



New Chapters in Iran's Proxy Strategy to Fight the West

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: With the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the Islamic Republic of Iran found a new avenue through which to carry on its anti-Western and anti-Israeli missions. Tehran has pledged to support its Russian ally in Ukraine and is sending weapons and other supplies to the Russian war effort. It is similarly assisting Armenia, its ally in the Caucasus, in its ongoing conflict with Israel- and-Turkey-backed Azerbaijan.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The Russian war effort in Ukraine has stalled. Major Western military aid to Ukraine, utilized by now battle-hardened Ukrainians, has caused Russia to lose the initiative, as evidenced by the Kharkiv counteroffensive in September, the liberation of Kherson in November, and the Bakhmut stalemate.

This decline in momentum began to change, however, when Iran ramped up its delivery of military equipment, primarily drones and engines, to Russia. Iranian deliveries to Russia include several types of UAVs, chief among them the Shahed 136 loitering munition. This weapon has been used extensively to target Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and the power grid.

Iran has also smuggled Mohajer 6, Shahed 129, and Shahed 191 drones to the Russian Navy using an Iranian state-owned airline and boats. Some deliveries went via "Iran Air Cargo" planes that traveled through Armenian air space and

used civilian airports there. These more sophisticated drones provide aerial surveillance and engage targets using armaments fitted under their wings.

The provision of these drones represents a steep escalation in Iran's aid to the Russian war machine. According to a CNN report, the Shahed 136 warhead was substantially modified by its Iranian manufacturers to comply with Russian demands that they inflict greater damage on Ukrainian targets, primarily civilian infrastructure.

Despite official Iranian claims that the drones were delivered to Russia before the outbreak of the war, reports by the UK Defense Ministry state that new batches were supplied as late as mid-March 2023. While new shipments from Iran to Russia are being counteracted by additional air defense systems sent to Ukraine by the West, no supply is limitless, and Iran's efforts to drag out the conflict may lead to a gradual halt in Western support for Ukraine.

We are already seeing several EU countries push for a diplomatic solution in order to mitigate the potential for lasting economic damage caused by the billions spent on military aid to Ukraine. In the aftermath of the invasion, many European countries drastically increased their own defense spending, leading to a general European rearmament reminiscent of the Cold War. The increase in European defense budgets is diverting funds from other enterprises. This trend is likely to continue as long as countries such as Iran maintain a steady stream of military aid to the Russian side.

Tehran is also using Moscow's war effort as a proving ground for its munitions. The feedback received from Russian troops is analyzed by Iran's DIO (Defense Industry Organizations) and then used to improve the weapons' efficiency elsewhere. For example, improvements resulting from Russian feedback are applied to the weapons Iran sends to Hezbollah and Hamas to use in their conflict with Israel.

US media reports claim that Iranian officials have toured a site in Russia where a new drone factory is to be set up to supply the Russian army in Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, Iranian instructors have been sighted in occupied Luhansk Oblast. Their mission, apparently, is to teach the Russians how to operate the UAVs. Tehran is no doubt giving such support to Russia in the hope of getting something in return – support for its nuclear program, for instance.

Iran stands to gain from a prolonged Ukrainian conflict not only from the opportunity it provides to test weaponry, but also from the reduction in global

media coverage of Iran's domestic crises. Large-scale bloody protests aimed at achieving basic human rights are still going on inside Iran. Media coverage of these protests is much more limited than it once was, due in part to Iranian censorship but also because the world's focus is on Ukraine. The more Tehran helps Russia prolong the war, the more it stands to benefit from reduced media attention to problems on its own soil. In September 2022, the so-called "Hijab Revolution" took place, and in February 2023, the fight for independence of Southern Azerbaijan began in northwestern Iran. Both these movements have suffered from diminished global media attention.

Escalating Conflicts in the Caucasus

The Caucasus region has been plagued by hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia for decades. Iran has long maintained that it will not tolerate an Israeli military or intelligence presence in Azerbaijan and has pledged support to Armenia on multiple occasions. Iranian munitions - the same ones now undergoing field testing in Ukraine - were actively used by the Armenian military during the previous round of fighting, and Iranian UAVs were used by Armenia in April 2023. Iranian emissaries are reported to have been seen in Karabakh, a separatist enclave populated by Armenians on Azerbaijani territory.

By assisting Yerevan, Tehran is inflicting a serious blow to the West and to Israel. Azerbaijan is a major energy supplier, especially now that Russia is under sanction and Europe is searching for alternative sources of energy. Attacks on Azerbaijan may damage gas and oil exports and hit Israel's economic security.

Building on that, Iran's IRGC and Land Force exercises on the Iranian-Azeri border last October, and official regime statements proclaiming them to be a [show of force](#) and response to Israeli activity in Azerbaijan, indicate that Tehran has no qualms about assisting Armenia against Azerbaijan and attempting to weaken Israeli influence.

A major point of Iranian hostility towards Azerbaijan is the planned Zangezur corridor. Azerbaijan is split by Armenia into the mainland to the east and the exclave of Nakhchivan bordering Turkey to the west. As part of the ceasefire agreement after its victory in the 2020 Karabakh war, Azerbaijan pushed for the creation of a corridor to connect the mainland with Nakhchivan. This would cut Armenia off from its ally Iran, which vehemently opposes it.

The corridor would bring an end to Azerbaijan's transport of goods to Nakhchivan through Iranian territory, limiting Iran's control of the area and the cargo that

passes through it. Tehran has been using Yerevan as a route through which to bypass Western sanctions, so cutting it off would severely damage the Iranian economy and particularly its military industrial complex.

Tehran has been outspoken about alleged “Zionist puppeteering of Azerbaijan” for years, claims that have often been accompanied by anti-Semitic statements and caricatures. Tehran’s accusations include direct involvement in the Zangezur corridor project. According to numerous Iranian official statements, such as from IRGC leadership, the Zangezur project is a case of “cooperation between NATO, Israel and additional enemies of Iran”. Some official statements from Tehran claim the corridor should never be constructed because the whole region in fact belongs to Iran, and go so far as to call for the annexation of Nakhchivan.

Iran is also meddling in the Caucasus with regard to the foreign enclave on Azerbaijani territory. This land is recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan but populated by ethnic Armenians, and it now hosts Russian military “peacekeepers”. According to *The Armenian Weekly*, the Iranian media did not cover “Artsakh” much until the 2020 war. Following that war, it became one of Iran’s most discussed [topics](#). According to several Western media outlets, the Iranians and the Russians see this enclave as a “kill switch” for the supply of Azerbaijani energy resources to the EU and to Israel.

Tehran has increased its involvement in the Caucasus by means of weapons supplies and military cooperation with Armenia. In addition, the IRGC unit “Qods Force”, once commanded by Qassem Soleimani, created a number of Khomeinist-Islamist organizations made up of Khomeinist ethnic Azeris who had fled Azerbaijani territory. One such organization, created in the image of other IRGC proxies in the Middle East, is the Hüseyiniyyun group. Several members of the organization were trained by the Qods Force, heeding Soleimani’s instructions and orders, and were then sent to engage enemies of Iran in Syria and Azerbaijan. According to the subscription-locked Telegram channel AZfront, members of the Islamist organization in Azerbaijan would act as Iranian propagandists and destabilizers, attempting to sway public opinion against the pro-Israel government and to initiate a “return to roots” by advertising Iran as a friendly neighbor and crucial ally against “Western imperialism”.

On January 27, 2023, the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran was stormed by a gunman armed with military-grade firearms. It is believed that the attack was orchestrated by the IRGC. Tehran denies these claims despite many coincidences and facts that make it seem pre-planned.

The response from Baku was swift: the embassy suspended its work in Iran following the deadly attack. The attack exacerbated tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan, leading to speculation about whether an escalation towards open hostilities might take place.

Fighting the Jewish State

The third proxy war in which Iran is engaged is its war against Israel. The Qods force has been operating in Syria for a long time with the object of establishing infrastructure to enable strikes into northern Israel while creating a more efficient arms supply route to other Iranian proxies in the region.

Until recently, the Syrian regime had the undivided attention and military backing of Russia. The Syrian civil war even saw the Russian air force and special forces assist in training as well as fighting alongside Assad's army. This changed once Russia's invasion of Ukraine started going downhill. Russian activity in Syria decreased swiftly and drastically, and the majority of assets were transferred to the Ukrainian theater. The power vacuum left by the Russians in Syria allowed the Qods force to ramp up its own activity on a massive scale.

The Qods force was already actively transporting weapons, constructing intelligence networks, and initiating strikes into Israel before the Russian withdrawal. With a larger power base in Syria, Iranian subterfuge presents a larger threat to Israel and its security interests on the Syrian border. Before the war in Ukraine, Moscow agreed with Jerusalem that it would block Iranian weapons shipments to its cells in Syria and Lebanon. It was also understood that Russia would not interfere with IAF missions to destroy Iranian/Syrian targets threatening Israeli security. These agreements are no longer relevant due to the minimizing of Russian influence in Syria, a change that leads directly to more conflict on this front.

Iranian influence on terrorist organizations doesn't end in Syria. Tehran has ties with and smuggles weapons to Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Jenin, and Hebron, from where they have launched countless attacks on Israel. Whether it be rocket strikes from Gaza and Lebanon or incitement of Palestinians to commit terrorist attacks, the IRGC's fingerprints are everywhere. Moreover, Iranian-sponsored cells of ethnic Azerbaijanis, trained by Hüseyiniyyun, were sent to target Israelis in Cyprus and Georgia but were apprehended by local security services.

How This Strategy Is Backfiring on Iran

Opposition to Tehran is not sitting idly by while Iran injects itself into all these conflicts. We are witnessing the formation of a global anti-Tehran coalition composed of all the nations Iran has wronged and fought against in recent years. But there are still those who ally themselves with Iran.

Beijing endorsed Tehran with an official visit on February 14 from Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. They reportedly discussed how Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow form a counterweight to Washington's global hegemony.

With regard to Ukraine, we are seeing political pushback at the UN and in international conferences calling out Iran's military support for Russia. According to the Telegram-based Strategic Study Forum, the US pledged to give seized Iranian weaponry and ammunition to Ukraine. Meanwhile, Israeli drone strikes in Iran like the one on January 28, 2023, as well as other intelligence operations, harm the Iranian drone industry and consequently support Ukraine.

In December 2023, Azerbaijan reacted to the Iranian encroachment by conducting military exercises together with Turkey on the border with Iran. The joint drills mirrored Iran's military muscle-flexing, when it tried to intimidate Azerbaijan by crossing the Araks River and demonstrating its ability to capture strategic heights. Azerbaijan and Turkey were unfazed by the Iranian exercises and demonstrated their ability to match and even surpass Iranian strength, as when Turkey displayed its advanced F-16 jets.

In January 2023, Israel and the US conducted the Juniper Oak 23 exercise, the largest joint exercise between CENTCOM and the IDF to date. With this in mind, experts from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies believe it is in Kyiv's best interests to align itself with Israel and join Jerusalem in its fight against Tehran and its proxies.

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