was designated as a state sponsor of terrorism by the US.⁵ A second aspect is the assassination of Iranian dissidents living abroad in the 1990s,⁶ such as Bakhtiar, Ghassemlou and Sharafkandi. Third is involvement in, or support of, terrorist attacks against the West, Arab states and Israeli interests.⁷ As an example, 78 terrorist incidents in Western Europe were attributed to Iran in the 1980s.⁸ The other aspect of terrorism affecting Iran is internal political violence against Iranian citizens and security forces caused by counter-revolutionaries, ethnic minorities, and cross-border groups. However, the aim of this paper is not to explain every attack by, or upon, Iran but to explain the overall terrorism landscape and especially some of the stances of Iran which are often viewed as contradictory in the West.

The invasion of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979 was the major turning point in the foreign policy of the US and Iran,⁹ providing a basis for designating Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1984. Further, Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa on Salman Rushdie, the author of *Satanic Verses*, in 1989 further damaged the Iran’s relationship with the West.¹⁰ Iranian involvement with non-state militant actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, became problematic after attacks in Beirut (1983), Buenos Aires (1992), Khobar Towers bombing

(1996). Consequently, powerful countries imposed sanctions on Iran in order to weaken Iran's financial support for the designated groups. Following those events, the US–Iran relationship deteriorated, and the US adopted and enforced through sanctions a policy of containment. Iran was accused of dozens of attacks around the world, and was frequently blamed for destabilising the Middle East and intervention in Arab neighbours' domestic issues. For instance, from the outset of the Islamic Revolution, Bahrain considers itself vulnerable to threats from Iran for a number of reasons, including emulation of the Islamic (Shia-based) movement, the Iran-Iraq war, naval confrontations between the US and Iran, perceived attempts to overthrow the existing regime, and the renewal of historical Iran's claim over the sovereignty of Bahrain.¹¹ Further, the Government of Bahrain claimed that the Bahraini Hezbollah organisation is funded by Iran to carry out terrorist attacks.¹² Nevertheless, Iran denies all involvement, and the US has often failed to provide convincing evidence of Iran's complicity in the attacks.¹³ In turn, Iran blames the US, Israel, and its allies for the instability of the Middle East, which suffers from extremism as a result of their interventions and occupations.¹⁴

Alongside these external challenges, Iran has been exposed to violent threats from three internal dimensions. First, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, various groups were militarily opposed to the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. Second, domestic separatists, such as the Kurds and Baluch, sought to acquire greater autonomy at the cost of potential fragmentation of Iran. Finally, Iran is located in the geopolitical region of a seemingly continuous war zone which attracts terrorist groups, in particular around Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Terrorist groups such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS are thus the primary foreign threats for security and stability in Iran. Iran considers itself a frontline actor in combating terrorism in accordance with the international standards and its own policies to

resolve the conflicts in the Middle East.¹⁵ Some of the major terrorist incidents will be explained in the next section.

Iran has cooperated with some states and non-state militant actors in order to maintain its stability and to confront the US and Israel in the Middle East.¹⁶ Iran has also condemned the US and other Western countries for allegedly supporting terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.¹⁷ Iran believes that the chief cause of extremism in the Middle East emanates from colonialism, racism, occupation and foreign intervention, such as military aggression against Afghanistan, Iraq, the Palestinian people, and Syria.¹⁸ Therefore, the issue of terrorism persists as a major ground for hostility between Iran and other countries, even after Iran and other P5+1 countries¹⁹ reached an agreement through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on 14 July 2015, leading to the lifting of nuclear-related (but not human rights related or terrorism related) sanctions on Iran. Furthermore, even the nuclear sanctions faltered when, on May 8, 2018, President Trump decided to cease the US's participation in the JCPOA and to re-impose sanctions.²⁰

A number of studies have been conducted into the accusation that Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism through the support of organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas.²¹ This article's contribution to the debate is to offer an in-depth explanation of the counter-terrorism policy of Iran from an Iranian perspective. Although Iran maintains itself as a victim of terrorism, it has not published any documents to demonstrate the exact number of terrorist attacks within Iran, nor has it elucidated in detail its strategies in relation to terrorism. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discover how Iran combats (or, allegedly, propagates) terrorism through the policies of counter-terrorism, prevention, protection, and international cooperation.

To this end, this article is divided into three sections. First, Iran is discussed as a victim of terrorist attacks by various groups of dissident nationalist, foreign, and separatist terrorism.

It is demonstrated that although Iran has not been directly involved in the Middle East conflicts after the Iraq war was ended in 1988,²² the terrorist attacks inside its borders are salient. The second section pertains to Iran's offensive actions through financing and equipping of predominantly Shia non-state militant actors, analysing the effect of this policy on the combating of terrorism and national safeguarding from terrorist attacks. The third and final section elaborates on Iran's four policies for combating terrorism, namely the policy of counter-terrorism, the policy of prevention, the policy of protection, and the policy of international cooperation. In doing so, this article demonstrates that Iran's focus is on its external 'war by terrorism' against colonialism, racism, occupation and foreign intervention rather than internal protection of citizens through counter-terrorism.

Iran as a Victim of Terrorist Attacks

Dissident Nationalist Terrorism

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, various groups opposed Ayatollah Khomeini. The leading opposition group was the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), with a background in Marxist and Islamist interpretations. The MEK survived the test of time and developed into the most disciplined armed organisation opposing the Islamic Republic.²³ The MEK was established in 1965 in opposition to the Shah and the US. It targeted US civilians and military personnel, supporting the US embassy hostage-taking in Tehran.²⁴ Following the 1979 Revolution, although the MEK first endorsed Ayatollah Khomeini, they later attempted to overthrow the government but failed and fled to Paris and then Iraq.²⁵ Members of MEK sought refuge in Camp Ashraf near the Iran–Iraq border, and were financially and militarily supported by the regime of Saddam Hussein, the former leader of Iraq.

From 1980 to 2003 (when MEK's weapons were confiscated by the US intervention mission in Iraq),²⁶ they carried out several terrorist attacks in both Iran and on Iranian

interests in other countries.²⁷ Selected attacks by the MEK included the bombing of the Islamic Republic Party Headquarters (1981) which led to the death of approximately 70 high-ranking officials; attacks on diplomats (1987 and 1994); an explosion in the Imam Reza Mausoleum (1989); attacks on 13 Iranian embassies around the world (1992); the Presidential Palace; the Defence Ministry and military bases (2000); and a motor attack on the Supreme Court and other governmental buildings (2001).²⁸ In retaliation, the MEK's members were executed in prison,²⁹ including those who had no hand in planning Mujahedin activities and even those nearing the end of their incarceration.³⁰ The process of conviction and execution of the members of the MEK was characterised as a violation of fair trial and due process.³¹ As they were buried in mass graves,³² the total execution toll is difficult to estimate, and so estimates vary from 1,000 to 30,000. The MEK had been designated as a terrorist group by the US,³³ UK,³⁴ and EU. However, it was removed from their blacklists in 2012, 2008, and 2009 respectively due to the curtailment of terrorist activities.³⁵ Iran condemned the delisting of the MEK and highlighted the Western double standards on terrorism.³⁶ The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, condemned the US methods of separating 'good' and 'bad' terrorists, asserting that this 'shows terrorism is bad if terrorists are not America's servants, but if terrorists become America's servants, then they are not bad.'³⁷

The supporters of the MEK still believe that the organisation is capable of replacing the current regime,³⁸ and it continues to have some powerful Western supporters.³⁹ Regardless of the US and the Western support for the MEK,⁴⁰ as a group which carried out terrorist activities, it does not have widespread public backing in Iran. They have killed dozens of civilians, and a Human Rights Watch report indicates violations of human rights inside the organisation, ranging from detention of its members who wish to leave the organisation to torture.⁴¹

Foreign Terrorism

The three major terrorist groups that have threatened Iran's interests are the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS. Iran has viewed these groups as terroristic in nature. Iran has demographic ties with Afghanistan, in particular the West of Afghanistan where Farsi speakers and Shia are prominent. The stability and development of Afghanistan can help Iran's interests and security. But after the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in 1996 and capture of Mazar-i Sharif which led to the massacre of the Shia Hazara population and nine Iranians with diplomatic credentials,⁴² Iran decided to retaliate. Therefore, Iran prepared troops along the Afghan border and in 2002, during the US-led war in Afghanistan, coordinated with the US to topple the Taliban, by opening ports for transiting humanitarian aid, rescuing US pilots, and urging the Northern Alliance forces to cooperate with the US force.⁴³

Iran has an off-and-on-again relationship with Al-Qaeda; it formally announced that Al-Qaeda is a terrorist group,⁴⁴ but it is believed that Iran has provided sanctuary and safe haven for selected Al-Qaeda members.⁴⁵ Further, as is stated in the 9/11 Commission Report, the relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda traces back to the 1990s when Iran provided training supports for Al-Qaeda both in Iran and Lebanon through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah.⁴⁶

After the 9/11 attacks, vast crowds came on to the street with candlelit vigils for the victims. The officials, and President Khatami condemned the attack, and the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, said that 'mass killings of human beings are catastrophic acts which are condemned... wherever they may happen and whoever the perpetrators and the victims may be' and called the fight against terrorism a 'Holy war'.⁴⁷ In November 2013 and February 2014, a Lebanon-based Al-Qaeda-linked group attacked the Iranian embassy alongside the cultural and diplomatic building in Beirut because of Iranian support for the Assad regime in Syria.⁴⁸

However, the main allegations of support for terrorism against Iran are that Iran provided training assistance to Al-Qaeda during the 1990s, namely by facilitating the transit of Al-Qaeda operatives through Iran to Afghanistan, and by providing safe house controlled by the IRGC for Al-Qaeda members, including Saif al-Adl and Abu Hafs al-Mauratani, Hamza Bin Laden, Bin Laden's wives, and even Osama Bin Laden, himself, before he was killed.⁴⁹ Although Iran denied the presence of Bin Laden in Iran, it has acknowledged the presence of five hundred low-level Al-Qaeda operatives in Iran.⁵⁰ In July 2016, the US Department of the Treasury designated three Al-Qaeda members as located in Iran,⁵¹ pursuant to the Executive Order 13224.⁵² Iran has denied any firm relationship with Al-Qaeda; it has announced that senior members of Al-Qaeda are in custody,⁵³ but has failed to release any information regarding their names or the process of prosecution. Iran extradited dozens of Al-Qaeda members, to Saudi Arabia in 2003.⁵⁴ Nevertheless it is believed that Iran has not cooperated regarding extradition of the arrested Al-Qaeda members to the US and the UK.⁵⁵ It is reported that Iran wanted MEK members in exchange for Al-Qaeda members captured by Iran.⁵⁶ A further allegation against Iran is that Iran facilitates the travel of Al-Qaeda members by not placing stamps in their passports.⁵⁷ Iranian officials, however, state that the list of individuals and groups associated with Al-Qaeda has been distributed to the relevant authorities, including, the banking, financial institutions and border guards.⁵⁸

Iran's ties to Al-Qaeda remain uncertain but probably limited due to their different strategic plans coupled with their deep-rooted religious divergence. On the one hand, Al-Qaeda stresses the dangers to Shia from Salafi Islam is due to its cooperation with the US,⁵⁹ and Bin Laden also noted that 'the big deceit for the Shia is that they think they are in God's religion, while they are in the religion of the men of their authority'.⁶⁰ On the other hand, Al-Qaeda leaders have also referred sympathetically to the risk to the Shia through a list of questions that were presented to Zarqawi, including the question, 'Do the brothers forget that

both we and the Iranians need to refrain from harming each other at this time in which the Americans are targeting us?'.⁶¹ Since the pressing demands for Iran are national security, its power in the region, and countering the US and Israel, it is possible that Iran may indeed utilise Al-Qaeda as leverage against the US and Israel in a bid to maintain safety from Al-Qaeda threats.

However, the result of the 9/11 Commission Report, and the interrogation data from Khalid Sheikh Mohammad and Ramzi Binalshibh, reveal some interesting points.⁶² First, these two detainees at Guantanamo Bay denied any other reason for the hijackers' travel to Iran other than transit on their way to or from Afghanistan. Second, the detainees denied that there was any relationship between the hijackers and Hezbollah. Third, no evidence has been disclosed that Iran or Hezbollah were aware of the 9/11 attacks.⁶³ Regardless of the mentioned factors, recently Iran, the IRGC, and the Central Bank, as defendants, have been held liable to pay billions of dollars in damages to victims of the 9/11 attacks.⁶⁴

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2012 prompted Iran to seize the potential opportunity to enhance its influence in Iraq and Syria. Iran is vigorously opposed to ISIS on the basis of its foreign policy, different religious viewpoints, ISIS's attacks in Iraq and ISIS's claim to statehood.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Iraq has been a significant neighbour for Iran; it has been a foe, a rival, and a strategic partner over decades. Due to economic, political, and religious ties between Iran and Iraq (approximately 60–75% of Iraqis are Shia),⁶⁶ the foreign policy of Iran is to maintain Iraq's security against any terrorist groups by supporting the Iraqi government in combatting ISIS.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, rejected direct cooperation with the US-led military cooperation to defeat ISIS.⁶⁸

ISIS's religious beliefs are starkly different from Iran's. ISIS follows the Sunni branch of Islam and believes that 'Islam is a religion of the sword not a religion of peace'.⁶⁹ ISIS

aims to annihilate the Shia, the official religion of Iran, and considers Shias to be apostates.⁷⁰ In 2017, ISIS released a video ebtitled ‘The Farsi Land: From Yesterday till Today’ in which directly threatening Iran for its tolerance towards Jews, its role in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, and its behaviour towards the Sunnis living in Iran.⁷¹ In June 2017, some months after this ISIS video appeared, five members of ISIS attacked the Iranian Parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, killing 17 people and wounding 42.⁷² In retaliation, Iran launched a missile strike and targeted the ISIS military base in Deir ez-Zour in Syria.⁷³ This missile strike was a significant action for several reasons. First, it illustrated the importance of internal security threats for Iran. Second, it was the first time Iran had used a missile since the Iran–Iraq War (1980-1988), demonstrating its ability and power in spite of international pressure to stop the missile programme.

Separatist Terrorism

As Iran comprises of a variety of ethnic groups (Persians, Kurds, Baluch, Azeris, and Arabs), it always fears fragmentation.⁷⁴ The prominent domestic threat is from the separatists, such as the Kurds and Baluch.⁷⁵ Iran’s borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and in particular the Sunni provinces, are always serious sources of potential instability.

Jundollah (the Army of God) was a prominent Sunni terrorist groups established by Abdolmalek Rigi in 2003.⁷⁶ Its primary aim was to fight for the equal rights of Baluch and Sunnis, who represent 1-2% (two million) of the population in Iran.⁷⁷ Such minorities have encountered discrimination, such as the closure of their religious centres in Sistan and Baluchistan.⁷⁸ Jundollah is responsible for killing dozens of officials, in particular senior members of the IRGC and civilians. Their tactics ranged from bombing markets and mosques to hostage-taking.⁷⁹ In 2010, Abdolmalek Rigi, the leader of Jundollah, was arrested and then confessed that he was supported by the US.⁸⁰ He was then executed.⁸¹ The group was thereafter weakened, but the US still designated Jundollah as a foreign terrorist group in

2010.⁸² Following this event, the Jeish ul-Adl (Army of Justice), a Sunni terrorist group opposed to Iran, launched its military activity. They have continued to carry out terrorist attacks since 2013 through the abduction and killing of Iran–Pakistan border guards.⁸³

The Kurds have also committed violent attacks in Iran. The Kurds, who inhabit four neighbouring countries, enjoy a form of self-rule in two of them, Iraq and Syria. There are 30 million Kurds: 14m (18%) are in Turkey, 8.1m (10%) in Iran, 5.5m (17.5%) in Iraq and 1.7m (9.7%) in Syria.⁸⁴ The Kurds have a long history of armed conflict in their attempts to establish an independent state.⁸⁵ The main Kurdish groups are the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraq, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey, and the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) both in Iran.

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the British and French divided the region in the Treaty of Sevres (1920).⁸⁶ The settlement proposed the creation of Kurdistan, but as Mustafa Kemal gained control over Turkey in 1923, he did not recognise Kurdish independence. The Kurds have since fought for independence, and the main Kurdish group in Turkey is now the PKK, which has been controlled by Abdullah Öcalan since the 1970s. Its purpose is to establish a sovereign Kurdish state, independent of four regions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. From 1984, the PKK embarked on its military struggle against the Turkish government until 1993, when it declared its first cease-fire.⁸⁷ However, the arrest of Öcalan in 1999 was a blow for the PKK.⁸⁸ Despite several declarations of cease-fire in 1999, 2004, 2006, and 2009, it never ceased its attacks.⁸⁹ In 2015, the PKK was the fifth largest terrorist perpetrator in the world. With 238 attacks, it was only surpassed by the Taliban, ISIS, Boko Haram, and the Maoists.⁹⁰ The PKK has been designated as a foreign terrorist group by the US (1997),⁹¹ the UK (2001),⁹² the EU (2002),⁹³ Turkey,⁹⁴ Iraq, and Iran.⁹⁵

The Kurdish population of Iraq has experienced a problematic relationship with the government of Iraq, eventually leading to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992. The two main Kurdish groups are the KDP (established in 1946), controlled by Massoud Barzani (President of the KRG), and the PUK, controlled by Jalal Talabani until his death in 2017 (he was the former President of Iraq from 2005 to 2014). The struggle and ambition of the Barzani tribe to establish an independent Kurdistan recently culminated in an independence referendum in which 92.73% of the votes were for the independence of Kurdistan.⁹⁶ However, the Iraqi court annulled the result and found the referendum unconstitutional.⁹⁷ More importantly, no other country recognised the result or supported the claim to independence.⁹⁸

The modern era of conflict between the government of Iran and the Kurds stems back to when Qazi Mohammad announced the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad, Iran, in 1946.⁹⁹ Despite Russian backing, he was swiftly defeated by the Iranian troops.¹⁰⁰ This was a pivotal turning point in the history of Iran and the Kurds.¹⁰¹ After the execution of Qazi Mohammad in 1947, the Kurds had ups and downs in their struggle to achieve their independent state. Since the outset of the 1979 Revolution, the Kurds have remained a threat to the Iranian government.¹⁰² The leading demand of Kurdish parties is more autonomy in Kurdistan,¹⁰³ but the Iranian government opposes it on the basis that autonomy will lead to separation. The nature of the relationship between the government and a variety of Kurdish parties has fluctuated and varies from compromise to armed opposition. This variation stems from the stances of different presidencies.¹⁰⁴

After the Revolution, the KDP demanded autonomy in Kurdistan in a federally structured Iran, a demand immediately rejected by Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁰⁵ Thereupon, the KDPI launched an armed struggle against the government.¹⁰⁶ The battle continued until its leader, Ghassemlou, was assassinated during meetings with Iranian representatives in Vienna

in 1989.¹⁰⁷ His successor, Sadeq Sharafkandi, was also killed in the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin in 1992.¹⁰⁸ It is believed that the Iranian regime employed assassination missions against the Kurds in the 1990s, and it is estimated that the murders amounted to 200.¹⁰⁹ The Mykonos case resulted in the condemnation of Iranian officials (the Supreme Leader, the President, the foreign minister, and the minister of intelligence and security) as well as the order for the international arrest for Follahian, the former Iranian Minister of Intelligence.¹¹⁰

The other group that has carried out attacks against Iran is the PJAK. Iran describes the PJAK, an affiliated group with the PKK in Turkey, as a terrorist organisation.¹¹¹ They are alleged to be financially and militarily supported by the US and Israel, just as Iran supports Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel.¹¹² However, the PJAK was designated as a terrorist group by the US in 2009.¹¹³

Most of the political activists have been imprisoned and executed on various national security charges which include Moharebeh (enmity against God),¹¹⁴ an offence often used for terrorist activities (described further below). Claims to legitimacy through self-determination are rejected.¹¹⁵

War by Terror: Iran as a State Sponsor of Terrorism

Terrorist Acts versus Acts of Martyrdom

By examining the history of Iran, one can demonstrate that the concept of martyrdom is one of the most crucial aspects of Iranian identity and religion.¹¹⁶ Martyrdom has been used in a broad variety of contexts. In this section, three contexts of the use of martyrdom are briefly explored to understand the philosophy behind Iran's support for the non-state militant actors: victory in the 1979 Islamic Revolution; the Iran–Iraq war; and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

In the Shia view, the legendary third Imam Hussein is a symbol of martyrdom who sacrificed his life to preserve Islam.¹¹⁷ The 'Karbala narrative' and 'the event of Ashura'¹¹⁸

do not relate to an act of suicide by Imam Hussain, because in Islam taking of one's own life is strictly forbidden.¹¹⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini used this religious event to substantiate a theology that is broadly accepted by Iranian society. Khomeini divided society into two classes: the oppressed (Imam Hussein), and the oppressor (Yazid, the opponent of Imam Hussein).¹²⁰ The context thereby associated with the 1979 Islamic Revolution is the concept of martyrdom that causes people to prepare and fight against the Shah to eliminate tyranny and replace it with justice.

The second context of the use of martyrdom is related to the Iran–Iraq war, which was a facilitator to spread the idea of the oppressed–oppressor paradigm, further highlighting the importance of martyrdom. In the Iran-Iraq war, martyrdom was legitimised to maintain national independence and territorial sovereignty.¹²¹ In the eight-year war, 867,218 people were killed,¹²² and regardless of the religious origins of martyrdom, it was transformed into a nationalistic symbol, and was thus socially accepted even by Iranian Christians.

Even after the war, officials sought to exploit the oppressed-oppressor idea as well as the concept of martyrdom. In the contemporary political context, the oppressor is Israel and its allies, and the oppressed is Palestine. Ayatollah Khomeini sanctioned martyrdom operations and argued that ‘the Shia, we, welcome any opportunity to scarify our blood’.¹²³ Moreover, the Constitution states ‘with respect to the Islamic content of the Iranian Revolution, which was a movement for the victory of all the oppressed people over their oppressors, the constitution prepares the ground for continuing this revolution at home and abroad’.¹²⁴ It adds that ‘while Iran completely abstains from any kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world.’¹²⁵ Therefore, with this mindset of martyrdom, Iranian officials have a justification to sponsor non-state militant actors in order to defend the rights of the oppressed people around the world. Although this concept of martyrdom is

derived from religion, in practice it is used as a political concept to maintain national state interests.

Non-state Militant Actors Supported by Iran

The allegation against Iran is not limited to supporting proxies in the shape of non-state militant actors, for it is alleged that Iran has also directly planned and carried out several terrorist activities, including explosions in Paris and Italy by the Committee for Safeguarding the Islamic Revolution in reaction to French and Italian support for Iraqi regime in the 1980s,¹²⁶ an explosion in a crowded Paris shopping centre by the Committee of Solidarity with Arab and Middle Eastern Political Prisoners in 1986,¹²⁷ and an attempt to assassinate in France Shahpur Bakhtiar, former prime minister of the Shah, by Anis Naccache in 1980, followed by his assassination in 1991 by Iranian agent Vakili Rad.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is not to refer to all alleged-attacks against Iran; rather, the focus is on the apparently contradictory policy of Iran and how it can be understood.

Iran's tie to Hezbollah has been described as 'the most robust relationship between a state and a designated terrorist group in history'.¹²⁹ In response to the invasion of Israel in Southern Lebanon, members of the IRGC, Iranian intelligence, and diplomats helped to establish Hezbollah in Lebanon as a proxy in 1982.¹³⁰ Hezbollah's founders agreed on two principles for the establishment of the organisation: belief in the Velayat-e faqih theory (Guardianship of the Jurist),¹³¹ and the armed struggle against Israel.¹³² In the early 1980s, one of the Hezbollah officials noted that 'our relation with Iran is one of a junior to a senior'.¹³³ However, it is not clear to what extent Hezbollah is under the control of Iran, as another Hezbollah official has asserted that, 'there is no connection between Iranian and Hezbollah administration'.¹³⁴ In 2016, Hassan Nasrallah said that 'we are open about the fact that Hizbullah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from Iran'.¹³⁵ The amount of support by Iran (detailed below) shows that

Hizbullah and Iran have a close relationship, in which Iran might exert some control over Hizbullah activities.

Hezbollah has two wings: socio-political, and military. While the political wing carries out political, social and charitable work, the military wing's activities are directed principally against Israel, though actions against rivals for internal discipline are also undertaken. In 1992, Hezbollah transformed the militia's outward face into a political one through participation in the Lebanese elections.¹³⁶ The political wing became important both in Lebanon's domestic issues, and in defending its military apparatus. The creation of a political wing assists Hezbollah in preserving its legitimacy in order to expand its supporters, in particular amongst the Shia community of Lebanon.¹³⁷ Hezbollah has 12 members of the Parliament and a cooperative relationship with the party, Christian Free Patriotic Movement, which holds the Presidency.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, both wings of Hezbollah were designated as foreign terrorist groups by the US,¹³⁹ while only its military wing was proscribed by the UK.¹⁴⁰ The reason for not proscribing the political wing is that the UK takes into consideration the role of Hezbollah in political structures in Lebanon and Palestine which it may wish to engage with.¹⁴¹

There is a complex relationship between Hezbollah and Iran. Iran provides approximately \$100–200 million annually to Hezbollah.¹⁴² Some funding is consumed for social welfare in Lebanon by the socio-political wing as humanitarian aid, such as housing, hospitals, and employment of Lebanese citizens who have suffered from the Israeli attacks in 1982 and 2006.¹⁴³ In addition to the direct financial sponsorship, thousands of Hezbollah members are sent to the training facilities in Iran, or are trained by Iranian IRGC officials in the Lebanese camps.¹⁴⁴ In return, Hezbollah preserves its loyalty to Iran and strikes against Iran's foreign enemies.¹⁴⁵

In addition to the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran financially and militarily supports some Palestinian groups that fight Israel. They comprise Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). Although these Palestinian groups are mostly Sunni in membership, Iran maintains a relationship with them due to their common goal to fight Israel. Amongst these groups, Hamas is most important to Iran due to its influence in the Gaza Strip, which it has governed since 2007.¹⁴⁶ Hamas was founded in 1987 with the aims of eliminating Israel and establishing an Islamic State in Palestine. Similar to Hezbollah, it has two wings: the Izz ad-Din and al-Qassam Brigades, a military wing, and a political wing. Hamas' place in the political and electoral process of Palestine since 2007 has developed, despite its designation as a terrorist group (with some distinction as to the wings),¹⁴⁷ achieving a majority in Parliament, as well as appointments as Palestinian Authority ministers such as the Interior Minister.¹⁴⁸

Iran directly supports Hamas with money and weapons. The financial support varies between £20 and £50 million a year,¹⁴⁹ depending on other funding sources and political links.¹⁵⁰ In addition, the political climate between Iran and Hamas is entirely different from Hezbollah. For example, Iran and Hamas were in disagreement over supporting the Assad regime in Syria.¹⁵¹ At the same time, a high-level delegation of Hamas participated in the Iranian Presidential inauguration in 2017, which illustrates a level of reconciliation between them. In addition, Iran has established a training centre in Lebanon to provide facilities for Palestinians, costing £50 million annually.¹⁵² The practice of providing weapons to the Palestinians has been evident since 2002, when the Israeli authorities seized the Karin a vessel full of arms, accusing Iran of transferring the ammunition to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Iranian officials denied Iran's involvement in the operation and called it a plot of Israel to discredit both Iran and the Palestinian Authorities.¹⁵³

These Iranian proxies sometimes operate alongside the IRGC-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), governed by Commander Qasem Suleimani. The IRGC-QF has a foreign policy role in exerting influence throughout the region by supporting pro-Iranian policies; it embodies approximately 10,000 to 15,000 personnel.¹⁵⁴ The IRGC-QF is in the conflict zone of Iraq and Syria fighting ISIS as a foreign terrorist organisation as well as the Syrian militants opposed to Bashar Al-Assad's regime.¹⁵⁵ In fact, these actors supported by Iran have aided Iran in combatting terrorism in countries which have either share common borders or common interests. The coalition of Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and other supporting Iraqi and Syrian militias have claimed a profound impact in the defeat of ISIS. In November 2017 in a victory letter to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Qasem Sulaimani announced the end of ISIS and thanked the Supreme leader Ayatollah Sistani, spiritual leader of Iraqi Shia, and Sayyad Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, for their presence in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵⁶

Iranian Policy in Combating Terrorism

Counter-Terrorism Policy

The counter-terrorism policy of Iran aims to stop attacks inside and outside of Iran where they are viewed as terrorism and not acts of national liberation. It attempts to detect threats and thwart them through productive dialogue between responsible organisations, with the end goal of prosecuting those responsible. The coherent statement of Iranian policy is related to internal national security and external power and influence in the Middle East, so that what others might see as the paradoxical counter-terrorism policies of Iran, sponsoring and combating terrorism, can work in achieving Iran's aims. By supporting some organisations, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian groups, Iran is able to maintain both its security inside borders and its power and influence outside borders. The policy of counter-terrorism, which is considered part of the defence and security affairs, is entirely under the control of

the Supreme Leader. The general policy, recently published document by the Supreme Leader,¹⁵⁷ refers to boosting defensive ability as follows: by allocating at least 5% of the budget for defence; and the development of missile power, the capacity to produce major weapons and equipment, the expansion of passive and cyber defences, and the provision of stable border security by software and hardware obstruction.¹⁵⁸

The major organisations trying to thwart terrorism are the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the law enforcement police (NAJA), the Military (Artesh), and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These units make a sustained effort to coordinate with each other under the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) with approval from the Supreme Leader. The chief of the general staff, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, and the supreme commanders-in-chief of the security and armed forces are all appointed by the Supreme Leader.¹⁵⁹

The functions of the MOIS are collecting internal and external intelligence, monitoring dissidents, and uncovering conspiracy and sabotage.¹⁶⁰ In addition, all the other institutions must share information with this ministry. Although the ministry must work under the authority of the President, the MOIS has a direct responsibility toward the Supreme Leader in terms of external operations.¹⁶¹ The operations are conducted by MOIS agents called 'Unknown Soldiers of Imam Zaman'.¹⁶² One of its roles is to keep track of potential activists who are in ethnic and religious minority groups. For example, it is believed that in the 1990s the MOIS took part in the 'chain murders' of Iranian dissidents outside of Iran. Recently, the MOIS announced that 20 terrorist teams¹⁶³ and 41 members of ISIS were arrested in 2015 and 2017.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, 58 ISIS-related groups' activities have been frustrated before they could materialise.¹⁶⁵

The next unit is the NAJA, which is primarily under the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior and, in some cases, under the Deputy Chief Commander of the Joint Forces. The

relevant counter-terrorism units are the Border Guard Command, the Anti-Terror unit (NOPO), and intelligence and public security.¹⁶⁶ The dominant role of NAJA is limited to inside the border areas.¹⁶⁷ In the recent attack by ISIS on the Iranian Parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, NOPO played an important role in inhibiting terrorist activity.

Artesh and the IRGC have overlapping duties; Artesh is active on both the borders of Iran also outside Iran, but it is not as powerful as the IRGC. The IRGC is the foremost organisation for counter-terrorism and intelligence, both inside and beyond the border. The Supreme Leader controls its activities.¹⁶⁸ The Statute of the IRGC considers various missions, of which include fighting with those who seek to sabotage, the overthrow of the regime, acting against the Islamic Revolution of Iran, and disarming persons who carry and maintain weapons and ammunition.¹⁶⁹

The IRGC uses irregular, asymmetric, unconventional, and guerrilla warfare to combat terrorism.¹⁷⁰ The IRGC-Quds Force is responsible for extraterritorial missions, reporting directly to the Supreme Leader as its commander-in-chief. However, the IRGC and IRGC-QF are infamous for supporting designated groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas.¹⁷¹ As a result, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated the IRGC-QF and the IRGC pursuant to the global terrorism Executive Order 13224 in 2007 and 2017 respectively.¹⁷²

Iran's Parliament has recently increased the budget for ballistic missiles and foreign operations by the IRGC in a bid to prevent terrorist attacks on its neighbours.¹⁷³ Officials claim that 'Iran is in the frontline of combating terrorism and religious extremism in the Middle East due to humanitarian and strategic reasons, not for sectarian and political ones.'¹⁷⁴

Given the number of different units with varying counter-terrorism strategies, there may be disagreements regarding their policies. However, since there are not any open

materials, it is difficult to prove such a claim. For instance, after the missile was fired by the IRGC on the ISIS base in Syria in June 2017, the IRGC announced that the Supreme Leader had agreed to this attack, whilst the President and the minister of the MOIS declared that the decision was made in the SNSC, of which the President is its head.¹⁷⁵ The MOIS and IRGC simultaneously cooperate and compete with each other.¹⁷⁶ Such contradictions between the units clearly demonstrate levels of disagreement, not only amongst the relevant units of counter-terrorism, but also between the Supreme Leader and the President. This is especially clear regarding the counter-terrorism policy.

The next aim of the counter-terrorism policy is to prosecute those responsible for terrorist-related activities in order to deny a safe haven to the perpetrators of the crime.¹⁷⁷ However, Iran is yet to enact a comprehensive Anti-Terrorism Act. Terrorists are charged with the crime of Moharebeh (enmity against God) and Fesad fel-arze (spreading corruption on the earth) under the Islamic Penal Code.¹⁷⁸ As the Penal Code is derived from *Shari'ah*,¹⁷⁹ these two crimes are practically equivalent to the crime of terrorism. Moharebeh is defined as 'drawing a weapon on the life, property or honor [referring to female members of one's family] of people or to cause terror as it creates insecurity.'¹⁸⁰ Fesad fel-arze refers to a person who 'commits crimes against individuals' physical integrity and crimes against national security causing disruption to the economic structure of the country, commits arson and destruction, distributes poisonous or dangerous substances, or runs corruption and prostitution centres'.¹⁸¹

Policy of Prevention

The policy of prevention means countering the ideological challenges of terrorism as well as preventing citizens from becoming terrorists. As a broad concept, the policy of prevention includes preventing radicalisation, recruitment, and mobilisation of individuals into terrorist groups.¹⁸² It targets those whose aims are the destruction of civilisation, giving rise to

Islamophobia, and creating fertile ground for further intervention of foreign forces in the region.¹⁸³ To fully understand the policy of prevention, the important elements of interdiction of foreign terrorist fighters and indoctrination have been adopted for discussion here.¹⁸⁴

The interdiction of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) is one of the chief objectives in preventing terrorism, which can be achieved through the prevention of travel. Not only can FTFs undermine the policy of Iran in the chaotic region of the Middle East, they are also prepared to commit attacks inside Iran. Therefore, a vital step in combatting terrorism is to prevent suspected terrorists from joining terrorist organisations such as ISIS, Jundollah, and PJAK. For example, in the summer of 2016, the MOIS stated that it had impeded 1,500 individuals from joining ISIS.¹⁸⁵ Seven ISIS-affiliated suicide attackers between 2015 and 2016 were Iranians.¹⁸⁶ The regions with most exposure to ISIS' propaganda are Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Azerbaijan, and Baluchistan because of the close distance to the border of Iran-Iraq.¹⁸⁷

Indoctrination or radicalisation primarily derives from socio-economic deprivation such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, humiliation, and injustice, thereby growing into a culture of violence.¹⁸⁸ In the case of Iran, radicalisation is from internal rather than external influences. The socio-economic deprivation inside Iran might cause people to carry out terrorist activities or join other terrorist groups such as ISIS. Although the details of counter-terrorism efforts inside Iran are not published, officials attempt to prevent radicalism from within Iran, especially Sunni regions that share a border with Sunni countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, who enjoy an 80% Sunni population.¹⁸⁹ Iran is viewed as a centre of Shia radicalisation, but in reality, Iran's policy is to reconcile Shia and Sunni Muslims, because Sunni-Shia sectarianism has a detrimental effect on the Middle East and, in particular, on Iran.

The Supreme Leader regularly declares that ‘Sunni and Shia must go across their dispute...the Sunni–Shia conflict is a foreign-backed wicked propaganda’.¹⁹⁰ Iran is making an effort to create strong ties with the Sunnis, both inside and outside Iran. In regard to the domestic situation, the government is improving its relationship with the Sunni leader, Molavi Abdul Hamid, to prevent Sunni radicalisation. In 2013, the President Rouhani administration established ‘the special assistant office of ethnic and religious minorities’ to the President. The leading purpose of establishing this office is to counter radicalisation. According to the special assistant to the President, placing attention on the development of the cities near the borders will result in the emergence of safety and security.¹⁹¹ By the same token, it is assumed that the government has a strategic plan for the cities that have potential for extremism to be adopted. The President visited the strategic city of Mahabad, as well as Sistan and Baluchistan. There is a plan to improve the infrastructure and investment to provide facilities for these cities.¹⁹² The government has also made an attempt to appoint local officials for these cities.¹⁹³

In addition, President Rouhani introduced a draft on ‘A world against violence and extremism’ to the UNGA, concentrating on the detrimental effects of armed conflict on the spread of violent extremism. It also emphasises the practice of tolerance and the importance of education as an effective means of preventing the spread of radicalisation.¹⁹⁴ His administration has focused on the importance of fighting extremist ideologies in order to eliminate radicalisation. The government calls upon religious leaders to manifest the real face of every religion, to stop distorting the principles of Islam.¹⁹⁵

Policy of Protection

The policy of protection is an important activity for Iran, particularly in relation to secure borders. The responsibility of Iran to maintain border control is significant considering the lack of control exhibited by its neighbours.¹⁹⁶ The IRGC commander claimed that 60% of

territory on the other side of Iran's border is not controlled by its respective neighbours.¹⁹⁷ As Iran shares borders with unstable countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Turkey - countries that have experienced terrorism and chaos - border security is essential in protecting Iran from the threat of terrorism. In addition, Iran is a Shia-majority country with regular conflict with various Sunni or separatist groups that claim independence. This is particularly the case in the provinces near the borders, such as Kurdistan and Baluchistan, whose populations use terrorist tactics to confront the government, as already described.

As a result of these harmful elements, Iran has two strategies: protecting the shared borders, and cooperating with neighbours. Regarding border security, Iran has reinforced the armed forces in both the air and ground borders to prevent passage for suspected members of terrorist groups, drug-related criminal gangs, and arms traffickers.¹⁹⁸ According to the Iranian report to the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), the Consolidated List provided by the 1267 Committee was distributed to the border guards to prevent entry to Iran.¹⁹⁹ Recently, Turkey has constructed a border wall along the Iran-Turkey border, which Iran welcomed because of its fight with PKK and PJAK.²⁰⁰ In addition, the entry and residence of criminals in Iran and those involved in illegal activities are restricted.²⁰¹

Iran's further action to protect its borders is to fight terrorists directly along the borders. As Ayatollah Khamenei said regarding the fight with ISIS, 'If they had not fought terrorism and Takfirism in Syria, we would have been fighting them right here in Tehran.'²⁰² This strategy of protection has two benefits for Iran: the reduced expense of war with terrorists outside the border, and the demonstration of its ability and power throughout the Middle East. In fact, by securing itself from terrorist attacks, Iran demonstrates its effective counter-terrorism policy in a world of insecurity.

Policy of International Cooperation

There is no doubt that international cooperation is needed to combat terrorism. So, Iran has agreements with other countries on a variety of potentially relevant subjects, such as legal assistance, extradition, intelligence sharing, and transfer of those sentenced. The MOIS, the Ministry of Interior, Law Enforcement, and other security agencies are responsible for cooperating with other countries and INTERPOL.²⁰³ Iran has collaborated with a wide range of countries, such as Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, France, Azerbaijan, Russia, Syria, Uzbekistan, Algeria, and Kuwait.²⁰⁴ More recently, Iran and Australia have agreed on intelligence sharing in the fight against ISIS.²⁰⁵

Amongst the agreements with different countries, three particular agreements are highlighted due to their direct link with combating terrorism: ‘The Law of the Cooperation Agreement on Combating Organised Crime and Terrorism between Iran and Kazakhstan’ (2007), ‘The Law of the Cooperation Agreement between the Government of Iran and Turkey on Combating Drug Trafficking, Organised Crime and Terrorism’ (2011), and ‘The Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran to annex the Convention of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to Combat International Terrorism’ (2008). Of these three, the OIC Convention is most important for several reasons. The role of Islam and the common regional area of the member states can play a decisive role in combating terrorism.²⁰⁶ The three facets of the Convention can be useful in understanding Iran’s perspective towards terrorism: first, the definition of terrorism and terrorist crimes; second, the criminalisation of financing terrorism; and, third, the areas of cooperation between the OIC members, including preventing and combating terrorism and refraining from sponsoring terrorist activities. Cooperation between Iran and other regional countries is feasible than with other countries or organisations, such as the FATF and CTC. Due to lack of trust of Iran in such organisations,

which are considered as mechanisms for the West and America to put pressure on Iran, the OIC is easier for Iran to get along with than other organisations.

In addition to the regional agreements, Iran has reported its implementation of UN Security Resolutions Resolutions 1373 and 1624 to the CTC (though its responses have been secret since 2006).²⁰⁷ Iran has also cooperated, to some extent, with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to meet the required standards of the banking system, remittances and charities. In response, the FATF has suspended countermeasures from June 2016 to date (October 2018), though Iran remains designated as a high-risk and non-cooperative country.²⁰⁸ The main areas which should be addressed by Iran are: criminalising terrorist financing by removing ‘the exemption for attempting to end foreign occupation, colonialism and racism’; freezing terrorist assets; ensuring an adequate customer due diligence; the independence of Financial Intelligence Unit and the submission of suspicious transaction reports (STRs); identifying and sanctioning unlicensed money transfer service; ratifying the Palermo and Terrorism Financing Conventions; ensuring that financial institutions verify that wire transfers contain complete originator and beneficiary information; establishing a broad range of penalties for violation of the money laundering offence; and ensuring adequate regulation for confiscation of property of corresponding value.²⁰⁹ However, following internal discussions about cooperation with the FATF and ratification of the Conventions, the Supreme Leader has depicted the FATF and the Conventions as tools for the powerful countries to maintain their benefits and to put pressure on Iran, which will cause problems for the country.²¹⁰ According to the most recent FATF meeting,²¹¹ the counter measures remain suspended, but the decision is finely balanced and, in the light of the reimposition of sanctions by the US, progress on the FATF agenda is not promising.

Iran’s geopolitical situation in the Middle East means that it must even occasionally cooperate with the US and the West to defeat recognised terrorist groups. Iran and the US

have previously maintained a mutually convenient relationship in combatting terrorism in the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, their cooperation has declined due to their differing perspectives towards other groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. In countering ISIS, they had initially agreed to cooperate to defeat them, but the US declared that Iran should not be invited to attend the international conference on the security crisis in Iraq in 2014.²¹² As a result, the Supreme Leader announced his refusal to cooperate with the US.²¹³ Nevertheless, the US-led coalition was not criticised by Iran because it benefited Iran's interests. In combating ISIS, Iran has also coordinated with Iraq. Iran pledged to train and equip the Iraqi police against ISIS²¹⁴ and other Iraqi militias²¹⁵ because the security of Iraq is considered to be Iran's security.²¹⁶

Conclusion

International cooperation to combat terrorism requires a universal and consistent perspective on who exactly are the terrorists. Due to Iranian support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and other groups as a form of 'War by Terrorism', the coordination of policy and action on counter terrorism remains difficult. Nevertheless, the overall security of Iran when compared with its neighbours illustrates that its policies have been relatively successful in the fight against terrorism. Iran's global rank for being impacted by terrorism is 47 out of 130, while Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria are listed as 1, 2, 4, and 5 respectively.²¹⁷

Today, Iran's main strategy to combat terrorism is offensive in nature, especially after the emergence of ISIS and the civil war in Syria. The relatively successful policy of Iran lies in three layers. Primarily, Iran's policy is to support its neighbours through advice, military equipment, and financial assistance. In the second stage, the offensive character of the counter-terrorism policy is to use its proxies to keep Iranian territory free from terrorists, such as via Hezbollah, or occasional cooperation with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. In the final stage, Iran adopts a direct military action policy and a physical presence in the conflict zone, such

as the presence of IRGC-QF in Iraq and Syria to fight ISIS. Iran's policy mainly focuses only on military reaction to terrorism. While prevention, protection, and international cooperation are important, military action is emphasised in order to portray politically Iran's strength to the US, Israel, and their allies.

Not all actions undertaken by Iran to combat terrorism have been held to be legitimate according to international human rights and rule of law standards.²¹⁸ As all decisions are taken by the Supreme National Security Council and Military wings, such as the IRGC, in secret, the country is reluctant to divulge official plans to combat terrorism other than concentrating on the IRGC and IRGC-QF to maintain safety through intervention in other areas of the Middle East. Despite the relative success in countering terrorism, a transparent counter-terrorism policy is required to prevent violation of human rights or destructive policies which breach international law. It is very unlikely in the near future that the government of Iran will accede to becoming subject to robust and effective counter-terrorism regulations, akin to the counter-terrorism policy strategy of the UK (CONTEST 2006) or the European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2005) either in internal or external spheres of governance.

Notes

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- ¹⁷ The evidence for the Supreme Leader to condemn the US and the UK was the speech of Hillary Clinton, in which she confesses that the US funded those groups when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. See: the official website of the Supreme Leader, www.english.khamenei.ir.
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