

Abstract

The systematic and calibrated deployment of political violence movements and terrorism by states, which use them as proxies in their conflicts with other state or sub-state actors constitutes one of the major driving forces behind the current political and military strife in the greater Middle East. The principal state supporters of terrorist groups in the Middle East are here identified as, on the one hand, the Islamic Republic of *Iran* and, on the other, the secular Ba'athist regime in Damascus, *Syria*.

In the last two decades, both states have pursued a foreign and security policy geared towards regional preponderance, albeit from different positions within the regional strategic pecking order. In terms of their foreign political agendas, Iran and Syria have at least one other commonality in that they both support PVMs in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories (the West Bank and Gaza).

The author here argues that there is a compelling rationale for Iran and Syria to conduct a policy of carefully covert, vicarious violence against their adversaries. The reason for this surrogate warfare can be found in the stark reality of the Middle Eastern military balance: The military might arrayed against Iran and Syria by opposing powers in the region does not permit symmetric conflict without incurring the risk of massive retaliation.

On the international level, the U.S. has traditionally taken a narrow view of state support for terrorist organizations; after the attack on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, the U.S. government has declared a war on terrorism in general and, aside from its principal perpetrators, its backers in particular. This policy specifically targets Iran and Syria in the Middle East. The U.S. long-term involvement in the Middle East, also made manifest in its leadership of the Coalition that invaded Iraq in March 2003, is resulting in the exertion of considerable pressure on both Iran and Syria to abandon policies and interests resulting in the destabilization of the region. U.S. policy specifically targets the use by states of PVMs involved in terrorist activity.

In a regional context, a nascent Israeli-Turkish working relationship since the mid-1990 in defense-matters, which is based on a

broadly compatible security agenda – the maintenance of the status quo –, has more permanently decreased the possibility of a direct military confrontation in the Middle East and served the maintenance of regional stability.

It is therefore the glaring imbalance of power in the region, coupled with the Iranian and Syrian agendas that challenge the status quo upheld by the regional Western allies, which compel and impel Iran and Syria to depend on asymmetric confrontations by proxy, in the context of which the use of terrorism plays a significant role. Unless Iranian and Syrian pretensions in the region are not decisively and even proactively confronted diplomatically and militarily, these two states will have no incentive to abandon what they have come to view as a winning long-term strategy underpinned by the convenient use of proxies successfully employing terrorist tactics.