



Iran's Military Interventions

Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts

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In recent years, Iran has risen as one of the most significant regional challenges faced by the United States. In this report, the authors assess when, where, why, and how Iran conducts military interventions and identify key signposts of Iranian military interventions that can be used as early warning indicators for U.S. military planners and can guide decisions about the use of forces in the Middle East region.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- When, where, why, and how does Iran use military interventions?
- What motivates Iran to intervene militarily in a foreign country? Under what circumstances is Tehran most likely to undertake a military intervention?
- Under what circumstances might Iran deviate from its traditional model, and what might spark Iranian interventionism and revisionism to increase in the future?



KEY FINDINGS

The presence of co-identity group populations is nearly a prerequisite for Iranian interventions

- All Iranian interventions identified by the authors and considered in this report have taken place in countries and theaters where co-identity group populations are present.
- The presence of these groups, which tend to be more amenable to looking to Iran for guidance and support, allows Tehran to rely on advise-and-assist missions and to increase Iranian influence while limiting the costs associated with involvement in foreign conflicts.

External threats to Iran's sovereignty and the regional balance of power also are key factors

- External threats have mostly resulted in more-overt Iranian actions, largely because such actions allow

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Iran to conduct a messaging campaign around its activities and reassure domestic audiences, send signals to regional and international friends and foes, and legitimize its intervention.

- From Iran's perspective, unless it is able to build a more favorable regional balance of power, it will remain isolated and potentially vulnerable to existential threats from its most capable adversaries: the United States and Israel.

In the future, Iran may have two models of interventions it can leverage

- First, it may continue its traditional approach, which largely leverages advisory missions and is centered on the use of local forces from co-identity group populations. This is likely to constitute the majority of Iranian interventions and would, in any case, underpin virtually all of Iran's wars.
- Second (perhaps less frequently but more significantly), the Islamic Republic could use its Syrian intervention model, using its expansive network of proxies in an expeditionary manner, supplemented by its more-conventional forces.

