Transnational Mobilisation of Armed Resistance

How Iran has built a network of Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979

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III

Abstract

The Islamic Republic has been building a transnational network of armed resistance groups since the Iranian revolution in 1979, with Shi'a militias being its most important asset. These groups are viewed as one of Iran's asymmetric warfare capabilities, which has raised just as much concerns among Arab and Western decision-makers as the country's conventional armed forces, potential nuclear programme, or ballistic missiles.

The objective of this study has been to explain how Iran has mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979. I have addressed this question by examining the mobilisation processes of three prominent Iraqi Shi'a militias: Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hizbullah. The selected cases can be said to be cases of Iran's transnational mobilisation of armed resistance, which have allowed it to engage in covert or indirect conflict intervention in the region.

To logically connect the empirical data with the study's research question, I have used a case study research design, with process tracing and the semi-structured interview as methods for data collection. While I have relied on multiple sources of available textual material, I have also conducted field work in Iraq. Furthermore, the empirical analysis has been guided by a theoretical framework that has attempted to build a bridge between the literatures on state-militia dynamics and contentious politics.

The empirical findings suggest that Iran has acted as a sectarian entrepreneur that has used both its material and non-material resources to mobilise likeminded militias to engage in collective violence and making of claims. Shi'a Islam and Iran's concept of velayat-e faqih appears to be at the core of Iran's ideological and religious appeal. Furthermore, Iran's resistance against foreign interference in the region, and its anti-Americanism in particular, has been a meaningful collective identity that mobilised militias to engage in coordinated action. Moreover, Iran's has contributed to the proliferation of militias in Iraq by encouraging more radical elements to form new groups, which has largely been possible through Iran's ability to build close relationships with individuals.

Map of Iraq

Iraq, Map No. 3835 Rev.6, July 2014, United Nations

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Henriette Ullavik Erstad
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List of acronyms

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
BB	Badr Brigades
BO	Badr Organisation
HHN	Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba
HS	Hashd al-Sha'abi
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force
IS	Islamic State (of Iraq and Syria)
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
JAM	Jaysh al-Mahdi
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KH	Kata'ib Hizbullah
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MKO	Mujahideen e-Khalq
PMF	Popular Mobilisation Forces
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SCIRI	Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq
US	United States
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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1   Introduction

> Indeed, in a wider political sense, the real victor of the Syrian war and in Iraq has been Iran, a triumph for which the Islamic Republic has its militia forces to thank. - Phillip Smyth (2015)

The Islamic Republic of Iran has long been a major power in the Middle East. However, as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq transition into a phase reminiscent of an epilogue, many observers have noted that Iran's position in the region is stronger than ever. The quote above suggests that Iran has capitalised on this situation, and succeeded due to a rather unconventional asset – Shi'a militias. While it is a known fact that Iran has mobilised militias in other countries to strengthen its position, *how* they have done it will be the topic of this thesis.

On the surface, the rise of Shi'a militias appears to be a phenomenon that can be traced to the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph of the entire Muslim world. His militant Salafi jihadist group had recently seized territory in Iraq and Syria, claiming that it now belonged to the so-called Islamic State (IS). The day after, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani declared a religious fatwa where he called upon all Iraqis to take up arms and defend their realm (Alaaldin, 2018a). As the collapsing Iraqi Security Forces lacked the capacity to absorb a surge of new recruits amidst the turmoil, Iraq's well-organised Shi'a militias took up the effort by establishing new divisions (Ostovar, 2016, p. 223; Mansour, 2015). The result was a conglomerate of new and old armed groups with around 100,000 fighters that merged under the banner Hashd al-Sha'abi, who later became integrated into Iraqi governance structures due to their military effectiveness against IS (O'Driscoll & Van Zoonen, 2017, p. 9; Haddad, 2018, p. 1).[1]

The most powerful militias within Hashd al-Sha'abi are ideologically, militarily, and financially linked to Iran, many of which were armed and trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guards to attack forces during the US-led occupation.[2] They also consider themselves to be a part of Iran's transnational network of armed resistance, which stretches from Tehran to Sana'a via Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, also known as the "Shi'a crescent" as Jordan's King

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[1] The Iraqi parliament passed a bill recognising Hashd al-Sha'abi as a legal entity with similar rights to the conventional army in 2017, while Iraq's prime minister Haider al-Abadi also issued a decree in March 2018 that formalised its inclusion into the Iraqi security forces (Majidyar, 2018b).

[2] Also known as "Special Groups" to US officials, these militias were behind the most advanced and lethal attacks against the coalition between 2003 and 2011 (Knights, 2011b; Visser, 2011).

Abdullah II called it in 2004 (Löuer, 2012, p. 1; Nasr, 2006). Their fighters have been engaged in anti-IS and pro-Assad operations in Syria in coordination with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Lebanese Hizbullah. Thus, there has been a widespread perception that Iran successfully used the fight against IS to increase its influence in Iraq and the region, and has come out as the primary 'victor' after the US-led invasion in 2003 (Arango, 2017; Majidyar, 2017b; Smyth, 2015). However, the truth is that Iran has made use of militias for far longer than since 2003. For example, some of the Shi'a militias within Hashd al-Sha'abi have strong historical ties to Iran, and even fought alongside the Iranian armed forces during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

In fact, this is not even a post-2003 phenomenon – the Islamic Republic has been building a transnational network of armed resistance groups since the Iranian revolution in 1979. Iran's Shi'a revival and Ayatollah Khomeini's promise to export the revolution had unique salience among Shiites across the region, from the Persian Gulf to the Levant. Through the use of these actors, Iran has been able to intervene covertly and indirectly in several regional conflicts to safeguard its geopolitical interests. By doing so, it has avoided the risk of conventional conflict escalation with its adversaries, with the added benefit of having plausible deniability to avoid international condemnation. Therefore, the Shi'a militias are viewed as one of Iran's asymmetric warfare capabilities, which has raised just as much concerns among Arab and Western decision-makers as the country's conventional armed forces, potential nuclear programme, or ballistic missiles.

As such, Iran's mobilisation of Shi'a militias is a significant factor in international relations of the 21st century Middle East. Furthermore, in the case of Iraq, it is not unreasonable to argue that Iran and their affiliated Shi'a militias will play a key role in years to come. Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias is therefore a highly relevant topic with regard to the reconstruction and stabilisation of post-IS Iraq. Furthermore, the black box of Iranian statecraft that has contributed to the proliferation of militias in Iraq is an interesting case of how an external state effects a domestic mobilisation process of armed resistance in another country. Moreover, it is an interesting case of how states engage in proxy conflict or covert military intervention through the transnational mobilisation of militias.

1.1 Research question

This thesis considers the following research question:

How has the Islamic Republic of Iran mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979?

I will answer this question by examining the mobilisation processes of three of the most prominent Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias in Iraq today: Badr Organisation, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Kata'ib Hizbullah (KH). As the Badr Organisation came into existence as the militia of the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) with the name Badr Brigades in 1983, it is the mobilisation process during the 1980s that will be examined in this thesis.[3] As such, the units of analysis are SCIRI, AAH, and KH. Furthermore, mobilisation will here be understood as "an increase of the resources available to a political actor for collective making of claims" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 120).

The cases represent mobilisation processes that occurred under very different contexts: while SCIRI and the Badr Brigades came into existence as exiled opposition groups that sought to replace the Ba'athist regime with an Islamic Republic, Asai'b Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbullah were formed during the US-led occupation of Iraq with the aim of attacking coalition forces. Furthermore, the selected cases can be said to be cases of Iran's transnational mobilisation of armed resistance, or in other words, its asymmetric warfare capability that allows Iran to engage in covert or indirect conflict intervention. However, as the cases represent a small sample of a much larger phenomenon, this has come at the cost of generalisation. Thus, the aim of this study is not to develop a more general argument of how Iran mobilises armed resistance groups outside its national borders. At the same time, I consider them as important cases to study by themselves as they represent the most powerful militias with a close relationship to Iran in Iraq today.

The theoretical framework that will guide the analysis attempts to build a bridge between two strands of the literature, namely state-militia dynamics and proxy conflict on the one hand, and contentious politics on the other. Within this framework, Iran is viewed as a sectarian entrepreneur that has used its material and non-material resources to mobilise likeminded groups to further its own interests in the region. I will therefore apply an instrumentalist approach to mobilisation in the analysis, which considers Iran's mobilisation of militias as a by-product of realpolitik. The mechanisms that structure the analysis have been derived from

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[3] In 2007, SCIRI changed its name to Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Badr Organisation split from ISCI in 2012, reportedly to preserve its ties to Iran while its mother organisation attempted to distance itself (Stanford University, 2016b).

contentious politics, in addition to sectarian entrepreneurship: brokerage, indoctrination, coordinated action, and social appropriation. Furthermore, this thesis has a case study research design, with process tracing and the semi-structured interview as the methods for data collection. Process tracing has been important to empirically assess in which order the mechanisms have occurred, while the semi-structured interviews conducted in Iraq have been beneficial in achieving better understanding and knowledge of the topic.

1.1.1 Clarifications

First, I will consistently refer to Iran as a unitary actor throughout this thesis. It is well-documented that it is the IRGC and its Quds Force (IRGC-QF) who are at the frontlines when it comes to this dimension of Iran's regional affairs. The reason why I consider this appropriate is that according to the constitution of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei is the de-facto head of the IRGC, in addition to being the ultimate authority on decision-making in issues concerning foreign policy and national security (Kazamzadeh, 2017, p. 202). Furthermore, the IRGC-QF's Major General Qassem Soleimani is considered to be in charge of the formulation and implementation of Iran's policy in Iraq (Posch, 2018, p. 28). Thus, the President and his cabinet is considered to have little influence on the mobilisation of armed resistance outside Iran's national borders, including Iraqi Shi'a militias. In sum, although it is most meaningful to differ between various institutions in Iran's political system and informal power structures, I will refer to Iran as a unitary actor for the sake of consistency and simplicity.

Second, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is today known as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), while the Badr Brigades has become an independent entity that goes under the name Badr Organisation for Reconstruction and Development (Badr Organisation). However, it is the mobilisation process that led to the formation of SCIRI and the Badr Brigades during the 1980s that will be examined in this thesis, and I will therefore refer to the entities by the name they used during that time. Furthermore, I will refer to them as ISCI and Badr Organisation if I am speaking of a point in time when that was their name.

1.2 Contribution of this thesis

Although a lot of academic literature examines the dynamics between states and militias, many of these studies have been concerned with traditional forms of state support to such groups, and especially material resources such as financial or military assets. Furthermore, much of the

existing literature has examined *why* states decide to support such groups.[4] In addition, while there is a lot of scholarly work on Iran's relationships with non-state or para-state armed groups in general, little has been written about Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias in particular.[5]

Moreover, there seems to be a lack of literature on *how* external states affects domestic mobilisation processes of armed resistance in another country, and especially within the theoretical framework of contentious politics.[6] In other words, scholars of social movements and contentious politics have extensively studied the relationship between regimes and civic mobilisation tactics, but few have examined the role of an external actor in mobilisation of a foreign movement. However, Jeffrey T. Checkel's book '*Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*' (2014) is an illustrative example of academic work that examines mobilisation of armed resistance across state boundaries. In this book, Kristin M. Bakke examines how local insurgents learn from outsiders, while Fiona B. Adamson looks at mechanisms used for diaspora mobilisation. However, a missing piece of the puzzle is still how an external state affects another state's domestic mobilisation processes, and how this fits in with the larger phenomenon of transnational movements. This thesis aims to fill this knowledge gap.

Furthermore, understanding an external state's mobilisation of militias is important for the study of international relations as it represents a form of interstate conflict, albeit indirect. Accordingly, in order to understand interstate conflicts, it is equally important to understand external support for the actors involved (Salehyan, Gleditsch, & Cunningham, 2011, p. 710). This builds on the proxy conflict literature, which originates from the Cold War when the superpowers fought each other by backing each other's adversaries (Hanlon, 2006, p. 133).[7] As the use of militias have allowed Iran to engage in indirect or even covert interventions in the region, these groups can also be viewed as Iran's asymmetric warfare capability (ICG, 2018). Moreover, by focusing on an external state's mobilisation of militias in another country, a small contribution is also to minimise the divide between scholars of interstate and intrastate war.

In sum, this thesis can be placed somewhere between the literature on social movements and contentious politics on the one hand, and proxy conflict and state-militia dynamics on the

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[4] For literature on why states support insurgent movements, see Navin A. Bapat's '*Understanding State Sponsorship of Militant Groups*' (Bapat, 2012), Salehyan et. al.'s '*Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups*' (2011), and Byman et. al.'s '*Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*' (2001).

[5] For more general accounts on this topic, see Afshon Ostovar's '*Vanguard of the Imam: Religions, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*' (Ostovar, 2016).

[6] Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi conceptualises militias as a form of contentious politics in his book chapter in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel's '*Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*' (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017)

[7] See for example Ariel I. Ahram's '*Proxy Warriors: the Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*' (2011)

other. Instead of treating these literatures as separate areas of inquiry, they are here viewed as complementary and interrelated. As result, my aim is to build a bridge between two strands of literature through empirical and analytical contributions.

1.2.1 Delimitations

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, several delimitations have been necessary to complete the project in a meaningful manner.

First and foremost, I have made a selection of only three cases from a far broader population. This implies that I have excluded a significant number of other cases that could have proven useful to answer the research question. Furthermore, I have made a geographic delimitation by only looking at Iraqi Shi'a militias. I have not looked at mobilisation processes in countries such as Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, or Afghanistan. In sum, this study only sheds a small light on a much larger social phenomenon than what I am covering. At the same time, this is also what makes it an important topic to study.

Second, when examining Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias, the internal impact this has on Iraq's internal affairs is of high importance.[8] The proliferation of militias and their allegiance to an external state poses several challenges for Iraq. This includes the Iraqi state's monopoly on violence, as well as the reconstruction and stabilisation of a country that has been ravaged by decades of war and conflict. It should also be noted that this study does not seek to explain the internal processes that have led to the emergence and proliferation of militias in Iraq.

Furthermore, the mass mobilisation of Hashd al-Sha'abi in 2014 will not be assessed. Ideally, I would have included a mobilisation process that involved Iran during this period. However, due to lack of access to data this proved to be difficult. On the other hand, since the units of analysis in this thesis are considered to be the most powerful militias within Hashd al-Sha'abi, they have intrinsic research value.

Finally, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address the effect Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias has had on its bilateral relationship with Iraq. While this will be touched upon to some extent, this study is also not an attempt to measure the effect this strategy has on the wider international relations of the Middle East.

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[8] For more on this, Hashd al-Sha'abi, see Fanar Haddad's '*Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'abi: State and Power in post-2014 Iraqi*' (2018), and Dylan O'Driscoll and Dave van Zoonen '*The Hashd al-Sha'abi and Iraq: Subnationalism and the State'* (2017).

1.3 Thesis outline

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework, which is based on previous literature on state-militia dynamics and contentious politics. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodological approach. In Chapter 4, the historical background on the proliferation of militias in Iraq, in addition to the Islamic Republic's Iran's revolutionary internationalism, the main actors involved, and a presentation of the 'Hizbullah model', will be provided. In chapter 5, 6, 7, and 8, I will analyse the empirical results. Chapter 9 contains concluding remarks, implications the findings have for future research on this topic.

2   Theoretical framework

This thesis seeks to explain how Iran has mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979. In this chapter, the theoretical framework that will be used to help answer this question will be presented. First, I conceptualise the term 'militia', and review existing literature on why states decide to support such groups. Second, I present a theoretical discussion on transnational mobilisation of armed resistance and the actors involved, namely sectarian entrepreneurs. This literature, which identifies the mechanisms for mobilisation and its indicators, constitutes the theoretical framework for this thesis. Finally, I will summarise the empirical expectations that can be drawn from this chapter.

2.1   Conceptualising militias

An important piece of the puzzle to understand militias is how they vary in form and function. Max Weber (Weber, 1919) defines a state as a "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."[9] This definition, now known as the state monopoly on violence, is widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the modern state (Munro, 2018). However, this definition does not necessarily capture the reality faced by several states in the 21st century. In today's Middle East, the combination of state fragility, regional instability, and decades of armed conflict has led to a proliferation of armed non-state or para-state actors that have challenged the state monopoly on violence. In this regional context, militias have become one of the most powerful agents of political change.

Although militias are a relatively new phenomenon in the Middle East, the origins of such groups can be tracked back to the state-building process in Medieval Europe, when the state called upon civilians to take up arms and collectively defend their territory (Thurber, 2014, p. 901).[10] Nevertheless, militias were not paid serious attention to by scholars until after the Cold War (Marshall, 2016, p. 184; Thurber, 2014, p. 901). In its broadest definition, militias are armed non-state or para-state actors. More specifically, Williams (Williams, 2009, p. 19) defines a militia as an "irregular armed force operating within the territory of a weak and/or

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[9] Weber's definition was derived from Jean Bodin's 'Les Six livres de la République' (1576) and Thomas Hobbes' 'Leviathan' (1651)

[10] According to Charles Tilly (Tilly, 1985), civilians would pay dues to the state in exchange for the militia's protection, both from external threats as well as the militia itself. For a history of the role of militias in Europe, see Joseph Strayer's '*Medieval Origins of the Modern State*' (1970), Charles Tilly's '*War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*' (1985), and Thomas Ertman's '*Birth of the Leviathan*' (1997)

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failing state." Similarly, but more loosely defined, Jentzch et. al (2015) defines a militia as "an armed group that operate alongside regular security forces or work independently of the state to shield the local population from insurgents." It is also important to recognise that militias can be part of transnational networks that operate across state boundaries. Due to the wide scope of the concept, the term militia can therefore be difficult to define. To solve this problem, scholars have often focused more specifically on different subcategories of militias, such as foreign proxies, warlords, or paramilitaries (Thurber, 2014, p. 903). However, as none of these subcategories adequately conceptualise the diverse nature of the Iran-affiliated armed groups in Iraq, I will apply a broad meaning of the term militia in its broad meaning throughout this thesis.

Militias are also often non-state actors. The latter grouping often operate own their own, but also under the supervision of for example a factional leader, tribe, clan or ethnic group (Williams, 2009, p. 19). Members of militias are often drawn into this type of environment when the state fails to provide the basic rights of its people, such as welfare services or security. Furthermore, people might decide to join a militia when there are no other real opportunities for them to improve their livelihoods. However, the militias in focus will be considered as para-state actors rather than non-state actors as the latter fails to address the existing variation of state-militia dynamics. In fact, militias can also be in the service of a state, either directly or indirectly. For example, in Syria, several militias are fighting for President Bashar al-Assad, while in Iraq, Hashd al-Sha'abi has fought alongside the Iraqi security forces against the Islamic State. The engagement of militias in armed conflicts can also be understood as *asymmetric warfare*, which is defined as "conflicts between nations or groups that have disparate military capabilities and strategies" (RAND Corporation, 2018).

In fact, militias often work to provide social services and protect local populations from violence (Thurber, 2014, p. 904). In this way, militias can also undermine the social contract between the population and the state, which is a key source of state legitimacy (Grynkewich, 2008, p. 351). For example, parallel to the growth in its military activities, Hizbullah developed an extensive welfare system for Lebanon's poor and needy, including hospitals, clinics, orphanages, education, and monetary assistance (Koya, 2006, p. 23). They can also be important sources of order and protection, with Iraqi Shi'a militias serving as an example. In addition to protecting civilians from threats such as Sunni insurgents, they have also protected religious buildings and holy sites (Jabar & Mansour, 2017). Thurber (2014, p. 904) points out that it is a common misperception is that militias are either a threat to or an agent of the state.

Furthermore, militias can be socio-political movements as well. Thus, a problem with the term militia is that it often obscures the complexity of certain groups, including the fact that they can ultimately be political organisations pursuing political aims (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017, p. 169). Staniland (2015, p. 779) has suggested the following typology for militias to capture the variation that exists in state-militia relations:

Table 1. Political roles of armed groups (Staniland, 2015, p. 779)

Ideological fit to government	Operationally valuable	Operationally invaluable
Ally	Armed ally	Superfluous supporter
Gray zone	Business partner	Undesirable
Enemy	Strange bedfellow	Mortal enemy

When applying the term militia to actors operating in countries like Iraq, it is important to acknowledge that there are different understandings between Middle Eastern and Western schools of thought, as well as between academics and non-academics (Posch, 2017, p. 4). Hashd al-Sha'abi illustrates the great variety that exists between militias, and within a militia, and why a distinct definition can sometimes be difficult to achieve. Some Iraqi scholars strictly refuse to apply the term militia for this group, with one of the reasons being that units within it act on a legal basis and are therefore state institutions rather than not para-state actors (Posch, 2017, p. 6). However, although Hashd al-Sha'abi have received formal legal recognition and have in principle been made accountable to and are funded by the government, the different units within HS can still be characterised as militias according Williams' definition, at least within the time frame of this thesis. The most important reason is that the HS leadership sees its force as being independent of the army and does not welcome incorporation (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017, p. 18). In addition, some even swear public allegiance to Tehran rather than Baghdad (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017, p. 29). As such, Mansour and Jabar (2017) argue that they both challenge and undermine the central state's authority. I consider this assessment to be applicable to the units of analysis in this thesis, as well as Lebanese Hizbullah.

2.1.1 Explaining state support to militias

Much of the literature included in this section deals with other types of armed groups, such as insurgent movements, which I consider as contextually compatible for a study concerned with militias as well. On a general level, the relationship between a sponsoring state and a militia is

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often explained as a patron-client relationship. In the context of this thesis, a patron-client relationship will be understood as the following definition by James C. Scott's (1972, p. 92):

> A patron-client relationship is an exchange relationship between roles that may be defined as a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection and benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.

Most scholars agree that a patron-client relationship involves an asymmetrical distribution of power between two entities who are connected to each other in both a localised, personal and broader systemic sense (Adler, 2002, p. 135). Although portraying militias as something used by governments to achieve tactical goals ignores the diversity of state-militia dynamics (Staniland, 2015, p. 770), this is an important aspect in the context of this thesis. This is because the patron is viewed as being in an advantageous position, although both parties view the relationship as beneficial (Adler, 2002, p. 135). For example, state assistance normally has significant impact on an armed group's military and political effectiveness (Byman et. al, 2001, p. 10). Furthermore, Adler (2002, p. 136) argues that the patron has access to resources that the client is not able to secure without the formers assistance, and the patron takes advantage of its indebted client to achieve its own agenda. As such, the relationship between states and militias can be viewed as a marriage of convenience.

With regard to state assistance to militias, states can have a multi-faceted approach. Traditionally, states have provided militias with material support such as funding, training, equipment, intelligence, and logistical assistance. States can also offer them a safe place to train and organise, or even offer diplomatic assistance such as helping them represent their cause internationally (Byman, et. al, 2001, p. xiv). However, Staniland (2012, p. 174) argues that "being awash in cash and AK-47s has no single impact on how groups are built and how they behave." The projection of non-material resources such as religion or ideology can not only increase the group's social base, popular support and legitimacy, but also increase resources for mobilisation around shared agendas. In addition, ideological and religious affiliated insurgents might be a more "safe bet" for the state than other groups, as this might increase the group's loyalty towards the sponsor (Bapat, 2012, p. 5). In this thesis, the focus will be on both material and non-material resources.

But what do states yield from providing militias with these various forms of assistance? In fact, numerous benefits can be yielded from such relationships. First and foremost, when lacking other resources, it can be an alternative way for states to project political or military

power internationally in order to pursue change in the international system (Bapat, 2012, p. 3). States can for example use the militia as means of coercive diplomacy to influence the actions of a voluntary actor (Freedman, 2004, p. 26). According to Byman et. al (2001, p. 23), it is well-documented that governments support insurgent groups to apply pressure on a rival. Moreover, states choose to delegate violence to militias due to incentives such as pressure to adhere to international humanitarian law or human rights standards, the threat of reprisals from the international community such as legal action, cuts in economic or military assistance, or even "negative publicity" (Carey & Mitchell, 2017, p. 6). Moreover, governments can therefore "avoid accountability for violence by ensuring plausible deniability" by delegating violence to militias (Carey & Mitchell, 2017, p. 6). For example, Iran's assistance to Iraqi militias has allowed it to influence the conflict without risking direct involvement or conflict escalation (Felter & Fishman, 2008, p. 70).

Accordingly, we can also view states' use of militias as a form of costly signalling (Byman et. al. 2001, p. 23). In this regard, the literature on covert intervention and escalation management can be instructive. Austin Carson (2016, p. 104) argues that covert military intervention can be a way for adversaries to compete for influence without risking unintended escalation of conflict or drive geopolitical competition to new heights of hostility. Patrick M. Regan (1996, p. 342) views this as third-party intervention, which he defines as "the supply or transfer of troops, hardware, or intelligence and logistical support to the parties in conflict". Furthermore, militias can function as a substitute for conventional military conflict (Bapat, 2012, p. 1). This is often referred to as proxy warfare, which in its simplest sense is "when State A encourages the people of State C to take up arms against State B, which happens to be its own adversary" (Stern, 2010, p. 216).

The trend of states choosing to take advantage of militias can also be seen in connection with alliance politics. The realist explanation for alliance-making is that states seek to establish a balance of power and constrain threatening states, which often is by cooperating with threatening states' enemies (Waltz, 1979, quoted in Fuhrmann, 2009, p. 188). Furthermore, countries also want to weaken their adversaries to increase their relative bargaining power and political influence (Fuhrmann, 2009, p. 169). Ryan (2015) argues that in the Middle East, regime security is a main driver of alliances because "Middle Eastern regimes remain frequently trapped in internal and external security dilemmas of their own making, obsessed with ensuring the security of their ruling regimes against both internal and external challenges". As a result, the internal and external security of these states is so intertwined that they cannot be considered

in isolation from one another (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 1997, quoted in Ryan, 2015). According to Byman et. al (2001, pp. 23–24), governments frequently support insurgents to increase local or regional influence, particularly along their borders, often to avoid that an adversary adopts goals or policies hostile to its interests. Geopolitics, rather than ideology, ethnicity or religion, can therefore be viewed as the main driver for state support to armed groups (Byman et. al, 2001, p. 24).

2.2 Transnational mobilisation of armed resistance

As outlined in section 3.1, militias can be more than armed actors – they can be social movements as well. Social movements "involve the mobilisation of large numbers of people to challenge power and press for (or resist) social change" (Romano, 2017, p. 17). This is line with what many of the Iraqi Shi'a militias describe themselves as, which is also demonstrated through their pursuit of a broad social and political agenda, formal participation in state institutions, and their substantial legitimacy and popular support (Alaaldin, 2017a, p. 5; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017, p. 169). Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2017, p. 169) has therefore suggested that one can think of Iraqi Shi'a militias as "armed and politicised social action," and thus, a form of *contentious politics*.

> Contentious politics involve interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actor's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.
> - Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2015, p. 7)

A central form for contentious politics is mobilisation, which is defined by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2015, p. 120) as "an increase of the resources available to a political actor for collective making of claims." Actors who encourage people to participate in collective action are often referred to as political entrepreneurs, who have an essential role in the mobilisation of resources on which such action is founded (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 14). Typically, political entrepreneurs persuade people to vote, protest, petition, campaign, or join a political party, but it can also include more "unconventional" political actions (Vermeersch, 2011, p. 1), such as mobilisation of armed resistance. The latter is the purpose of this thesis, and in this regard Iran can be viewed as a political entrepreneur which engages in the process of mobilising Iraqi Shi'a militias.

Much of the existing literature on mobilisation has focused on processes that take place at a domestic level or within states (Adamson, 2014, p. 67). As result, scholars of contentious

politics have often focused on the relationship between regimes and civic mobilisation tactics, but few have examined the role of an external actors in the mobilisation process of a foreign movement. However, globalisation has paved the way for political actors to engage in *transnational* mobilisation and build movements across state boundaries. The term transnational is here seen as contacts and interactions across state boundaries that engage both state and non-state actors, and thus is outside the former's control (Nye & Keohane, 1971, p. 331). In a similar vein, transnational movements can be seen as networks of actors that are organised on the local, national, regional, and international level (Smith, 2013, p. 1). Moreover, Smith (2013, p. 2) argues that like any other contentious actor, such movements forge alliances to enhance their political influence. Following this logic, Iran's transnational mobilisation of armed resistance will here be viewed as transnational network-building, with the allies involved being both state, para-state-, and non-state actors.

More scholarly literature has therefore focused on the transnational dynamics of armed conflict, which is of particular relevance for a study concerned with how a state has mobilised foreign militias. For example, Idean Salehyan (2009, p. 5) found in his study that 55 percent of all rebel groups that have been active since 1945 have transnational linkages. David Malet (2007; 2010; 2011, quoted in Bakke, 2014, p. 33) has shown in his studies that transnational insurgents were present in at least 70 of 331 intrastate conflicts between 1816 and 2005. Scholars have also established correlations between refugees and civil wars, arguing that through refugee communities neighbouring states may be sanctuaries for rebel groups (Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006; Salehyan 2007; quoted in Bakke, 2014, p. 33). Furthermore, modern civil wars continue far longer than they otherwise would have due to the cross-border flow of goods, including arms supplies, money, and foreign fighters (Checkel, 2014, p. 3; Fisher, 2016). Thus, transnational mobilisation of armed resistance can be seen in relation to existing literatures on the transnational dynamics of civil war.

Transnational movements that engage in armed conflict take part in what is referred to as collective violence, or armed resistance as it is described as in the context of this thesis. According to Tilly (2003, p. 40), two political actors are prominent in this type of contentious activity: political entrepreneurs, and violence specialists. While the former specialises in organising, linking, dividing, and representing constituencies, the latter specialises in deployment of violent means (Tilly, 2003, p. 30). Although the IRGC unarguably can be viewed as a violence specialist, Iran as a unitary actor will here be viewed as a political entrepreneur.

This is because its contentious activities are considered to be more wide-ranging than the deployment of violent means.

For political entrepreneurs that seek to mobilise actors to engage in collective violence, material resources such as arms, funds and training are not necessarily sufficient. Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 94) argues collective action cannot occur without the presence of a "we" that identifies common traits and a specific solidarity. This also applies to the domain of collective violence. Moreover, a feeling of solidarity and shared identity makes it easier for the movement to face risks and uncertainties (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 95). Paul Staniland (2012, p. 152) argues that groups and networks with overlapping social base that pull together organisers across localities are the most effective in mobilising collective action. This often involves having a unified central authority while at the same time being able to train for combat at local institutions, which is largely made possible by preexisting ties that contribute to trust and unity of purpose (Staniland, 2012, p. 152). As previously mentioned, the "cost" of achieving a group's loyalty seems to be correlated with the extent of sectarian or ideological overlap between the patron and the client (Bapat, 2012, p. 5; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017, p. 175). Following this logic, the literature on *sectarian entrepreneurship* is instructive.

2.2.1 Sectarian entrepreneurs

Elizabeth J. Wood (2014, p. 257) has suggested that "transnational mobilisation of allies is more likely in the case of conflicts along the lines of a religious (or ethnic) cleavage than where that cleavage is absent." In a similar vein, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (2017, p. 4) introduce the term *sectarianisation*, which is defined as "a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilisation around particular (religious) identity markers." This is in line with Marc Lynch's (2013) argument, namely that ethnic or sectarian violence is often driven by elites who cynically exploit categories of identity in order achieve their own political objectives. This process is also shaped by the domestic context, such as class dynamics, state fragility, wars and revolutions, in addition to geopolitical rivalry and foreign meddling (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 4; Wehrey, 2014, p. xiv). It can also be seen in connection with the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship, which can be defined as "a set of connections and regular patterns of interaction among people sharing common national background or migration experiences" (Waldinger, Aldrich, & Ward, 1990, p. 3).

Sectarianism is not an inherent historical quality of the Arab masses […] There are sectarian entrepreneurs and religious scholars who continue to flourish in the present by manipulating these identities in the interest of ruling regimes often at their request.
- Madawi al-Rasheed (2017, p. 158)

Sectarianism, in other words, "is a *modern* political phenomenon that is nourished by persistent dictators whose rule depends on invoking these old religious identities that become lethally politicised" (Al-Rasheed, 2017, p. 158). Similarly, Toby Matthiesen (2014) argues that these elites abuse and manipulate sectarian differences for their own purposes, and can thus be referred to as entrepreneurs in sectarian identity. Although sectarian entrepreneurs are not the only contributors to the activation of sectarian identity, they unarguably play a contributing role (Wehrey, 2014, p. xiv). Following this logic, a growing body of literature argue that that political entrepreneurs can also be *sectarian entrepreneurs*, which refers to the deliberate politicization of religious identities in order to achieve political goals (Al-Rasheed, 2017; Lynch, 2013; Matthiesen, 2014; Wehrey, 2014). To make better sense of how ethnic or sectarian entrepreneurship works in practice, Hashemi and Postel (2017, p. 5) suggest that the literature on *ethnic* mobilisation is relevant.

The two principal theoretical approaches in explaining ethnic mobilisation have been *primordialism* and *instrumentalism* (Nasr, 2017, p. 81; Varshney, 2009, p. 282). Primordialism views ethnicity as "a subjectively held sense of shared identity" – or in other words "a natural phenomenon that is deeply embedded in human psychology and social relations" (Nasr, 2017, p. 81). Instrumentalists, on the other hand, views ethnicity as "neither inherent in human nature nor intrinsically valuable (Varshney, 2009, p. 282). Therefore, ethnic or religious identities can be used for gaining political power or drawing resources from the state, and thus, it masks a deeper core of political or economic interests (Nasr, 2017, p. 81; Varshney, 2009, p. 282). Furthermore, instrumentalists argue that group conflict is the result of competition for power between political elites (or sectarian entrepreneurs) who exploit or manipulate identities to further their own interests (Nasr, 2017, p. 81). In this thesis, based on the discussions on why states support militias, the instrumental explanation for mobilisation will be viewed as most instructive.

2.2.2 Mechanisms for mobilisation

When analysing Iran's capacity as a sectarian entrepreneur, it should be viewed as commonly involved in the planning and execution of mechanisms that are used to mobilise Iraqi Shi'a

militias during the selected time periods. When examining a contentious process such as mobilisation, Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 28) argue that we should 1) describe the process; 2) decompose it into its component mechanisms, and 3) recompose it into a more general account that seeks to explain how the process has taken place. By following these steps, we can also examine whether certain mechanisms coincide so regularly and with such similar outcomes that they constitute a robust process (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 30). By mechanisms, Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 29) refer to a "delimited class of changes that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations."

Several of the mechanisms that have been identified in mobilisation processes at the domestic level have also been found in cases of transnational mobilisation (Adamson, 2014, p. 67). As such, mechanisms for mobilisation that can be derived from the literature on contentious politics might be a fruitful starting point for a study concerned with an external state's mobilisation of armed resistance in another country. The mechanisms are all picked out from Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) literature on contentious politics, however, I have attempted to adjust them by using indicators from additional literature on state-militia dynamics and sectarian entrepreneurship in order to make them contextually compatible. The mobilisation of Hizbullah has also been considered when selecting mechanisms, as many scholars view it as a model that Iran actively attempts to replicate through its Iraqi Shi'a militias.

As result, I will draw on four mechanisms that will function as the analytical framework of this thesis, which are *brokerage*, *indoctrination*, *coordinated action*, and *social appropriation*. All mechanisms apart from indoctrination have been derived from Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) work on contentious politics. Indoctrination has been added from the literature on sectarian entrepreneurship.

Brokerage

The first mechanism is *brokerage*, which is defined as "the production of a new connection between previously unconnected sites" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 31). According to existing scholarship on social network theory, brokers are particularly powerful actors, and even gain more power through their ability to link together previously unlinked networks (Adamson, 2014, pp. 68-69). Due to the transnational nature of the militias on focus, brokerage will here be viewed both as producing a connection between the patron and the client, but also as connecting various militias with each other, within and across national boundaries.

Furthermore, Adamson (2017, p. 69) further argues that a broker "plays a role in connecting a group or network symbolically but also materially to a conflict".

A common assumption about armed resistance movements is that their effectiveness is dependent on their material resources, their ability to mobilise these and their ability to use them to mobilise others (McCarty & Zald, 1997; Bakke, 2013, p. 29). While it is true that resources for mobilisation are often material, they can also be non-material such as when an actor's ethnic, religious or ideological identity markers increases its ability to make collective claims. Furthermore, Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 15) have argued that non-material resources can be the authority or friendships that are available to the group. As such, indicators of brokerage can include material and non-material resources such as training, facilities, equipment, funds, or religious and ideological guidance.

Indoctrination

> The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master unless he transforms strength into right and obedience into duty. - Jean Jacques Rousseau ([1762] 1968, p. 242)

Bakke (2014, p. 35) argues that a social movement's goals can change as a result of interaction with an external actor. Furthermore, Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 93) argue that identity often is constituted through the definition of boundaries between actors engaged in conflict. Following this logic, a second mechanism is what I refer to as *indoctrination*, which here is understood as when an actor attempts to align another actor to its own worldview or political objectives. This mechanism has been derived from Tilly and Tarrow's (2015, p. 37) mechanism *identify shift*, which is "the formation of new identities within challenging groups whose coordinated actions brings them together and reveals their commonalities." Identity is here viewed as "a social category that expresses not only the meaning any one actor attributes to the self; rather self-definitions are related to definitions the self gives to others and others to the self" (Campbell, 1998, pp. 12–13). In order to capture Iran's role in this, the mechanism has been adjusted with the help from the literature on sectarian entrepreneurship. Thus, in the context of this thesis, an indoctrination can manifest itself in both religious and ideological terms. This can also be seen as strategic framing, which is "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimise and motivate collective action" (McAdam et. al., 1996, p. 6, quoted in Busby, 2007, p. 251).

However, I will mostly refer to this mechanism as indoctrination to emphasise the external actor's role in this process. Thus, in addition to brokerage, the indoctrination of a new connection might be equally important, which is also supported by the theoretical contributions in section 2.1.1 and 2.2.1.

Coordinated action

In line with the instrumental explanation for mobilisation, an important dimension of understanding how Iran mobilises militias is how this policy serves its interests. Furthermore, several of the theoretical contributions that were discussed in section 2.1.1 with regard to why states support militias argued that coordinated action is an important motivation. Accordingly, another mechanism that will be examined is *coordinated action*, which "occurs when two or more actors engage in mutual signaling and parallel making of claims on the same object" (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 31). In the context of this thesis, and in line with the literature on covert and third-party intervention, coordinated action between two actors can be both covert and overt in nature. An example of covert coordinated action can be when advisors that belong to the patron state covertly help the client to plan and execute a military attack (Carson, 2016, p. 117).

Social appropriation

The last mechanism derived from the literature on contentious politics is social appropriation, which is defined as "when non-political groups transform into political actors by using their organisational and institutional bases to launch movement campaigns" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In addition to Sadeghi-Boroujerdi's (2017, p. 169) argument that militias must be viewed as armed and politicised social action, there are also theoretical contributions that imply that social appropriation is a mechanism that might be important during the mobilisation process of such groups. For example, Grynkewich (2008, p. 353) argue that violent groups may benefit from establishing a social welfare arm and provide public goods, as this challenge the legitimacy of the state it operates in and thus might result in winning the loyalty of the population. This is unarguably a relevant point in the context of this thesis, as it may be a way for Iran to ensure the relevance of these groups even if Iraq transitions into a state of peace and stability. Furthermore, the Hizbullah model in section 4.2.2 has demonstrated that the establishment of religious and social welfare services has been an important way to gain popular legitimacy and consolidate power in Lebanon. As several other Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias also view

themselves as social or religious movements rather than merely armed groups, it is also interesting to examine if or how Iran has played a role in this.

2.3 Chapter summary

The starting point of this thesis is that an external state has been involved in the mobilisation process of a foreign movement, and more specifically, militias. Furthermore, this has been a way to engage in proxy conflict, or indirect military intervention. As such, the theoretical framework has been derived from the existing literature on state-militia dynamics, in addition to contentious politics in general and sectarian entrepreneurship in particular. Within this framework, the empirical expectations are that Iran has acted as a sectarian entrepreneur that has used its material and non-material resources to mobilise likeminded militia groups as means to further its own interests in the region. I will therefore apply an instrumentalist approach to mobilisation in the analysis, which considers Iran's mobilisation of militias as a by-product of realpolitik. In sum, the theoretical framework builds a bridge between the scholarly literature on state-militia dynamics and proxy conflict on one hand, and contentious politics on the other.

3   Research design and method

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research design and methodological approach that will be applied to answer the research question. The explanatory case study has been chosen as the most appropriate research design for this thesis, with process tracing and semi-structured interviews used as methods. Combined with the previously outlined theoretical framework, I employ a deductive research design, in the sense that it seeks to both test and develop existing theories.

3.1   Case study as research design

> We are all special cases.
> - Albert Camus, *The Fall* (1956)

In order to collect, present and analyse data in an appropriate manner, it is crucial to have an adequate research design (Yin, 2018, p. 26). The design can be viewed as a "blueprint" for the research, which should be constructed with the study's purpose being its key criterion (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p. 675; Nachmias & Frankfort-Nachmias, 2014). This way, the researcher will be better equipped to logically connect the empirical data with the study's research question, and ultimately, to its conclusions (Yin, 2018, p. 26). I have chosen the *explanatory case study* as the most adequate research design to guide this study, as I have selected three cases of a larger phenomenon, namely Iran's transnational mobilisation of armed resistance.

First and foremost, according to Robert K. Yin (2018, p. 15), a case study is "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident." Similarly, John Gerring (2007, p. 19) defines a case study as "a spatially delimited phenomenon (a unit) observed at a single point in time or over some period of time, where clearly defined political or social units and institutions are usually the main phenomenon of study."

Furthermore, a researcher can also incorporate several cases when conducting case study research, which is referred to as multiple case studies (Gerring, 2009, p. 21). The selected cases for this study are three mobilisation processes, which will be examined in detail in order

to see whether events unfold and actors act as the theory predicts (Van Evera, 1997, p. 29). As such, the theoretical framework will guide the analysis, which involves that the theory will be tested through observation and empirical evidence (Van Evera, 1997, p. 27). However, the analytical framework has been derived from different theories, which has involved building a bridge between state-militia scholarship and the larger literature on contentious politics. As such, this thesis has deductive research design in the way that it seeks to both test and develop existing theories.

3.1.1 Why the case study?

According to Yin (2018, p. 1), the case study is an appropriate research design the more the researcher wants to understand such a real-world case, and that contextual conditions are crucial to achieve such an understanding. Furthermore, Yin (2018, p. 49) argues that case studies "are relevant the more that the research question require an extensive and "in-depth" description of a social phenomenon." Furthermore, when dealing with a large amount of qualitative data, it is beneficial to develop a theoretical framework that will guide the research design, data collection, and analysis, in addition to make assumptions explicit (Yin, 2018, p. 15).

First, the research question of this thesis seeks to explain a contemporary phenomenon, whose nature is disputed among conflicting narratives, in addition to the fact that its context is in flux and constantly undergoing change. Second, there is a lack of data on the units of analysis due to the continuous chaotic situation that has been in Iraq since the 1980s, and especially after 2003. Moreover, access to available data is limited due to the covert nature this dimension of Iran's regional affairs. As the cases span a time period of nearly four decades, a time during which the context has both evolved and changed dramatically, the emphasis will involve an extensive examination of the setting (Bryman, 2016, p. 67). Thus, the case study was a natural choice when choosing an adequate research design as the inquiry requires an extensive and in-depth description of how Iran has mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias.

Furthermore, it was based on considerations with regard to the research question and the purpose of this thesis. An important condition when choosing the adequate research design and method is to classify the form of the research question being asked (Yin, 2018, p. 11). "How"-questions are more explanatory than descriptive or exploratory case studies, and are also more likely to lead to the case study being the preferred research design (Yin, 2018, pp. 10-11). The explanatory case study is therefore considered to be a meaningful approach to illuminate the "how"-research question of this thesis.

In sum, the desire to understand a complex phenomenon is the main motivation for this thesis, and as result, the case study is considered an appropriate method. However, this method has its weaknesses like any other method. For example, they are sometimes criticised as being merely descriptive (Gerring, 2012, p. 721). However, I consider this to be a strength rather than a weakness – namely the method's ability to deal with a wide variety of evidence in an extensive manner, which I consider crucial to answer the research question of this thesis (Yin 2018; Gerring, 2007). In sum, the following "trade-offs" have been done when choosing the case study as the research design, which will be further assessed in section 4.5:

Table 2. Trade-offs case study vs. statistical analysis (Gerring, 2007, p. 38)

	Case Study	**Statistical analysis**
Research goal	Hypothesis generating	Hypothesis testing
Prioritized validity type	Internal validity	External validity
Causal insight	Mechanisms	Effects
Empirical focus	Deep	Broad
Population	Heterogenic	Homogenous
Source material	"Thick", diverse data	"Thin", standardized data

3.1.2 Selection of cases

The research question for this thesis is how Iran has mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979. To answer this question, I have selected three mobilisation processes of Iraqi Shi'a militias as my cases. As this thesis considers the larger phenomenon of how Iran mobilises armed resistance groups across state boundaries, the fact that I am examining a limited amount of three cases has come at the cost of representativity. As result, I will not attempt to develop a more general argument on how Iran mobilises Shi'a militias in the region. However, the aim is rather to test and build on existing theories. During the process of selecting cases, several considerations have been taken into account.

First, I have chosen to "know more about less, rather than less about more" as John Gerring (2007, p. 49) describes it. An important clarification in this regard is that there are tens of other Iraqi Shi'a militias that Iran seems to have played an important role in the mobilisation

of. Thus, ideally, a far higher number of mobilisation processes could have been included as cases to answer my research question. However, I have chosen to focus on a few cases instead of many due to the limited scope of this thesis. On the other hand, I believe this will allow me to complete this research project in a more meaningful manner as I will be able to go deeper into each case. In other words, this choice can be justified in the way that it is considered both necessary and beneficial for a study that seeks to understand a complex social phenomenon.

Second, sufficient access to available data on the mobilisation process has been a necessary and important selection criterion. Unarguably, data-rich cases are more likely to illuminate the research question, and especially when testing theories by using process tracing (Yin, 2018, Van Evera, 1997, p. 79). As such, I spent a considerable amount of time assessing whether a satisfactory amount of data was available prior to choosing the selected cases. This is why the main reason why I decided to exclude a case that have occurred after 2014, although I originally set out to have a case from this period. The fact that I have chosen data-rich might have introduced a form of selection bias, but I have made up for this through the application of other criteria as well.

Third, researchers should select cases that best serve the purpose of their inquiry (Van Evera, 1997, p. 78). In other words, it can be beneficial to select cases that have high values on the independent variable in order to test a theory (Van Evera, 1997, p. 79). Compared to the broader universe, these selected cases involve the mobilisation of the most powerful Shi'a militias in Iraq today. They also represent the relatively few groups that openly declare their loyalty to Iran rather than the Iraqi state, with their leaders having close and well-established financial, military, religious or political relationships with the IRGC-QF and Iranian leaders. In sum, it is not unreasonable to assume that the selected cases might illuminate how Iran mobilises Iraqi Shi'a militias.

Moreover, the cases seem to be representative, in the sense that they share similar characteristics with other Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias in the region - the Hizbullah model in section 3.2.3 serving as an important example. According to Gerring and Seawright (2007, p. 91), in order for a case study to provide insight into a broader phenomenon, "it must be representative of a broader set of cases". As such, my approach to case selection has to some degree been a *typical-case approach*. This approach exemplifies "what is considered to be a typical set of values, given some general understanding of a phenomenon" (Gerring & Seawright, 2007, p. 91). Before choosing the selected cases, I spent a considerable amount of time assessing similarities and differences between various Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias in the

region, which was also a reason why I decided that it was important to include the Hizbullah model in the background chapter.

In other words, I have selected the cases based on three main practical criteria: 1) there is sufficient evidence to link Iran to the mobilisation process, 2) the militia that has been mobilised plays a central role in Iraq's domestic scene, and 3) there is satisfactory amounts of data available to answer the research question in a meaningful manner. However, an important question is what does one potentially gain or lose from choosing these cases?

With regard to gain, these cases might provide an increased understanding of how the most prominent Shi'a militias in Iraq today came into existence. Furthermore, they highlight how Iran mobilises its closest militia allies. Moreover, these cases can provide insight into how Iran has built up one of its most effective asymmetric warfare capabilities. With regard to weaknesses, I believe the main loss is that I will not be able to capture a far larger phenomenon – namely the tens of other Shi'a militias that operate in Iraq that share similar characteristics with the selected cases, including the linkages to Iran. However, I consider this as a necessary delimitation.

The defined time frame for this study is 1979 until 2014. This choice was taken with the objective of being able to identify variation, or in other words, if a dynamic regional context has led Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias to vary. Furthermore, the time frame encompasses the years between the Iranian revolution of 1979 until relatively recent, which can provide useful insights in continuity or change in this aspect of Iranian security- and foreign policy, namely the "export of the revolution." This confirms the necessity of the selected time frame.

To sum up, the aim of focusing on such a small number of cases is to provide insight into a possible causal relationship across a larger population of similar cases (Gerring & Seawright, 2007, p. 86). As such, cases "claim to represent general categories of the social world, and that claim implies that any identified case comes from a knowable universe from which a sample can be drawn" (Walton, 1992, pp. 121–122). For obvious reasons, the fact that I will only examine a small amount of three cases will make it difficult for me to develop a more general argument about Iran's transnational mobilisation of armed resistance groups. On the other hand, these cases are important enough to study by themselves as they represent the most influential militias in Iraq today, in addition to being Iran's closest Iraqi militia allies.

3.1.3 Units of analysis

The units of analysis are the "cases" in a case study (Yin, 2018, p. 288). Due to the limitations of this thesis as discussed in the previous section, I have chosen the following Iraqi Shi'a militias as the units of analysis: Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its Badr Brigades, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Kata'ib Hizbullah (KH). The units of analysis have been selected through the same criteria as my cases. A short presentation of the group will follow.

SCIRI and the Badr Brigades

The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) originated from the Shi'a Islamist movement in Iraq, and is considered an offshoot of Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya, also known as the Da'wa Party (Hashim, 2005, p. 247; Marinova, 2017, p. 242). It was founded by the Shi'a Islamist leader Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim in Tehran in 1982, and was initially an umbrella organisation that sought to bring together various factions of Shi'a dissidents that were exiled in Iran. In 1983, SCIRI also established its own militia, the Badr Brigades, with help from the IRGC. Both SCIRI and the Badr Brigades operated from Iran until 2003, when the toppling of Saddam Hussein allowed it to return to the country. Today, SCIRI is called the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and the Badr Brigades has become an independent entity that goes under the name Badr Organisation for Reconstruction and Development (Badr Organisation).

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, or League of the Righteous) is an Iraqi Shi'a militia that originated as a splinter group from the Sadrist movement in 2004 (Stanford University, 2016).[11] However, AAH did not officially declare itself as an independent unit before January 2006 (Sowell, 2015; Stanford University, 2017a). AAH's founder and secretary-general is Qais al-Khazali, who was a senior member and commander in the Sadrist movement. The group is also known as the Khazali Network, which was also referred to as "Special Groups" by US officials because they were considered as the better trained, funded and armed than other militias (Shafaaq, 2018; Cochrane, 2009, p. 19). It is already public knowledge that AAH receives both material and non-material support from Tehran, including funds, training, equipment, and ideological and

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[11] The Sadrist movement is an Iraqi Shi'a Islamist and nationalist movement that emerged during the 1990s under the leadership of Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr (Cochrane, 2009, p. 9). Today, it is led by his son Moqtada al-Sadr, whose political bloc won the largest number of seats of the votes in the 2018 parliamentary elections (Jalabi & Georgy, 2018).

religious direction (Watling, 2016). AAH is also open about its affiliation with Iran, which is illustrated by its official logo. Reportedly, the group has more than 10,000 fighters (CP, 2018; Majidyar, 2018). Today, the group serves as the 41st, 42nd and 43rd Brigade in Hashd al-Sha'abi (Al-Tamimi, 2017).

Figure 1. Official logos of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, IRGC, and Lebanese Hizbullah[12]

Kata'ib Hizbullah

Kata'ib Hizbullah (KH) is an Iraqi Shi'a militia that was founded by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis with the help from IRGC-QF in 2007 (Stanford University, 2016a)[13]. Today, Muhandis is known for his positions as Iraq's deputy national security advisor and the deputy commander of Hashd al-Sha'abi(Haddad, 2018). KH is also receiving for receiving both material and non-material support from Tehran, in addition to ideological and religious direction. Furthermore, it is open about its affiliation with Iran, which its official logo illustrates. It is considered to be one of Iraq's most secretive militias, and little is known about its number of fighters. Since 2014, KH has been the 45th brigade of Hashd al-Sha'abi, and also operates in Syria (Fassihi, Solomon, & Dagher, 2013).

Figure 2. Official logos of Kata'ib Hizbullah, IRGC, and Lebanese Hizbullah

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[12] In 2017, the AK47 was replaced with a hand making the "victory sign".
[13] Muhandis' real name is Jamal Jaafar Mohammed Ali Ibrahimi.

Table 3. Overview of units of analysis

Name of group	Leader	Establishment (year/place)	Ideological profile	Registered political party	Social services provider
SCIRI and the Badr Brigades	Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim	1982 (SCIRI), Iran 1983 (Badr Brigades), Iran	Shi'a Islamist, Khomeinism, transnational	Yes	Yes
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	Qais al-Khazali	2006, Iraq	Shi'a Islamist, Khomeinism, transnational	Yes	Yes
Kata'ib Hizbullah	Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis	2007, Iraq	Shi'a Islamist, Khomeinism, transnational	No	No

Information gathered from Stanford University's database 'Mapping Militant Organisations' (2016, 2017, 2018).

3.2 Process tracing as a method

A method is a "set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analysing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 3). Although the structure of the analysis will be theoretically guided, it hinges on a comprehensive collection of empirical evidence in order to investigate whether the suggested causal mechanisms of mobilisation have occurred. As I am interested in mechanisms used by Iran across three processes of mobilisation, *process tracing* is a suitable approach.

Process tracing is "a procedure for identifying steps in a causal process leading to the outcome of a given dependent variable of a particular case in a particular historical context" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 176). In more simple terms, it is the tracing of "the decision process by which various initial conditions are translated into outcomes (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 35). According to Stephen van Evera (1997, pp. 64, 72), process tracing in case study research can provide such evidence in the following way:

> The investigator traces backward the causal process by which the case outcome was produced, at each stage attempting to infer from the context what antecedent conditions the process requires. […] The cause-effect link that connects independent variable and outcome is unwrapped and divided into small steps; then the investigator looks for observable evidence of each step.

The "thick description" that case study research produces can provide the means to discover the causal mechanism through which a phenomenon has occurred, and thus it provides an understanding that statistical result cannot provide (Crasnow, 2012, p. 658; Geertz, 1973). In other words, process tracing can be used to identify mechanisms and in which way they occurred (Bakke, 2014, p. 40). Process tracing can offer strong tests of a theory, especially if it looks for evidence of all links in all the causal chains of a process (Van Evera, 1997, pp. 65-66). However, due to the limited scope of this thesis, only four causal mechanisms will be examined.

3.2.1 Data collection

Data are "systematically collected elements of information about the world" (King et. al., 1994, p. 23). The method used is primarily qualitative document analysis, which relies on rich, dense information, and emphasises words rather than numbers in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2016, p. 380; Collier & Elman, 2008, p. 781). To reveal causal mechanisms at work in the selected cases, I have relied on a systematic and in-depth review of both primary and secondary sources. As the theoretical framework was coming together, I made a categorical overview in which I placed relevant data that could be interpreted as indicator of the mechanisms in focus. As such, I conducted a structured and focused comparison by seeking to "standardize data collection", making "systematic comparison and cumulation of the findings of the cases possible" (George & Bennett 2007, p. 67).

Concerning secondary sources, the data collection has been conducted through close examination of available textual material such as newspaper articles, official documents, government accounts, press releases, previous research, and other existing literature on the topic. As most medias reporting on and from an ongoing conflict are biased in some sense, official statements and opinions shared by actors involved are not always meant as it is said. This also includes politicians that are personally and professionally involved with the conflict. As result, much of the data available has been both contemporary and disputed, which is not ideal in terms of reliability and internal validity. When conducting case study research, the researcher should therefore rely on multiple sources of evidence, which should converge in a triangulation fashion (Yin, 2018, p. 15). Within qualitative research, it is often considered to be a weakness if triangulation of sources has not been achieved, which involves "using more than one source of data in order to crosscheck the findings" (Bryman, 2012, p. 717).

As such, I have tried to strengthen the data collection by conducting semi-structured interviews in Iraq as a method to verify disputed textual material. As such, I have made data triangulation this study's strength in terms of internal validity in particular. In addition to collecting data from available textual material, data has also been gathered from primary sources, namely semi-structured interviews conducted during my field work in Iraq in March 2018. I will elaborate on the use of interviews as a method to collect data in the following section.

3.3 Semi-structured interviews

An important source of case study evidence is the interview, which is especially useful when a research questions seeks to explain the "how" of a social phenomenon (Lynch, 2013, p. 37). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, data triangulation is considered a strength when conducting qualitative research in terms of internal and external validity. Therefore, I decided to carry out interviews in Iraq order to assess whether my observations were consistent with those "on the ground." I was thus able to include insights that reflected the relativist perspectives of my informants (Lynch, 2013, p. 37). My interviews were more similar to guided conversations rather than structured queries, which is often referred to as "unstructured interviews" (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Weiss, 1994, pp. 207–208).

3.3.1 Methodological approach

Compared with other forms of empirical evidence, such as surveys, interview usually involve a much smaller sample of participants (Mosley, 2013, p. 6). The participants were chosen through snowball sampling (sometimes called chain referral sampling or respondent-driven sampling), which is a method for gradually accumulating respondents in a sample based on recommendations from earlier interviews. This method of constructing a sample enhances access to respondents, since no cold contacts are required, and it can be used in conjunction with other forms of sampling (Lynch, 2013, p. 42). As a researcher with little previous experience in Iraq, this proved to be both a very useful and suitable way of finding key informants.

My informants were researchers, journalists, and high-level political officials based in Baghdad, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The duration of each interview was approximately 1 hour, which was flexible and decided by the informant. Ideally, I also would have interviewed militia

leaders, commanders, members, and key informants within the Iranian security establishment. However, this was challenging for several obvious reasons. In practical terms, it was difficult due to both visa restrictions and the current security situation in Iraq. See appendix 1. for overview of informants interviewed in Iraq.

Before I left for Iraq, I prepared only one interview guide. This was because of the limited amounts of interviews to be conducted, and the lack of need in different approaches to each informant. In other words, all informants were asked more or less the same set of questions, but they had a great deal of leeway in how to reply (Bryman, 2016, p. 471). Although I was pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, the questions were asked in conjunction with the natural flow or evolution of the conversation. In other words, I asked questions that allowed open-ended responses, and asked follow-ups if the responses generated additional queries (Mosley, 2013, p. 6). For example, all the interviews started off with an open question: In your view, what has been Iran's most important mechanism to mobilise Iraqi Shi'a militias? As my respondents held conflicting views on the topic of interest, I found this approach highly enlightening.

3.3.2 Ethical considerations

An important consideration for a researcher, regardless of the method being used, is the protection of the human subjects involved in the study (Brooks, 2013, p. 45). Moreover, a fundamental goal is to ensure that the research exposes the participants involved with minimal risk, which involves protecting the privacy, well-being, and dignity of all human subjects involved in the project (Tierney and Cowen, 2007; Brooks, 2013, p. 46). In other words, "general standards of ethical research dictate that scholars do not harm participants" (Woliver, 2002, p. 677). The Data Protection Official for Research at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) is an important organ that works to ensure fulfilment of legal and ethical guidelines that regulate research (NSD, 2018). The study was notified to the NSD's Data Protection Official for Research prior to conducting the field work, and approved upon arrival in Iraq.

Prior to all interviews, participants were asked to sign a formal consent form, which was outlined by following NSD's recommended guidelines. In the form, information about what participation in the project involved was included, namely an in-depth interview with the researcher (myself). In addition, if using an interpreter was necessary, participants gave their consent to this beforehand. Furthermore, the participant was asked to give his/her consent to data being collected through notes and audio recordings. The participants were informed that

all personal data would be treated confidentially, and that only the researcher would have access to the data. Finally, I emphasised that participation in the project was voluntary, and that withdrawal was possible at any time.

Treating all personal data carefully and confidentially was of great importance through the entire field work. Data was collected through notes and audio recordings, upon approval by the participant. According to Beckmann and Hall (2013, p. 203), the use of a recording device is unlikely to affect the informants, nor the information that the researcher gets out of the interview. I was the only one who had access to personal data at all times, and all personal data and recordings were stored on a password-protected laptop to in order to ensure this. The participant was informed that (s)he would not be recognizable in the publication, unless participant preferred otherwise. Participants were also informed that all data is to be made anonymous by project completion, and will not be kept for further storage. None of the participants requested to be anonymous in the publication.

3.4 Defining and measuring mobilisation

As chapter 2 demonstrated, the theoretical framework has been derived from existing literature on state-militia dynamics and contentious politics. Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 74) define mobilisation as "an increase of the resources available to a political actor for collective making of claims." In other words, people who at a given point in time are not making contentious claims start to do so. Thus, following Tilly and Tarrow's analytical approach, the cases will be decomposed into the suggested causal mechanisms that have selected to guide the analysis.

3.4.1 Mechanisms and indicators

I have attempted to find a meaningful way of disaggregating the mobilisation process into its components by deriving fire main mechanisms that seem contextually compatible based on the theoretical discussion and current empirical observations. As such, the mechanisms are in some sense both inductive and deductive. This is because existing literatures do not suggest a clear chain for the causal process in a complex social phenomenon such as the mobilisation of militias, and current empirical observations have therefore been useful. Moreover, I will draw on four mechanisms that will function as the analytical framework of this thesis, which are *brokerage*, *indoctrination*, *coordinated action*, and *social appropriation*. All mechanisms apart

from indoctrination have been derived from Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) work on contentious politics. Indoctrination has been added from the literature on sectarian entrepreneurship.

Brokerage

The first mechanism is *brokerage*, which is defined as "the production of a new connection between previously unconnected sites" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 31). Due to the transnational nature of the militias on focus, brokerage will here be viewed both as producing a connection between the patron and the client, but also connecting various militias with each other, both within and across national boundaries. Adamson (2014, p. 69) also argues that a broker also "plays a role in connecting a group or network symbolically but also materially to a conflict". As such, indicators of brokerage can include material and non-material resources such as training, facilities, equipment, funds, or religious and ideological guidance.

Indoctrination

An indicator of that indoctrination has taken place can be an *identity shift*, which is defined as "the formation of new identities within challenging groups whose coordinated actions brings them together and reveals their commonalities" (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 31). Closely related, another indicator can be *boundary activation,* which is "the creation of new boundary or the crystallization of an existing one between challenging groups and their targets" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 36). Other indicators of indoctrination can be revelation of religious or ideological commonalities that have previously been unknown, and strategic framing of shared commonalities.

Coordinated action

Coordinated action occurs "when two or more actors engage in mutual signaling and parallel making of claims on the same object" (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Indicators of coordinated action being a mechanism used is simply what lies in the definition, namely if Iran and the militia engage in mutual signaling and collective making of claims. In the context of this thesis, collective violence will also be an indicator of coordinated action. As mentioned in section 2.2.2, coordinated action can be both covert and overt in nature. Although the former is empirically challenging to observe, an indicator can be when for example a militia responds militarily on behalf of Iran when tensions are high between, for example, Tehran and

Washington D.C. With regard to overt coordinated action, indicators can range from evidence that the IRGC-QF has been coordinating with the militias, or if Iran and the militia has published statements that strongly suggests mutual signaling between the two.

Social appropriation

Social appropriation is defined as "when non-political groups transform into political actors by using their organisational and institutional bases to launch movement campaigns" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In the context of this thesis, indicators of this mechanism being used can be if Iran has helped the militia to transform from an armed resistance group into a social or religious movement, which can involve providing social services, or protecting shrines. Furthermore, an indicator can be if Iran has helped the group to become an official political party.

3.4.2 Overview

Table 4. Overview of mechanisms and indicators

Mechanism for mobilisation	Indicator of mechanism being used
Brokerage	Production of a connection between previously unconnected entities (mainly between Iran and a militia, but also between militias)
Indoctrination	Identity shift (group's identity changes after or prior to relationship with patron is established), revelation of religious or ideological commonalities that have previously been unknown, strategic framing of shared commonalities
Coordinated action	Coordinated claim-making, mutual signaling, covert intervention
Social appropriation	Transformation from armed resistance group to social/religious movement or political party (establishment of social welfare services, launch of political movement campaigns, etc.)

3.5 Critical quality assessment

It is important to evaluate how well this case study fares through criterions that are appropriate with regard to the research design and method of this study (Bryman, 2016, p. 69). In the following sections, I critically assess the quality of this study through construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability.

3.5.1 Internal validity and causal inference

Internal validity relates mainly to the issue of causal inferences (Bryman, 2016, p. 47). Some critics argue that case studies are insufficient to reach causal inference, often because they are judged as being 'merely' descriptive (Gerring, 2012, p. 721). Furthermore, my case study involves three cases, and thus representativeness is an obvious problem. However, the presence of uncertainty does not mean that one should avoid any attempts of causal inference (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, p. 76). In fact, process tracing is considered to maximise the ability to reach causal inferences (Bennett, 2014, p. 202). As such, when one thinks of qualitative methodology in political science, process tracing is often considered a suitable tool for causal inference (Goertz & Mahoney, 2010, p. 123). For example, instead of generalising the case to a broader universe, I can clarify whether a hypothesis about the mechanisms is generalisable and systematic (Gerring, 2007, p. 13).

Furthermore, proponents of case study research argue that the case study is indispensable because it is only through the detailed, thick descriptions that are provided through his type of research it is possible to uncover appropriate evidence for the causal claims that are sought in political science (Crasnow, 2012, p. 657). Mahoney and Goertz (2010) has therefore argued that case studies are closely associated with "seeking the particular cause of a particular effect." In other words, it can be viewed as a "causes-of-effects" approach, in contrast with the quantitative "effects-of-causes" approach (Crasnow, 2012, p. 657). According to Gerring (2007, p. 172), this usually links contextual evidence together when attempting to determine one or more causal mechanisms, as it is difficult to test the effect of one variable while holding all else constant when doing case study research. Crasnow (2012, p. 665) sums this up in the following way:

> Pieces of evidence produced through process tracing are useful as evidence for singular causation (causes of effects) within the context of testing a theory, but there does not seem to be any reason to think that they support average effects (effects of causes).

Concerning using the interview as a method, validity involves whether I have been asking the right questions, and equally important, asking questions in the right way (Mosley, 2013, p. 21). This is related to construct validity, which is "identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied (Gerring, 2012; King et. al., 1994). As a researcher, it is important that the theoretical concepts are formulated in a measurable way (Gerring, 2007, p. 215). In other words, construct validity is concerned with the extent to which the interview is measuring what it is supposed to measure (Mosley, 2013, p. 21).

Closely related, the researcher wants to make sure that (s)he and the informants are "speaking the same language", in addition to being provided with truthful answers (and if not, being able to detect this) (Gerring, 2007, p. 215; Mosley, 2014, p. 21). This is particularly relevant here, as many of my informants were political elites. The validity of the interview evidence also depends on the researcher's interpretation of it, which may be biased if (s)he only hears what she wants to hear (Mosley, 2013, p. 22). I have tried to prevent this from happening by not leaving out any information that can make my results less desirable or interesting, in addition being critical of any information given. Prior to leaving for fieldwork, I was well aware that the subject of my thesis is highly politicised and that conflicting narratives exist. Furthermore, by employing various triangulations strategies, I was able to evaluate interview data in light of other empirical material which functioned well as a control mechanism to detect any misinformation that was given (Gallagher, 2013).

3.5.2 External validity

While internal validity refers to the correctness of a hypothesis regarding to the case in focus, external validity is concerned with the correctness towards the cases not studied (Gerring, 2007, p. 217). In other words, external validity is the extent to which the results of the case study can be generalized to broader populations, or beyond the specific research context (Yin, 2018, p. 20). While process tracing is considered to maximise the internal validity of causal inferences, it does not produce external validity (Bennett, 2014, p. 102). As mentioned in section 4.1.1, the so-called trade-off in terms of validity when doing case study research is that case studies generally have strong internal validity and weak external validity (Gerring, 2007, p. 38). A general concern about case study research is therefore the apparent inability to generalise to a broader population or beyond the specific research context (Yin, 2018, p. 20).

With regard to whether the results of this case study can be generalized to a broader population or universe, the short answer is no. The fact that this is an in-depth study of three

cases clearly come at the cost of generalisation. However, the motivation and aim of this study is rather to contribute to the understanding of the social phenomenon in focus, which is how Iran mobilises Iraqi Shi'a militias. As such, the goal of this study is to expand and generalise theories – or in other words, analytical generalisations rather than statistical generalisations (Yin, 2018, p. 21; George & Bennett, 2005). This implies that the most desirable achievement would be if the findings prove fruitful in testing or developing the theoretical framework.

3.5.3 Reliability

Reliability means that "applying the same procedure in the same way will always produce the same measure" (King et al., 1994, pp. 25-26). In other words, reliability is concerned with whether the study can be repeated with the same results (Bryman, 2016, p. 46; Yin, 2018, p. 42). In reality, repetition rarely occurs with regard to case studies (Yin, 2018, p. 46). Although reliability is considered to be of particular importance in quantitative methods, it also needs to be assessed in qualitative ones.

Ensuring reliability is a difficult task in case study research, but a way of ensuring it can be to minimize errors and biases (Yin, 2018, p. 26). This is important because the investigation is largely dependent on the researcher itself, and challenges such as selection bias or subjective interpretation are not unlikely to have affected both the data collection and the analysis. In addition, the data collection of secondary literature such as articles, official statements and public documents have been conducted through internet searches, which might have been guided by theoretical expectations. When using search engines such as Google, I have typed in search words based on what I am seeking to find. This way, the data collection concerning the secondary sources in particular might have been affected by a biased entry into the data. As such, another researcher might achieve different results. Furthermore, it can be a difficult task to establish what exactly has been done or how the researcher arrived at the study's conclusions (Bryman, 2016, p. 406).

In this regard, high reliability can be achieved if the data collection and the analysis of the data is accurate and transparent (Hellevik, 2002, pp. 52–53). As the process tracing is based on available textual material, and the interviews have been recorded and transcribed, this problem is at least to some degree reduced. All sources used are listed in the bibliography with page numbers being included in the references, while all transcripts are available upon request. Furthermore, I have tried to make my data collection procedures as explicit as possible. Despite this, it would still be highly difficult to replicate this study.

Furthermore, I have attempted to ensure reliability by critically assessing the selected data material's authenticity, relevance, credibility and neutrality. These considerations have been taken with basis on the source the data has been derived from, and also, if there is any message that is being latently or manifestly promoted in the text. A weakness in this regard is that the interpretation of the text has been influenced by my contextual understanding and ability to critically judge its quality. However, as triangulation has been a key feature of the data collection process, it is not unreasonable to argue that the core findings in this study will be the same if another researcher attempts to do a similar study, despite the fact that (s)he is unlikely to fully replicate this study.

Reliability in interview research is about the confidence we can place in a given instrument of measurement. To what extent is the information collected in an interview accurate, and how much confidence do we have that, were the interview to be repeated again, the same information would be generated (Mosley, 2013, p. 25)? Accurately capturing the information offered by informants requires the researcher to have an effective means of recording data from the interview. Recording interviews can serve as a means of addressing reliability (and validity) concerns. In addition, for those who use an interpreter to help conduct interviews, a recorded session allows one to go over the interview later, along with the interpreter, to address any inaccuracies in translation (Mosley, 2013 p. 25). Nearly all of the interviews conducted during my field work were recorded and transcribed later.

It can be argued that when you work with interpreters, you lose some control of the interview as the interpreter might shape the interview (Fujii, 2013). However, I viewed using an interpreter as a way to enhance the reliability of the interview. This is because the informants were allowed to answer questions in their own native language, in addition to being able to talk in a conversational manner and in their own pace rather than adjusting their responses to the level of language barriers between us (Fuji, 2013). In any case, I did not have a choice, as most of my informants' mother tongue was Kurdish or Arabic, which I have no knowledge of. As result, I used an interpreter for six out of ten interviews.

3.6 Chapter summary

This thesis has a case study research design, with process tracing and the semi-structured interview as the methods for data collection. Process tracing has been important to empirically assess in which order the mechanisms have occurred, while the semi-structured interviews

conducted in Iraq have been beneficial in achieving better understanding and knowledge of the topic. The mechanisms that structure the analysis have been derived from contentious politics, in addition to sectarian entrepreneurship and state-militia dynamics: brokerage, indoctrination, coordinated action, and social appropriation.

4 Historical background

In this chapter, a short and simplified summary of the historical background will be presented. First, I will briefly discuss the causes and evolution of the proliferation of militias in Iraq. Then, I will explain Iran's revolutionary internationalism, the main actors involved, and a presentation of the 'Hizbullah model.' The purpose of this chapter is to explain how the militia phenomenon in Iraq is not merely a consequence of the country's internal dynamics, but also the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Islamic Republic's aim to export it.

4.1 The proliferation of militias in Iraq

Iraq and its people have been continuously ravaged by violent conflict since the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. This has led to a severe deterioration of Iraq's internal security situation, and simultaneously, a proliferation of militias. While the US-led invasion in 2003 was pivotal in increasing the role of militias in Iraq's internal dynamics, this process had been developing for decades. In fact, one of the most powerful militias in Iraq today, Badr Organisation, was formed during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. The following sections will present a short overview of the many causes behind the proliferation of militias in Iraq. As this thesis is concerned with Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias, it is the emergence of these groups that will be in focus.

4.1.1 Armed opposition in Ba'athist Iraq

Iraq has had an active opposition throughout its modern history, and especially after the Ba'ath party came to power in 1968 (Rabil, 2002, p. 1). During the 1970s, factions within Iraq's Shia Islamist movement became increasingly engaged in political activism. Furthermore, this escalated after the 1979 revolution and Shi'a revival in neighbouring Iran, as it inspired Iraq's Shi'a opposition after decades of oppression under the Ba'ath partys rule.

Moreover, the leading Shi'a Islamist movement, Hizbu al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya (Da'wa party hereafter), reportedly carried out attacks against regime figures, which led Saddam Hussein to make membership a crime and punishable by death (Rabil, 2002, p. 3). When Saddam Hussein became president in July 1979, he embarked on a wave of arrests, executions,

and deportations of Shi'a Islamists (ICG, 2007, p. 2).[14] Many of them the Shiites had also deported prior to 1979 as he suspected them to be "Trojan horses" for the Shah (Louër, 2012, p. 38). During the intensified oppression of Shi'a Islamist movements in Iraq, many of its leaders and members decided that Khomeini's Iran was a safe sanctuary from where they could pursue their opposition activities. According to Joyce Wiley (1992, p. 113), Iran accepted around 500,000 Iraqi Arab refugees by 1988, in addition to tens of thousands of Iraqi Kurds. One of the individuals that escaped across the border to Iran was Shi'a Islamist leader and political activist Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim (Hakim hereafter), and his brother Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, who escaped across the border to Iran in the early days of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 (ICG, 2007, p. 2).

On November 17, 1982, two years after his arrival, Hakim announced the formation of SCIRI from Tehran, which reportedly had been initiated by the Islamic Republic's newly established leadership (Louër, 2012, p. 65; Marr, 2012, p. 196). SCIRI was initially an umbrella organisation for Iraqi Shi'a opposition groups, but Hakim and his followers represented the most powerful faction within it (Marinova, 2017, p. 243). According to Shaul Bakhash (1984, p. 233), Iranian officials referred to Hakim as "the leader of Iraq's future Islamic state." While a majority of SCIRI's representatives came from the Da'wa party, it also included smaller factions such as the Iraqi Mujahideen, Islamic Movement in Iraq, and Islamic Action Organisation (ICG, 2007, p. 5; Lansford, 2014, p. 715; Marr, 2012, p. 196).

Although the shared Shi'a faith had brought Persians and Iraqi Arabs together for centuries, the Iranian revolution in 1979 led to a dramatic shift in relations between the two. The Islamic Republic's outspoken goal to export the revolution led the Iranian leadership to adopt a different approach to Iraqi Shiites, and particularly the opposition groups with political ambitions to overthrow the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad (Marinova, 2017, p. 56). Concerning Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias, this can therefore be said to date back to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s with the creation of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and its militia, the Badr Brigades. While the Da'wa party carried out internal operations against the Ba'athist regime, SCIRI and the Badr Brigades even fought alongside the Iranian army during the Iran-Iraq war (ICG, 2006, p. 3). Thus, although militias became prominent in Iraq's internal dynamics after the US-led invasion in 2003, it is misguiding to believe that all of them were formed in this period.

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[14] For literature on Iraqi Shi'a Islamist movements, see Yitzhak Nakash's '*The Shi'is of Iraq*' (1994), Joyce Wiley's '*The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as*' (1992), Laurence Louër's '*Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*' (2012) and Vali Nasr's '*The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will shape the Future*' (2006).

4.1.2 The US-led invasion and its consequences

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to a dramatically different context for Iran and its armed Iraqi Shi'a allies, as it allowed exile groups such as SCIRI and the Badr Brigades to return to their home country. Iraqi Shiites and Kurds viewed their new political situation as an opportunity to carry out a long-awaited redistribution power after decades of oppression under the Ba'ath party's rule (Nasr, 2006, p. 58). For example, before American troops reached Baghdad, gangs loyal to the young Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr had already seized police stations and weapons, naming the Shi'a slum districts of eastern Baghdad as "Sadr City" (Ahram, 2011, p. 88). At the same time, local activists formed new parties and militias that resulted from spontaneous neighborhood committees, tribes, and clerical networks (Posch, 2018, p. 5).

Moreover, the influential role of militias has first and foremost emerged as a consequence of the US-led invasion in 2003, and the Iraqi security forces' lacking capability to protect its own population. The fragmenting power vacuum, institutional weaknesses, and faltering security situation that followed allowed the Badr Brigades and other armed groups to become an integral part of society as they began securing their own neighbourhoods (Posch, 2018, p. 5). Furthermore, numerous strong political parties sprang up to provide public goods and services, such as healthcare and education, but most of all to provide security for their constituents (Hubbard, 2008, p. 346). In other words, the militias therefore emerged in a fragile state where the respective government lacked the capacity and legitimacy to provide security to its own citizens. As such, Iraq has provided a fertile environment for such groups to gain a foothold. Moreover, the chaos that broke out after 2003 is the most important factor to why the militias have gained prominence in Iraqi society.

One important reason for this has been the de-Ba'athification of Iraq, which led to a collapse of Iraq's security apparatus (Posch, 2018, p. 15). Paul Bremer, who became Iraq's de facto sovereign head as the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), issued two monumental orders that defined the new state; CPA Order 1 dissolved the ruling Ba'ath party and led to the firing of thousands of civil servants who were responsible for running the state; and CPA Order 2 dissolved the Iraqi military and intelligence services (Mansour, 2017, p. 15; Posch, 2018, p. 15). What most excluded Sunni's from Iraq's political scene was the de-Ba'athification and giving the majority Shi'a population the dominant position in the national government (Johnston et al., 2016, p. 13). Many of those who lost their jobs joined resistance

movements and insurgent groups, as for example the Al-Qaeda network in Iraq (AQI) (Zinn, 2016).

When the new Iraqi state was being rebuilt, it therefore lacked the capacity and legitimacy to provide security and law enforcement in large parts of the country. This provided the Shi'a militias with a unique opportunity to consolidate power, and increase its popular legitimacy among the population. As such, while the government's legitimacy has faltered, militias have gained popularity (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017, p. 40). They first set out to protect holy places and shrines, but they gradually gained more control. Furthermore, both Sunni insurgents and militias such as Sadr's JAM and "Special Groups" were very active in attacking US coalition forces (Knights, 2011b). Due to the large number of violent attacks, which also have resulted in civilian casualties, Iraqi militias have both compromised and contributed to the country's security, often simultaneously (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017, p. 40).

Another main actor was the Sunni insurgency, which was dominated by members of the Sunni Arab minority who had been largely motivated by resistance to the occupation and the marginalisation by Shi'as that followed (Mowle, 2006, p. 56). Whilst all of these groups perceived themselves to be serving 'Iraq' the reality was that Iraq as imagined by prominent Iraqi political actors would, intentionally or not, marginalise the other or at the very least foster fears of marginalisation (Haddad, 2011, p. 145). While the civil war in Iraq began as a an urban guerrilla struggle by Sunni insurgent groups and Shi'a militias that sought to expel the occupying power from its territory, they also began attacking each other when the sectarian civil war broke out after the bombing of the Samarra shrine in 2006 (Thurber, 2011, p. 1).

As mentioned in the introduction, 2014 represented another new era for the Shi'a militias operating in Iraq as they merged under the banner Hashd al-Sha'abi. Within this umbrella organisation, the most powerful Shi'a militias that have cooperated closely with IRGC-QF are Kata'ib Hizbullah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Badr Organisation.[15] The most effective militias in the fight against IS were also those most aligned with Iran's leadership (Ostovar, 2016, p. 224). The leaders of these groups claim to represent Khamenei in Iraq, openly declare their loyalty to Soleimani, and states that their agenda is to impose the Iranian model of

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[15] Other smaller groups are Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba, Saraya al-Khurasani, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shahuda, Kata'ib al-Imam al-Ghaib and Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq, whose leaders are outspokenly fiercely loyal to Tehran's military and religious leadership, openly display imagery of Grand Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, and hail the IRGC special Quds unit commander Qassim Soleimani (Al-Tamimi, 2015; Qaidaari, 2015; Rawabet Research and Strategic Studies Center, 2016; Stanford University, 2016).

velayat-e faqih in Iraq (Stanford University, 2016). These groups hold central positions as leaders and commanders within Hashd al-Sha'abi. When the ISF were unable to integrate the mass mobilisation of new recruits that occurred after Sistani's call to arms following the fall of Mosul to ISIS, it was also these groups who were well-organised enough to deal with them (Ostovar, 2016, p. 224). This was because they had been receiving sophisticated support from the IRGC-QF for decades, and were also more experienced due to years of attacking coalition forces, Ba'athist regime figures, in addition to having operated in the Syrian civil war as well (Haddad, 2018).

4.2 Iran's revolutionary internationalism

Section 4.1 demonstrated that the expanding role of militias in Iraq has first and foremost been a consequence of the US-led invasion in 2003. However, some of the most influential Shi'a militias originated as armed opposition groups during the Ba'athist era, and in particular during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s with support from the Iran and the IRGC. To understand this phenomenon, we have to go back to the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the regime's aim to export it. In other words, we have to take a closer look at the at the raison d'être of the Islamic Republic and the main bodies in charge of its implementation - the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Quds Force.

4.2.1 The IRGC and its Quds Force

1979 is a year that will be remembered in history for the victory of the Iranian revolution and the proclamation of the Islamic Republic (Kepel, 2002, p. 107). Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's triumphant return to Tehran from exile marked the end of 2500 years of ruling monarchies, and the beginning of the Iran's *nezam velayat-e faqih* ("system of rule by a single jurisprudent").[16] Furthermore, Khomeini's foreign policy was based on two major principles shaped by a left-leaning Third-Worldism and its distinct revolutionary Shi'a doctrine; "neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic", and the "export of the revolution" (Rizvi, 2012, p. 113; Hunter, 2010,

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[16] Although Iran had been ruled by monarchies for millenniums, Shiism had been Iran's state religion since the Mahdist revolution in 1501, which was led by Shah Ismail the Safavid (Arjomand, 2010, p. 7). While establishing his rule over Persia, Shah Ismail the Safavid claimed that he was acting as the representative of the Hidden Imam, and important Shiite scholars from what today is known as Lebanon and Iraq to convert Iranians to their new state religion (Arjomand, 2010, p. 7).

p. 239).[17] While the former led Iran's Western allies to become its enemies almost overnight, the latter sparked fear among secular and monarchic rulers in the Gulf who witnessed their own Islamist movements being encouraged by the revival of political Islam in Iran *(.. The 1979 Iranian revolution therefore led to no less than a radical upheaval in the geopolitical equilibriums of the Middle East, which it continues to do to this day.

The promise to export the revolution was based on Khomeini and his followers viewing it as a model that would trigger further revolutions in other Muslim countries (Rakel, 2008, p. 185). Moreover, by deriving legitimacy from its history of being victim of foreign interference, the Islamic Republic declared itself as a spokesperson for oppressed Muslims and people around the world (Roshandel, 2001, p. 44).[18] As such, Iran's resistance against US presence in the region and Israel's existence became the Islamic Republic's trademark. To protect its raison d'être, the Iranian leadership decided that it needed to spread its revolutionary ideals by working with Muslim allies in the region (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 103). This has continued to be a cornerstone in its regional strategy, with the building of a transnational network of armed resistance groups being one of its most effective tools. Moreover, these groups have evolved into being at the centre of Iran's "strategies of opposition" vis-à-vis regional and external adversaries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017, p. 164). Ostovar (2016a, p. 103) argues that this can be understood as a form of revolutionary or radical internationalism, which sees international relations through the lens of conflict.

The main actor involved in implementing Iran's revolutionary internationalism is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Appointed by Khomeini as defender of the revolution, the IRGC ('*sepah-e pasdaran-e enqelab-e eslami*') has been mandated to defend the place and function of the *faqih* in Iran's revolutionary system rather (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 2). Although the IRGC was first established as a militia-type organisation, it has gradually become an institution that influences almost every sector of society (Bruno, Bajoria, & Masters, 2013; Sinkaya, 2015). As such, the IRGC is a major political, economic, and security power center in Iran (Thaler et al., 2010). While its close relationship with the faqih has allowed it to expand

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[17] A major theme for the Islamic Republic is its view of the world as divided into two groups: *mustakbarin* ("the oppressors") and *mustazafin* ("the oppressed") (Roshandel, 2001, p. 44). Article 3 in the constitution of the Islamic Republic declares that its goals it to provide "unsparing support to the oppressed of the world," and Article 154 calls for "support of the just struggles of the oppressed against the arrogant in every corner of the globe (Rubin, 2017).

[18] However, the relationship between raison d'être and realpolitik is not necessarily always compatible. In fact, Iranian elites have made pragmatism the guiding factor in foreign policy and strategy: the principle of *maslahat-e nezam*, the 'expediency of the system', means that ideological purity takes a back seat when it comes to the survival of the state and the regime (Posch, 2017, p. 80). As result, although religious identity and beliefs certainly influence Iran's approach to foreign affairs, they do not dictate them (Ostovar, 2016b).

its power structures, it was also the IRGCs efforts during the Iran/Iraq war (1980-1988). While its close relationship with the faqih has allowed it to expand its power structures, it was also the IRGCs efforts during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), which Iranians refer to as the sacred defense, that transformed it into a conventional military organisation with a paramount role in decision-making processes (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 3; Toumaj, 2018).

With regard to the IRGC's revolutionary internationalism, it is the Quds Force (IRGC-QF) that has been at the frontline of this strategy in the region. The IRGC-QF was originally mandated to lead the IRGC's efforts against Israel, but is now in charge of all foreign covert and military operations (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 6). Its size is estimated to between five and twenty thousand individuals and are some of the IRGCs best trained members with skills ranging from explosives, espionage, and foreign languages (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 6). The IRGC-QF is led by Major General Qassem Soleimani, who reports directly to Khamenei and has advised him on Iranian operations in the region since 2002 (Cochrane, 2009, p. 19). Under Soleimani's command, the IRGC-QF's primary function has been to develop and assist likeminded armed non-state or para-state groups outside Iran's national borders. This is commonly referred to as Iran's strategic depth, and one of its most effective asymmetric warfare capabilities.

> Take heed, our capacities and capabilities are not merely those things we possess domestically, we also have important capacities outside the country; we have supporters, we have strategic depth […] in some cases because of Islam, in others because of language, and still others because of the Shi'a religion. These are the country's strategic depth ('omq-e rahbordi'); these are part of our capabilities; we must use all of our capabilities. - Ayatollah Khamenei (2014, quoted in Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017, p. 159)

As Iran knows that it is inferior to its main enemies in terms of conventional military strength, its strategy has been to decentralise its command structures and develop asymmetric threats (Selvik, 2018, p. 168). This has taken form in a transnational network of armed resistance groups, who mainly consist of Shi'a militias that work closely with the IRGC-QF (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 8).[19] Iranian leaders often refer to this network as "the axis of resistance." Through working with these allies and clients, Iran has increased the cost of a potential attack by its regional and external adversaries without committing too much of its own conventional forces (Selvik, 2018, p. 168; Posch, 2017, p. 4). This is a common characteristic of revolutionary internationalism, namely state collaboration with like-minded armed groups as

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[19] Iran has called upon all opponents of Israel to join the "Islamic Resistance,", also commonly referred to as an "axis of resistance" led by Iran and Hizbullah. Therefore, the alliance with Syria, which is considered a frontline state against Israel, plays a central role (Posch, 2018, p. 27). However, the resistance, which is largely Shiite, can also be interpreted as directed against Saudi Arabia (Posch, 2018, p. 27).

means of covert or indirect intervention to influence the internal dynamics of other states (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 103). In this regard, Iran's religious and ideological appeal has been an effective way to project power outside its own borders.

4.2.2 The 'Hizbullah model'

The most famous example of this aspect of Iran's regional strategy is its cooperation with Hizbullah in Lebanon. Hizbullah (Party of God) was founded by various sectors of Lebanese Shi'ite clergy and cadres in 1979, with Iranian support, as an Islamic movement protesting social and political conditions (Alagha, 2006). In 1982, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon led to Hizbullah's evolution into an Islamist resistance force (Khatib, Matar, & Alshaer, 2014). Because of Israeli presence, which led to thousands of deaths and displaced, Khomeini's message of Islamic resistance to Western and Israeli hegemony gathered widespread backing towards Hizbullah among Lebanese Shi'a (Razavi, 2013, p. 125). The group has recognized Khomeini as its political and spiritual leader, a position still endorsed today towards Khamenei (Khatib et al., 2014, p. 1). Moreover, Hizbullah's capabilities, weaponry and operations are influenced by its cooperation with Iran (Khatib et al., 2014, p. 1).

As Hizbullah is a well-documented case of a militia that Iran uses as a "model" to build new groups, it is important to assess the main feature of this relationship (Alaaldin, 2018b). To sum up, the 'Hizbullah model' refers to how the group managed to gain power and influence in Lebanon, which has been summed up in three stages by Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights (2017): first, it used its armed resistance brand and its provision of social welfare services to establish itself to gain popular support and legitimacy Lebanon's Shi'a community; second, it used its popular base to enter the political process through participation in elections to ensure that its interests could not be harmed by the Lebanese state; and third, it used its access to and influence over state institutions to safeguard these interests, and those of Iran, while managing to preserve its armed wing and social welfare services although it challenged the state's social contract and monopoly on violence (Eisenstadt & Knights, 2017).

In an interview with Fred Halliday in February 2004, the deputy leader of Hizbullah Sheikh Naim Qasim said in a response to a question about the decision taken by Hizbullah in 1992 to make the transition from being an armed resistance group to being a political organisation, Sheikh Naim stated that Hizbullah had set up a committee to study the matter and that this report had then been sent to Tehran; with the final decision, he stated, being taken by Iran and in particular by Khamenei (Halliday, 2005, p. 242). Although the degree of direct

Iranian influence on Hizbullah is disputed, Israel takes for granted that Iran is able to trigger a retaliatory attack from its northern border, which gives Iran a deterring effect towards Israel (Selvik, 2018, p. 168). Furthermore, on the symbolic side, by emphasizing Iran's Islamic identity instead of its Persian roots, Hizbullah helps Iran penetrate the heart of the Arab world and spread its influence (Razavi, 2013, p. 126).

40 years after its creation, Hizbullah is not only a leading political actor in Lebanon, it is also considered one of Iran's most successful geostrategic achievements. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2017, p. 167) argues that it was in the course of this process that Iran was able to forge "a model of political, social and armed mobilisation that proved remarkably durable". The trend of creating and developing new front groups, most evidently in Iraq and Syria, suggests that Iran is continuing efforts to expand its transnational network of Shi'a militias along the lines of this model (Smyth, 2015, p. 2). In other words, Hizbullah is commonly referred to as the "prototype" of the kind of militias Iran has been mobilising throughout the region (Hubbard, 2017). As such, central features of this model might have been attempted replicated in the case of Iraqi Shi'a militias.

4.3 Chapter summary

The background chapter has attempted to provide information on two main issues. First, the proliferation of militias in Iraq, and second, why Iran has mobilised these militias for its own purposes. The aim has been to demonstrate that the proliferation of militias in Iraq is not merely a consequence of the country's internal dynamics, but also the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Islamic Republic's aim to export it.

5 Analysis Part I: SCIRI and the Badr Brigades

In this chapter, I will examine Iran's role in the mobilisation process of SCIRI and its Badr Brigades in the 1980s. In order to do this, I will use process tracing as a method to observe whether the following mechanisms have been used, and in which order they occurred: brokerage, indoctrination, coordinated action, and social appropriation.

5.1.1 Brokerage

When examining if, or how, brokerage was a mechanism used by Iran during the mobilisation of SCIRI, the most obvious connection is the one between Iran and the various groups that constituted the organisation in 1982.

First and foremost, an important and well-established fact is that Khomeini was more than willing to host Iraqi Shiites and their various opposition groups in his new Islamic Republic (Thurber, 2014, p. 906). This is also confirmed in SCIRI's own documents, where it is stated that their main office was established in Tehran because Iran "had welcomed Ayatollah al-Hakim, the leader of SCIRI, and thousands of Iraqi immigrants who fled Iraq after Saddam took power in 1979" (Marinova, 2017, p. 56). According to ICG (2007, p. 2), Iran immediately allowed, and even helped Iraqi dissidents to organise themselves once they arrived from Iraq. Furthermore, SCIRI and the Badr Brigades became largely dependent on the material support it received from Iran (Marinova, 2017, p. 29). While the former's main source for funding was the Iranian government, the latter was funded, equipped and trained by the IRGC (Stanford University, 2012; ICG, 2007, p. 21). Iran's immediate readiness to recognise SCIRI was signalled at its founding ceremony in 1982, where Khamenei attended as Khomeini's representative (ICG, 2007, p. 3).

Although the Iraqi Shi'a opposition themselves had many pragmatic reasons to connect with Iran during the 1980s, Iran had the last word in the facilitation of this connection. These groups would not have been able to organise and pursue their opposition activities from Iran without Khomeini's endorsement. This suggests that Iran's use of brokerage was to offer much needed assistance to the various opposition groups in exile. As the Iraqi dissidents were unable to operate freely in their home country, a facilitating sanctuary from which they could pursue their opposition activities was an important incentive to connect with Iran. Furthermore, Iran's

offer to provide them with material resources is likely to have been crucial, as the various oppositions groups lacked resources of their own while in exile. In other words, Iran's ability to use brokerage seems to have largely been the allocation of material resources, including sanctuary. Moreover, brokerage also consisted of materially connecting SCIRI to the Iran-Iraq war, including internal operations against the Ba'athist regime.

However, the role of its non-material resources in the use of brokerage should also be emphasised. As mentioned in section 4.1.1, the successful Shi'a revival made Khomeini and his Islamic Republic a source of inspiration for many Iraqis in the opposition at the time. Furthermore, Khomeini's pan-Islamic rhetoric, such as Iran's self-assigned role as spokesperson for all oppressed Muslims around the world, contributed to Iran's capability to mobilise these groups. Sadi Ahmed Pire, the current spokesperson for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which also was in opposition and supported by Iran during that period, could confirm the importance of Iran's non-material resources during my interview with him in Erbil, Iraq, March 2018:

> Khomeini changed a lot in Iraq and the region. For the first time, a superpower like the Shah was put down by demonstrations and Ayatollahs, despite his strong military and arsenal. That changed the self-confidence of the people, and was a good lesson for Kurds and other ethnic groups in Iraq. Khomeini and his revolution showed us that [the state's] power is not everything, the masses can also decide.

Arif Qurbani also said the following during my interview with him in Chamchamal, Iraq, in March 2018:

> One factor [to mobilise these groups] has been Iran's capability to capitalise on the Shi'a religion. If Iraq wasn't Shi'a, Iran would not have been able to intervene. Another factor is the fact that the leaders in Iraq have been historically been Sunnis who have suppressed Shiites. As the opposition forces were on bad terms with the Ba'athist regime, they established links with Iran. Iran has therefore capitalised on the historical opposition against Saddam Hussein, which has allowed the Shias here in Iraq to perceive Iraq as a liberating force.

Iran's portrayal of itself as a liberating force in order to legitimise itself among Iraqis was also underlined by Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen during my interview with him in Erbil, Iraq, in March 2018:

> They [Iran] always say we morally and politically supported you [referring to the high number of Iraqi refugees in Iran during Ba'athist era]. They say we have suffered from dictatorships like you did. They say Iraq waged an 8-year long war against us. We are one people, the Shi'as, and one people, the Kurds. They say we have so many Kurds in Iran, we have many Shias, we are one house and we don't want to go back to war. If our Shia brothers want our help, we help them. We stabilise them, we will defend them, and if our Kurdish friends want that, we will do the same.

Kardo Mohammed, senior member in the Gorran Movement, supported this argument:

> All of the Shi'a groups [that Iran supports] have been oppressed by Sunni leaders and governments, which has led them to have a sectarian and ideological vision towards those in power. Iran has exploited that, and has portrayed the message that they are the saviours of oppressed Shiites. For Iran to influence these groups, they promote the idea that their need to protect their own security, that they need to be armed, and also that they need to undermine the security of Sunnis in large. As result, ideology is a big part of it.

Following these arguments, Iran capitalised on its non-material resources when taking advantage of the Iraqi Shi'a dissidents' grievances after decades of oppression. Although Iran probably felt morally obligated to help its fellow Shiites, Thurber (2004, p. 906) argues that it was also largely because the Iranian leadership hoped to "gain a foothold within Iraq's Shi'a community" and "to convince the religious elite to embrace Khomeini as their spiritual leader." This is in line with the literature on sectarian entrepreneurship, which seems to have been an important dimension of Iran's use of brokerage as a mechanism to mobilise SCIRI.

In a similar vein, Iran exercised brokerage by connecting the various Iraqi opposition groups with each other. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the different groups were not unconnected per se; after all, they stemmed from the same Shi'a Islamist movement in Iraq. It is not unlikely that a large portion of SCIRI's different leaders and members already had well-established relationships with each other, and even received the same religious education by the clerical establishment in Najaf. Nor is it unlikely that they shared the same spiritual guidance of Shi'a Islamist leaders such as Mohsen al-Hakim and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. However, although the Shi'a activists from these different factions had all been part of the larger Shi'a community in Iraq, the various opposition groups had not been formally connected prior to the establishment of SCIRI, apart from Hakim family and the Da'wa party (Cole, 2003, p. 547). To sum up, brokerage seems to have been connecting the various opposition groups with each other.

It is equally important to assess if the brokerage involved connecting with SCIRI's leadership. While the Da'wa party had the most representatives within SCIRI, its leadership was Hakims faction (Louër, 2012, p. 67; Shanahan, 2004; Doi, 2008). According to Shaul

Bakhash (1984, p. 233), Iranian officials referred to Hakim as "the leader of Iraq's future Islamic state." Hakim was the second oldest son of Grand Ayatollah Mohsen Tabatabaei al-Hakim, who was the primary *marja al-taqleed* in Iraq's Shi'a religious establishment in Najaf during the 1960s (Rizvi, 2008). Although shared spiritual ties between the religious establishments in Qom and Najaf have brought Iranian and Iraqi Shiites together for centuries, the relationship between the Iranian clergy and the Hakim family does not seem to have spilled over to the political sphere.[20] In particular, this seems to have been the case prior to Mohsen al-Hakim's death in 1970. As will be discussed in section 5.1.2, Mohsen al-Hakim had rejected Khomeini when the latter asked him to help in taking political action against the Shah in 1965 (Wiley, 1992, p. 41).

However, it is difficult to assess whether the two camps were as disconnected after Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim became a prominent Shi'a Islamist leader after his father's death in 1970. Like his father, Hakim was a senior member in the Da'wa party, where he worked closely with Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (ICG, 2007, p. 1).[21] While Mohsen al-Hakim denounced the Shi'a Islamist movement's engagement in political activism, his son and Sadr became renowned activists during the 1970s, which resulted in imprisonment, torture, and ultimately to Sadr's death in 1980 and Hakim's escape to Iran later the same year (S. Rizvi, 2010). Taking into consideration that Hakim was active in the Shi'a opposition during the 1970s, it is not unlikely that he already had a connection with Khomeini at that time. If that is the case, brokerage might have consisted the strengthening of an already existing connection.

Furthermore, the empirical findings suggest that Iran contributed to the production of a connection between SCIRI and Iraqis who were not affiliated with the exiled opposition. Iran allowed the Badr Brigades to recruit from Iraqi prisoners of war, who had been captured while fighting for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war (Nakash, 1994, p. 277).[22] For example, the Badr Brigades eventually had a special force named Hamza, which consisted of Iraqi prisoners of war who volunteered to join the Shiite opposition forces (Nakash, 1994, p. 277). SCIRI activists reportedly "scoured Iranian detention camps to fill the Brigades' ranks, and

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Yitzhak Nakash (1994) have argued that this is because Shiites in the Gulf have historically regarded Iranian Shiites with spiritual affinity rather than a political model for emulation.

[21] According to ICG (2007, p. 1), Mohsen al-Hakim stood jointly with Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr when the latter cofounded the Da'wa Party in the late 1950s. The Hakim and Sadr families represented the two most prominent families in Najaf at the time.

[22] Another important dimension of SCIRI's recruitment strategies was to approach Iraqi Shiite refugees that had been expelled in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Nakash, 1994, p. 277). Thus, SCIRI also took advantage of Saddam's policy of mass expulsions of Shiites by "offering them employment as fighters in the Badr Brigades and access to subsidised food" (ICG, 2007, p. 4).

converted any guilt these prisoners of war may have felt into a dependency it could manipulate" (ICG, 2007, p. 4). SCIRI's ability to do this was largely due to the access given by Iranian officials, which even suggests that it might have been Iran's idea in the first place. Apparently, the Iraqi prisoners of war were approved by the Iranians before joining the Badr Brigades (Posch, 2018, p. 12). This activated the connection between previously unconnected sites – namely Shiites that had fought *for* Saddam, and Shiite opposition in Iranian exile that fought *against* Saddam. Shiism therefore functioned as a meaningful category of identity, which was taken advantage upon by both SCIRI and Iran. As such, SCIRI with Iran's help also attempted to activate a new boundary between us and them, namely Shi'as and the Ba'athist regime.

Another, but less documented indicator of brokerage is the possible connection between Lebanese Hizbullah and the Badr Brigades during the 1980s. If this is correct, it is not unreasonable to argue that the connection was produced or at least partly produced by Iran, who were providing both of them with material and non-material resources. Furthermore, their similar revolutionary and Khomeinist Shiite doctrine might have extended an ideological and religious bridge between them. In 1987, the spokesperson for Iran's war propaganda office announced that the war inside Iraq would now be continued by Iraqis themselves, in the form of all-Iraqi "Hizbullah brigades" (Wiley, 1992, p. 63). At the sixth annual meeting of SCIRI in January 1988, Hujja Muhammad Ali Rahmani, an IRGC official, was among the speakers reporting on progress made "heeding Imam's [Khomeini] directive to organise Hizbullah cells inside Iraq" (Wiley, 1992, p. 64). This suggests that Iran had a similar plan with SCIRI as it had with Hizbullah, although it is difficult to empirically substantiate what kind of relationship existed between them during that time. However, although this is not impossible, I have not been able to find convincing and sufficient empirical evidence to claim with certainty that this was the case.

To sum up, Iran overall seems to have been actively deploying brokerage as means to mobilise SCIRI. I have identified three indications of this: first, the production of a connection between the exiled Shi'a opposition groups and the Islamic Republic; second, the production of a connection between the various opposition groups that were in exile in Iran; and third, the facilitation of a connection between SCIRI and non-dissident Iraqis, as for example prisoners of war. Concerning SCIRI and Lebanese Hizbullah, the empirical evidence is insufficient to say that Iran brokered such a connection. However, the findings suggest that brokerage was an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise an armed resistance front to put pressure on the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad.

5.1.2 Indoctrination

In order to examine whether indoctrination was a mechanism used by Iran to mobilise SCIRI, the years following up to its founding is crucial. In particular, two empirical findings indicate that Hakim's faction went through such a transition during the group's initial period. First, according to Joyce N. Wiley (1992, p. 41), Khomeini had approached Hakim's father in 1965 to ask him to join in taking political action against the Shah in 1965. However, Mohsen al-Hakim's response was that "Iraqi Islamists adhered resolutely to their strategy for achieving an Islamic society through gradual and peaceful tactics, relying on education and the persuasion of individuals." (Wiley, 1992, p. 41). Mohsen al-Hakim disagreed with Khomeini's increasing political activism (Corboz, 2012, p. 295). In fact, he even distanced himself from the Da'wa party due to its increased political activism during the 1960s, and even forbade his sons and Sadr to have anything to do with it (Corboz, 2012, p. 295). This suggests that the Hakim family did not − at least at the time − agree with Khomeini's approach to political life.

Furthermore, when Mohsen al-Hakim died in 1970, Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei succeeded him as marja in Najaf (Martin, 2000, p. 60; Walbridge, 2001, p. 6). To a greater extent than his predecessor, Ayatollah al-Khoei was a quietist scholar who did not advocate the intertwining of religion and politics (Walbridge, 2001, p. 6). This happened the same year as Khomeini held his famous series of lectures on velayat-e faqih in Najaf (Dabashi, 2006, p. 437). Khoei discarded the ideas that Khomeini was advocating on the following grounds (Rizvi, 2012, p. 113; Moin, 1999, p. 261):

> The authority of a faqih is limited to the guardianship of widows and orphans, and [cannot] be extended by human beings to the political sphere. In the absence of the Hidden Imam, the authority of jurisprudents [is] not the preserve of one or few faqihs.

Although the religious establishment was against it, the lectures became popular and doubled Khomeini's student mass (Martin, 2000, p. 72). However, despite Khomeini's popularity, most Iraqi Shiites still followed Khoei (Walbridge, 2001, p. 6). Moreover, it might have been among Iraq's Shi'a activists who were determined for political change that Khomeini had most salience, as he was more supportive of their political activities than Mohsen al-Hakim and his successor were. Furthermore, Mohsen al-Hakim had appointed his son and three others to assume overall leadership of Iraqi's Shi'a Islamist Movement (Wiley, 1992, p. 60).

Furthermore, when they fled to Iran, they were dependent on Khomeini's recognition in order to establish the organisation as a legitimate movement in his newly-established Islamic Republic. However, according to Wiley (1992, p. 60), Khomeini rejected four organisational efforts to authorise Hakim and the three other appointees as its leaders before Hakim was finally able to form SCIRI in 1982. This indicates that the formation of SCIRI in 1982 was the result of a long process of attaining Khomeini's approval. Furthermore, it may imply that Hakim's camp had to be indoctrinated with Iran's ideological and religious doctrine before Khomeini would allow them to assume leadership and form SCIRI. Although it is difficult to empirically substantiate at what time SCIRI's leadership became religiously and ideologically aligned with Iran, indoctrination is well-documented *after* the founding of SCIRI.

As suggested by its name, SCIRI hoped to lead an Islamic revolution in Iraq, following the model of Khomeini's recent revolution in Iran (Thurber, 2014, p. 907). At the time of its inception, SCIRI described itself as representing "all the Muslim people of Iraq, Sunnis as well as Shi'as," and Iran as "the foundation and prime mover of the world Islamic revolution" (Wiley, 1992, p. 60). Although it was portrayed as pan-Islamic, SCIRI's revolutionary ideology was unarguably more influenced by its Shi'a doctrine. In fact, Hakim was one of the first and few Shi'a intellectuals to write in pan-Shi'i terms, with his vision of "a unified Shi'a empire", with Iran and Iraq being explicitly mentioned, which was to be controlled by a *faqih* (Visser, 2004; pp. 145-147; Visser, 2007, p. 27). Hakim was therefore an advocate of the concept of *velayat e-faqih*, thus embracing the Shi'a doctrine represented by Khomeini's Islamic Republic.[23]

In contrast, velayat e-faqih was a source of tension and internal disagreement within other major Iraqi Shi'a Islamist factions, such as the Da'wa party (Shanahan, 2004, p. 947). It should be noted that historically, the religious Shiite establishment in Najaf has historically been a obstacle for the Islamic Republic's spiritual outreach in Iraq. While a majority of the Iraqi clergy believe that religion and politics should be separated, Iran's model and Khomeini's concept of velayat-e faqih is contrary to this view. Scholars such as Jerrold Green (2009), Vali Nasr (2007, p. 270) and Yitzhak Nakash (1994, p. 7) have all argued that Shi'ism in Iraq is distinctly different from that of Iran. To this day, Iraqi Shiites are divided between those who follow the clergy in Najaf, led by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and those who follow Ayatollah

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[23] The Islamic Republic's political system is called *nezam velayat-e faqih* ("system of rule by a single jurisprudent"), and originates from a series of lectures held by Khomeini in the 1970s. This means that the absolute rule is granted to the jurisprudent, the *faqih*, which makes the basis of the Islamic Republic's constitution.

Khomeini and his clergy in Qom. According to Phebe Marr (2012, p. 196), the concept was "alien" to the majority of Iraqi Shiites, not to mention the Sunnis, who Hakim also claimed to represent

Furthermore, he might even have been the preferred candidate in the first place. The Da'wa Party was by comparison both larger and more organised than Hakim's faction at the time. However, they did not endorse Khomeini's model of velayat e-faqih. Although it is not known why Khomeini rejected the movement's leadership at first (apart from perhaps being occupied with other things at the time), it is likely that he had some terms that had to be agreed upon before granting SCIRI his endorsement, including various types of support. After all, if Iran's long-term plan for SCIRI was for it to spark an Islamic revolution in Iraq and replacing the Ba'athist regime, it is not unlikely that the Iranians wanted to make sure that it would not get in the way of Iran's political objectives in Iraq in the future. Of course, this is speculative, and I have not been able to find any empirical evidence with regard to negotiations between Hakim and Khomeini or others. However, SCIRI's ideological allegiance did demonstrate an identity shift from the Shi'a Islamist movements' "founding fathers". Thus, it seems that there might have been negotiations between Hakim and Iran with regard to SCIRI's ideological platform prior to its formal establishment. This suggests that an identity shift, or indoctrination, might have been a mechanism applied by Iran prior to founding SCIRI and appointing Hakim as its leader. Kardo Mohammed, a senior member in the Gorran Movement, provided the following explanation of this during my interview with him in Erbil, Iraq, March 2018:

> What I have observed is that Iran first provides ideological support to groups, and then turns them into political parties, before providing them with arms and weapons. In this way, they "nurture" them and make sure they align themselves with Iran's goals prior to making them powerful actors and fighters.

Arib Qurbani, editor in chief for the newspaper Xendan, gave a similar account during my interview with him in Chamchamal, Iraq, March 2018:

> When Iran reaches out to a group, even though they have conditions, they will not say them directly or explicitly. From a strategic point of view, when Iran reaches out to a group, a condition would be for that group not to oppose Iran's regional interests. By default, you cannot partner or coordinate with a group and at the same time be in opposition to their agenda.

Another indicator that Iran has used indoctrination as a mechanism is that although SCIRI shared religious and political similarities with the Da'wa party, the latter was angered by Tehran's efforts to establish the former in 1982 (Juneau, 2015, p. 109). Contrary to SCIRI, the Da'wa Party had a period of indecision over its attitude toward the Islamic Republic in the early 1980s, although they had initially expressed sympathy for a similar revolution to occur in Iraq (Louër, 2012, p. 66; Ra'uf, 2001, pp. 33-34, 147). This might imply that Iran was either dissatisfied with Da'wa's ideological commitments to Iran, and that it considered the establishment of a more "loyal" entity necessary.

According to ICG (2007, pp. 2-4), Iran could not control the Da'wa leadership, nor was it able to convince it to endorse Khomeini and velayat-e faqih. Apparently, there were major disagreements within the party concerning this concept (Felter & Fishman, 2010, p. 7). It is not unreasonable to argue that this is part of the reason why Iran eventually settled for Hakim's faction to establish SCIRI, thus recognising Hakim as the legitimate representative of the Iraqi Shi'a opposition (ICG, 2007, p. 3). As several scholars have argued (Bapat, 2012; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2017), ideological overlap increases the chances of a group's loyalty towards its patron. Furthermore, most of the members within the Da'wa party also left SCIRI in in 1984 in order to maintain its independence from Iran (Marinova, 2017, p. 27). As such, Da'was might not have been considered as a "safe bet" with regard to the long-term goal of replacing the Ba'athist regime with an Iraqi replica of the Islamic Republic. Arif Qurbani argued that this has been an Iranian approach for a long time during my interview with him in Chamchamal, Iraq, March 2018:

> Within the Shi'as [in Iraq], Iran has undermined those Shi'a groups who have not been as close to the Iranian ideology as the ones who were. […] This has allowed Iranians, or at least created the dynamics, that only those who are friendly or close to Iranian ideology remain in power in Iraq.

Thus, it can be argued that the founding of SCIRI gradually activated a new boundary between those Iraqi Shi'a Islamist in exile that followed Khomeini and his doctrine, and those who did not. Based on Hakim's writings and the ideological commitments stated by SCIRI at the time, Hakim's faction seemed more prone to so-called indoctrination during the mobilisation process. This is also indicated by the fact that the Da'wa party reportedly left SCIRI already in 1984 due to the decision to distance itself from Iran. In other words, the empirical findings suggest that Iran may have been more successful in mobilising the core SCIRI members around its own unique Shi'a identity markers than they were with Da'was. For

example, the following statement by Yasir Kuoti during our interview in Erbil, Iraq, March 2018, suggests an identity shift, or even indoctrination, occurred among Shiites that cooperated closely with the Islamic Republic during its time in exile there:

> I am Shi'a, so sometimes I go visit some of the shrines. And Iranians are everywhere. Even the security guards and the rest of it are Iranian. […] Of course, who is introducing Iranian culture to Iraq? It is those people who came from Iran – such as Badr Organisation [Badr Brigades]. Iraqi Shi'as are even practicing some of the rituals that Iranians Shi'as do, which are not the same as ours. One example is hitting yourself with a sword until blood starts dripping, which symbolises that you sympathise with the killing of Hossein. They say that as he shed his blood, I will give mine too. Another source of it is that some Shi'as will sing the eulogies for the deaths of Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas, but with an Iranian accent. Also, the women attire is perhaps the most obvious example – a lot of Shi'a Iraqi girls and women are wearing an Iranian chador. This is not Iraqi, Iraqis have their own unique attire, but they are still wearing the Iranian one. These are Iranian practises that are very new to Iraq and were introduced after 2003. Of course, it is the people in [SCIRI and the Badr Brigades] who brought them.

To sum up, Hakim's alignment with the Khomeinist ideology represented an identity shift from the Shi'a Islamist movement his family was part of prior to his departure to Iran. This is most evident in the Hakim faction's adoption of velayat e-faqih. In terms of other aspects of Iran's revolutionary ideology, such as its anti-Western stance, this is a less evident indicator of indoctrination. During the 1990s, SCIRI participated in the Western-sponsored Iraqi National Congress, and it had a constructive relationship with the US upon return in Iraq (Posch, 2018, p. 28). For example, according to ICG (2007, p. 1), Iran had long considered other individuals within the Da'wa party to lead SCIRI before choosing Hakim. As such, it is not unreasonable to argue that indoctrination was a mechanism used by Iran before they decided to appoint Hakim as the leader of the Iraqi opposition.

5.1.3 Coordinated action

Shortly after forming SCIRI, Hakim stated that the organisation's goal was to overthrow the Ba'athist regime and to establish an Islamic Republic in Iraq following Khomeini's model (Pierpaoli Jr., 2013, p. 402). These objectives were shared by Iran, which might have been one of the main incentives behind its initiative to establish SCIRI. The Iranians, a retired Iraqi military officer contended, merely "wanted to have some Iraqis speaking on their behalf against the Saddam regime" (ICG, 2007, p. 3). This is also demonstrated by the fact that Hakim reportedly reflected Iran's political positions to the Iraqi opposition groups, both in Damascus

and elsewhere (Wiley, 1992, p. 78). As such, collective claim-making played an important part of the relationship between Iran and SCIRI.

In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that SCIRI's political objectives had not been activated by Iran, but rather the internal dynamics in Iraq and decades of hostile policies towards Shiites. Nonetheless, it was their common enemy in Baghdad that laid the foundation for the most important feature of cooperation between Iran and SCIRI until 2003, namely fighting together against the Ba'athist regime with the long-term objective of replacing it with an Islamic Republic. Although Iran probably felt morally obligated to help its fellow Shiites, Thurber (2004, p. 906) argues that it was also largely because the Iranian leadership hoped to "gain a foothold within Iraq's Shi'a community" and "to convince the religious elite to embrace Khomeini as their spiritual leader." Furthermore, shared objectives between the two is likely to have been an important reason for the various factions within SCIRI to look towards the Iranian leadership in the first place.

The most central tool for coordinated action between Iran and SCIRI was the latter's militia, the Badr Brigades. The Badr Brigades was established by the IRGC in 1983. During its establishment, SCIRI called upon Iraqi Muslim combatants to report to their base in Hajj Umran, which was in a part of Iraqi Kurdistan that had been captured by the Iranian army (Wiley, 1992, p. 60). The Badr Brigades was primarily a regular unit within the IRGC, which made sure that SCIRI was unable to exercise absolute control over it (Posch, 2018). While the Brigades were led by Hakim's brother, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, it was later trained and operationally led by IRGC Major General Esmail Daqayeqi, a close friend of Mohsen Rezai, who was IRGC's commander at that time (Posch, 2018; Jabar, 2003, p. 127). The Iranians also helped Badr Brigades with training, salaries, command structures, and to fill its ranks (Jabar, 2003, p. 253-354).

During its early years as a militia, the Badr Brigades had an estimated number 10,000 fighters, a majority of which were Iraqi Shi'a dissidents (Jabar, 2003, p. 127). The militia was first named Martyr Sadr Brigades after the Da'wa party ideological founder Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, but changed its name to Badr Brigades in 1985 after its noteworthy participation in Operation Badr (Toumaj, 2018). Operation Badr was the codename of a March 1985 offensive that led Iran to capture part of the Baghdad-Basra highway for a short period of time, which to a large degree was considered as a failure (Karsh, 2002, p. 47). Although very speculative, the initial name might have been an attempt to mobilise reluctant Da'wa members to join the militia. Many members of the Da'wa party left Iran because they refused to fight Iraqis on the

battlefield, which in fact was what the Badr Brigades was doing alongside the Iranian army (Pierpaoli Jr., 2013, p. 403). Furthermore, the Da'wa party continued to ideologically distance itself from Iran during the 1980s (Dai, 2008, p. 238).

Furthermore, the militia continued to oppose the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad from Iran until 2003 (Juneau, 2015, p. 109). SCIRI also conducted sabotage, bombings, and assassination attempts inside Iraq to destabilise the Ba'athist regime (Marr, 2012, p. 196). According to Joseph Felter and Brian Fisherman (2008, p. 7), the Badr Brigades were also trained to attack Mujahideen-e Khalq Organisation (MKO), an Iranian opposition group that resided in Iraq and was supported by the Ba'athist regime (ICG, 2006, p. 3). This has also been confirmed by a former SCIRI official, who said that the Badr Brigades was established partly as a counterweight to MKO (ICG, 2006, p. 3). This strongly points to the significant influence IRGC had over SCIRI, and the high level of coordinated action between the two. SCIRI's origins as an opposition group to the Ba'athist regime is quite divergent from its development into carrying out attacks against groups that were in opposition to the Iranian regime. Marinova (2017, p. 257) even argues that the close coordination between SCIRI and Iran demonstrates that the former functioned as "an extension of the Iranian regime".

It is possible that the leadership in Tehran viewed the influx of refugees as an opportunity to recruit new fighters to its ranks. Following the revolution, Iran had embarked on a systematic purge of the Shah's Imperial army and security forces, which had led to a devastating blow to the Iranian military's operational capabilities (Karsh, 2014, p. 19). When Saddam invaded Iran, the latter was by far militarily inferior: the Iranian army was down from 285,000 to around 150,000, whereas the Iraqi army stood at some 200,000 (Karsh, 2014, p. 19). The Ba'athist regime was also receiving significant financial and military support from its Arab League allies, the US, several European countries, the People's Republic of China, and the Soviet Union, among others (Hersh, 1992). In fact, the only regional country that supported Iran during the 8-year long war was Syria. Iran was therefore in desperate need of help, which the wider international community had failed to provide. As such, it is understandable that dissident Shi'a and Kurdish opposition groups was considered crucial both in carrying out internal guerrilla operations against the Iraqi government, and in fighting alongside Iranians on the battlefield.

An important assessment in this regard is that Iran's support to the Badr Brigades were not a substitute for conventional military conflict, which a motivation for state support to militias often tend to be. Furthermore, the Badr Brigades were an integral part of the Iranian

armed forces, and were not used as a tool for covert intervention. According to reports, the Badr Brigades were under Iranian command and fought alongside the Iranian army during the Iran-Iraq war (Jabar, 2003, p. 253; Marr, 2012, p. 196). In other words, Iraqi militiamen in the Badr Brigades fought alongside the Iranians against its own country, whose Republican Army was mostly made up by fellow Shiites. Although SCIRI and the Badr Brigades were in opposition to Saddam Hussein, the fact that they were fighting countrymen on the battlefield signals its strong attitude of loyalty towards its patron - Iran and the IRGC. In contrast, as previously mentioned, many members of the Da'wa party refused to do so.

In sum, the level of engagement in collective violence and making of claims between Iran and SCIRI's Badr Brigades is evident, and the empirical findings are sufficient to claim that coordinated action was a mechanism used by Iran to mobilise SCIRI. As such, shared goals and a common enemy was crucial during the mobilisation process. Furthermore, Iran's ability to capitalise on its ideological and religious appeal was also crucial when mobilising a Shi'a opposition that was inspired by its successful revolution and Shi'a revival. Moreover, coordinated action between them was unarguably coherent with Iran's the long-term goal of replacing the Ba'athist regime with a Shi'a Islamic Republic, but also the short-term goal of winning the war against Saddam Hussein.

5.1.4 Social appropriation

In addition to carrying out internal guerrilla operations against the Ba'athist regime and fighting alongside the Iranian armed forces during the war, SCIRI was also active in providing welfare services to constituents in Iran. This, Corboz (2012, p. 339) argues, was because SCIRI realized that it was dependent on support from fellow Iraqi Shiites in order to legitimise its political and militant activities. Furthermore, Corboz (2012, p. 345) argues that SCIRI used its social services to reward new and old members in exchange for their support. It is important to acknowledge that its constituency during its time in exile was mainly limited to the Iraqi Shiites that resided in Iran, as this was also where SCIRI was based until 2003.

According to Joyce Wiley (1992, p. 78), Hakim's duties during the Iran-Iraq war included regular tours of the Iraqi refugee camps in Iran, in addition to inspections of the Badr Brigades. Furthermore, SCIRI opened 18 primary and secondary schools in Iran over the years (Corboz, 2012, p. 346). Other social activities that SCIRI engaged in was touring refugee camps in Iran, providing documents that allowed marriages between Iranians and Iraqis, providing medical assistance, handing out monetary aid, giving religious and political speeches, and

funding cultural events for Iraqi diasporas not only in Iran, but also Syria and the UK (Marinova, 2017, p. 243). Hakim also spent every Wednesday evening receiving written and oral complaints from SCIRI's constituents (al-Jayashi, 2006, p. 139).

But what was Iran's role in SCIRI's activities that exceeded its militant activities? First of all, it was Iran who mainly allocated the resources that SCIRI was dependent on in order to offer social services. In general, SCIRI was heavily dependent on Iranian funding, and it is doubtful that any costly activities would have been implemented without Iran's approval. This might have been with the intention of strengthening the image Iraqis in Iran had of their current host country. According to Marinova (2017, p. 50), Iran for example provided SCIRI with funding to organise Arabic schooling for Iraqi refugee children. Naturally, language barriers were a problem for Iraqi Arabs residing in Persian-speaking Iran. This might also have been an important way to indoctrinate refugees and exiles, perhaps with the goal of convincing them to settle in Iran for good.

Thus, through these activities, Iran managed to mobilise the Iraqi diaspora around its agenda. In other words, an integral part of the mobilisation of armed opposition in the 1980s was mobilising the wider Iraqi Shi'a community around SCIRI and the Islamic Republic. This can also be seen as something that facilitates indoctrination in the sense that the recipients of SCIRI's support might have been more likely to endorse the organisation's cause, and by extension Iran's. Iran's mobilisation of resources through helping SCIRI provide welfare services can be seen in line with Staniland and Zukerman's (2007, pp. 7-8) route through which a group can make its movement appear legitimate in the eyes of those it is fighting for by setting up institutions that transmit their ideologies to future generations.

With regard to the transformation from an armed umbrella organisation of opposition groups into a political party, the lines become a bit blurred. As SCIRI was based outside Iraq, it did not establish itself as an official Iraqi political party before its return to Iraq in 2003. In addition, SCIRI claimed that it did not identify itself with the label of a Western-style party and preferred to be referred to as an "umbrella organisation" or a "popular movement" (Corboz, 2012, p. 349). On the other hand, considering SCIRI's high level of political and militant opposition activities, it was unarguably a political actor during its time in exile as well. Nonetheless, I believe that it would be more meaningful to analyse SCIRI's transformation into a political party after its return to Iraq in 2003. As this study is concerned with the initial mobilisation process of groups, SCIRI and the Badr Brigades' role in post-invasion Iraq will not be assessed. However, it is important to mention that their fostering during exile in Iran had

made them capable to consolidate power upon return in their home country. According to Kardo Mohammed,[24] SCIRI and Badr were the most important actors for Iran to achieve its political objectives in post-2003 Iraq:

> The invasion in 2003 paved the way for two Iraqi actors that accommodated [Iran's export of the revolution] – SCIRI and Badr. Through these two, Iran planted the seed to practice its own ideology and strategy in Iraq, which are based on its revolutionary ideas.

5.2 Chapter summary

Iran's capacity to mobilise a number of Shi'a opposition groups under the SCIRI umbrella was made possible largely due to the Shi'a revival that followed the 1979 revolution. Khomeini's triumph inspired not only oppressed Shiites in neighboring Iraq, but also other Muslim communities throughout the Middle East. The empirical findings suggest that several mechanisms were used by Iran during the mobilisation process of SCIRI and the Badr Brigades.

It seems as indoctrination was deployed prior to brokerage and coordinated action, which seems to have been made possible due to Mohsen al-Hakim's death and his son Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim's rise as a prominent figure in the Shi'a opposition movement. It is not unreasonable to argue that shared goals, a common enemy and Iran's ideological and religious appeal were all important factors in Iran's mobilisation of SCIRI and the Badr Brigades in the 1980s. Armed resistance and strategic framing of commonalities seems to have been important ingredients in Iran's ability to engage with the Iraqi Shi'a opposition.

As such, Iran has capitalised both on its Shi'a religion and the fact that Shiites have been historically repressed by Sunnis in Iraq. While indicators of social appropriation have been identified, SCIRI and the Badr Brigades did not transform into political actor before 2003, which is out of this thesis' scope as it is considered to have occurred *after* the mobilisation process. Overall, the case of Iran's mobilisation of SCIRI can be said to be an exemplary case of when refugee communities use neighboring states as sanctuary to foster militias, in line with Salehyan and Gleditch's (2006) scholarship on the correlation between refugees and civil wars.

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[24] Interview conducted in Erbil, Iraq, March 2018. All transcriptions are available upon request.

6 Analysis Part II: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq

The previous chapter demonstrated that Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias began shortly after the 1979 revolution. In this chapter, I will examine the mobilisation process of one of the most prominent militias that were established during the US occupation of Iraq, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). In order to do this, I will use process tracing as a method to observe whether the following mechanisms have been used, and in which order they occurred: brokerage, indoctrination, coordinated action, and social appropriation.

6.1.1 Brokerage

To examine if, or how brokerage was a mechanism used by Iran during the mobilisation process of AAH, I will first investigate the time period leading up to its founding in 2006. AAH emerged as a splinter group from the Shi'a Islamist Sadrist movement and its militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM, or Mahdi army). JAM was formed by Moqtada al-Sadr in June 2003 as an armed resistance front against the US-led invasion and following occupation (Stanford University, 2017b). In addition to carrying out attacks against coalition forces, one of its main responsibilities was to secure the Shi'a neighbourhoods that were dominated by the Sadrists, such as Sadr City in Baghdad (ISW, 2018).

Like many other militias at the time, JAM was receiving material support from Iran, in addition to being trained by Lebanese Hizbullah (Roggio, 2007; Nada, 2018).[25] However, unlike SCIRI and the Badr Brigades, the Sadrist movement was not ideologically aligned with Iran's revolutionary Shi'a doctrine such as the concept of velayat-e faqih (Cochrane, 2009, pp. 9-10). As will be further discussed in section 6.1.2, the movement's founding figure Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr actually challenged Khamenei's claim as being an authority for all Shiites (ICG, 2006, p. 4). The cooperation between them was therefore a pragmatic one, based on the common objective of making it difficult for the US coalition forces to remain in Iraq. In fact, Iran supported several non-aligned resistance groups at the time, including Sunnis (Kagan, 2007, p. 4; Wing, 2015).

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[25] According to Bill Roggio (2008), Hizbullah helped form JAM shortly after the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime in April 2003. A senior commander in Hizbullah, Imad Mugniyah, reportedly recruited fighters from Shi'a communities in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, who were later sent to Lebanon for training (Roggio, 2007; Roggio, 2008).

JAM turned out to become a very fragmented group, with so-called "rogue" factions within it that were acting independently from Sadr's instructions (Wong, 2005; Stanford University, 2016). These factions were reported to be torturing and killing Iraqi Sunnis, and was often referred to as Sadr's "death squads" (Mansour & Clark, 2014). One of the factions acting independently from Sadr was led by Qais al-Khazali, a senior member in the Sadrist movement who at the time was commander of a unit within JAM (Stanford University, 2017a). Sadr has maintained that the more violent attacks had been carried out by "splinter elements", and mostly by the unit under Khazali's command (Mansour & Clark, 2014). Furthermore, Khazali consistently violated a ceasefire agreement that had been achieved between the Sadrists, the Iraqi military and US coalition forces in 2004 (Cochrane, 2009, p. 15; Knights, 2010, p. 13; Wyer, 2012, p. 15). In other words, by commanding his unit to refuse to lay down arms and continue to carry out attacks against the coalition, Khazali was directly challenging Sadr's leadership and promoting his own agenda instead.

In 2004, the same year Khazali and his followers began to act independently from Sadr, the Sadrist movement was also deprived of its main source of funding when the Iranian-based Iraqi Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri decided to break with it after two failed uprisings against the coalition (Cochrane, 2009, p. 6). A number of sources have argued that Haeri's decision was likely approved by Iran, who also had grown increasingly concerned with Sadr after the failed uprisings (Felter & Fishman, 2006, p. 34; Cochrane, 2009, p. 15). To sum up the previous sections, Sadr was experiencing several obstacles in 2004. First, he was unable to control his own militia, whose commanders and fighters disapproved of his ceasefire agreements with the Iraqi military and US coalition forces; and second, there was a lack of sufficient funding; and last, Sadr's ally in Iran, whom he depended upon in terms of material support, was becoming increasingly wary of him. As result, a growing number of his followers turned to Iran (ISW, 2018).

About two years later, in July 2006, Khazali's faction officially announced the formation of Asa'ib Ahl-Haq (Posch, 2018, p. 17). A first indicator of Iran's use of brokerage as a mechanism during the mobilisation process of AAH is the possible production of a connection between itself and Khazali. It should be noted that Khazali had met with the IRGC-QF in Tehran in 2004 (Wing, 2015). According to Akram al-Kaabi, a deputy leader in AAH, this was also the year that the group had started to form (Wyer, 2012, p. 12).[26] This might indicate that Khazali and Iran viewed their shared discontent with Sadr to explore some

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[26] In 2013, Akram al-Kaabi created his own militia, Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba.

alternatives. Reportedly, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who acted as a representative for Qassem Soleimani in Iraq at the time, had approached Sadr in 2004 to offer him Iran's full support (Wing, 2015). Furthermore, Muhandis organised a trip for Khazali and other prominent JAM members to Tehran, where the Iranian leadership reportedly offered to connect Khazali and his JAM unit with Lebanese Hizbullah (Wing, 2015).[27] This implies that Iran might have facilitated a connection with Khazali while he was still commanding a unit in JAM, in addition to connecting him with Hizbullah.

According to US officials, Iran asked Hizbullah to help form and train AAH in 2005, although Khazali was still active in JAM at the time (Majidyar, 2017a; Posch, 2018, p. 18) This was one year after Khazali's alleged meeting with the IRGC-QF in Tehran. Furthermore, in May 2006, Hizbullah sent Ali Mussa Daqduq and his superior Youssef Hashim to Iran to work with IRGC-QF and Qassem Soleimani to train Iraqi militia fighters (Cochrane, 2009, pp. 18-19; Ostovar, 2016a, p. 173).[28] Reportedly, this was following the IRGC-QF's decision to appoint Khazali as leader for a new network of fighters, often referred to as the Khazali network, which he later named Asai'b Ahl al-Haq (Cochrane, 2009, p. 6). AAH fighters were also trained in specialized IRGC camps in Iran (Ostovar, 2016a, p. 173). Reportedly, Iran wanted to establish a new militia that was easier to shape than Sadr's uncontrollable JAM, in addition to being independent from Sadr as Qassem Soleimani considered him as "unpredictable" (Knights, 2010, p. 13; Wing, 2015). By 2006/2007, factions within JAM were clashing with Iran-affiliated militias such as Badr Organisation, in addition to AAH (Posch, 2018, p. 14; Williams, 2009, p. 83).

As such, it is not unreasonable to argue Khazali might have been confident that he would receive more support if he established his own unit independent of the Sadrists. Furthermore, Iraqi and US intelligence officials estimate that AAH receives between $1.5 - $2 million a month from the Iranian government (Stanford University, 2017; CEP, 2018). According to Elijah Magnier, Iran also helped AAH to buy housing, gasoline stations, and other sources of income to secure both cover and funding (Wing, 2015). Moreover, both Iran and Hizbullah quickly allocated its material resources to make sure that AAH would be an effective force in

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[27] This information has been given by Elijah Magnier, who gained insights into the relationship between Sadr and Khazali during his time with the Sadrist movement during the early years of the US occupation (Wing, 2015).

[28] Daquq joined Hizbullah in 1983, and served in various leadership position during his long tenure, including commanding a Hizbullah special operations unit, coordinating the protection of Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, and leading Hizbullah operations in large areas of Lebanon (Cochrane, 2009, p. 18). Hashim was the head of Hizbullah's Special Operations in Iraq (Cochrane, 2009, p. 18).

fighting. This implies that brokerage in the case of AAH also included materially connecting it to the conflict. In fact, without Iran's support it might not have been possible for AAH to develop the way they did. Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen also said the following while being interviewed:

> Groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq were still strong at the time even when it was taboo to have a militia. Ten years ago, you should not have a militia here in Iraq. Yet, they kept their strength, and they kept growing stronger.

Again, this suggests that the meeting in 2004 might be an important indicator of brokerage in terms of producing a more established connection between Iran and Khazali, on the expense of the two entities' relationship with Sadr. Furthermore, the aforementioned findings suggest that both Iran and Lebanese Hizbullah allocated its financial and military resources to offer its patronage to Khazali when he started acting independently from Sadr in order to remain committed to attacking coalition forces. The fact that Iran was supporting different factions within JAM during this time also suggests that it contributed to undermining centralised control under Sadr, in addition to leading many of its member to look to Tehran for material support when Sadr lost his main source of funding. In fact, Sadr himself has criticized Iran for attempting to fragment his group by encouraging Sadrists to split with JAM and instead work with Iran directly (Wing, 2015). Although this is speculative, it is also in line with how the IRGC-QF is known to operate in Iraq. For example, Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen explained how Iran works with individuals in Iraq the following way:

> In general, Iran does not work through institutions in Iraq. For example, they don't work with the government in the KRI to say we give you this in return for that. They work with parties, and inside the parties, they don't work with the institution, they work with individuals. So, they have close relations with certain individuals who are powerful, when they support them, they get things in return, like the loyalty of a militia group.

Dr. Muthana Ameen Nader, leader of the Kurdistan Islamic Union and elected member of Iraq's Council of Representatives and its Foreign Relations Committee, also told me that Iran had tried to reach out to his political party as well, stating that they were willing "to offer anything - any kind of help, political or financial." He also confirmed the approach that was put forward by Dr. Ala'Aldeen:

> They have a different way of making political relationships with others. They go deep inside a party.

> If they find one hundred ways to make a relationship with an individual, they will do that. In all parties, at all times, they try to make a network within the leadership in a party. Here in Iraq, they have very deep and wide networks of such relationships. […] So, when you talk of influence, it is not only influence in terms of the interests they keep through the diplomatic channel. No, they are internally inside the parties and they make wide relationships with all of the leaders. They always try to make a relationship with individuals that are famous, even if the individuals a leader or just a potential leader.

This viewpoint was also emphasised by Shakhawan A. Ahmed, Vice President for Iraq's Council of Representatives' Security and Defense Committee:

> Iran only deals with commanders and leaders, they don't deal with the soldiers. Except from the most skilled ones – such as the snipers, who are trained in Iran.

However, it is important to acknowledge that these entities were probably not entirely unconnected prior to this. First, Khazali might have had an established connection with prominent individuals in IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hizbullah during his time in the Sadrist movement. In addition, based on Iran's active engagement with Shi'a Islamist movements and opposition groups during the Ba'athist era, in addition to the spiritual ties between Qom and Najaf, Iran might have had some form of connection with Khazali prior to 2003. Furthermore, according to classified US intelligence documents published by WikiLeaks, Khazali had great influence over Sadr due to the money, trained men and weapons he was receiving from Iran already prior to restructuring his unit into AAH (US Department of State, 2008). Hizbullah was also known for providing support to various factions within JAM. However, I argue that this still qualifies as brokerage, although it might have occurred earlier than what the data points to.

Brokerage in the case of mobilising AAH seems to have resulted in a strengthened connection between the Iran and Khazali rather than the production of a brand new one. The empirical findings suggest that IRGC-QF and Hizbullah became more directly involved with Khazali and his followers after he split with the Sadrists. The fact that Iran decided to reorganise its efforts in Iraq, with Khazali leading a new network of militias, back this assertion. In addition, it might seem as though the IRGC-QF approached Khazali at a time when both Khazali and Iran were distancing themselves from Sadr. As such, AAH seems to have been offered more support than JAM, by both the IRGC-QF and Hizbullah. Furthermore, AAH also became part of Iran's transnational network of armed resistance groups, which JAM was not, although the latter did to various degrees receive both military and financial support from the IRGC-QF and Hizbullah. It also fights alongside Lebanese Hizbullah and other IRGC-QF

trained groups such as Kata'ib Hizbullah and Syrian, Afghani and Pakistani Shi'ite militias, which is another indicator of Iran connecting AAH to its transnational network of armed resistance. Moreover, the allocation of material resources was probably crucial for AAH during the start-up process, and might thus have been an effective way for Iran to establish a sustainable connection with the group.

In sum, brokerage might consequently include the following: connecting IRGC-QF with Khazali's unit, connecting Khazali's unit with Hizbullah, and disconnecting Khazali from JAM.

6.1.2 Indoctrination

First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge that in terms of ideological alignment with Iran, Khazali already possessed one fundamental view: anti-Americanism. The Sadrist movement's ideological heritage is strongly anti-American, and its founder, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, was well-known for his harsh rhetoric against the US (Smyth, 2016). In other words, AAH is a group that split from a Shi'a Islamist movement who resented the US occupation and were attacking coalition forces, only to align with Iran to continue carrying out such attacks shortly after. As such, it hardly seems meaningful to look for an identity shift that can indicate indoctrination with regard to the anti-American dimension of Iran's revolutionary ideology.

At the same time, it is important to note that Moqtada al-Sadr did in fact call for members of AAH to return to the Sadrist movement and implied that AAH was abandoning its armed resistance against the coalition in 2008 (US Department of the Treasury, 2009). However, this might have been an attempt to mobilise AAH around his own agenda as Sadr created a new militia, the Promised Day Brigades, shortly after. Furthermore, there is no evidence that AAH left its anti-Americanism after 2004. On the contrary, armed, funded, and trained by IRGC-QF and Hizbullah, AAH continued to conduct attacks on coalition and Iraqi forces throughout 2006 (Cochrane, 2009, p. 19). In a March 2009 quarterly report, the US Department of Defense (2009, p. iv) wrote the following:

> Several threat groups remain dangerous and require continued focus to prevent their resurgence. The long-term threat remains Iranian-sponsored Shi'a militant groups, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hizbullah, and unaligned Shi'a extremists, including the newly formed Promised Day Brigade.

When founding AAH, Khazali also shared another fundamental world view with Iran: Shiism. In this regard, there are some indicators than indoctrination might have taken place.

Firstly, an important point to take into consideration is that there has long been an ideological divide between Iran and the Sadrist movement in terms of Shi'a doctrine. In fact, the Sadrist movements' founder, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, challenged Khamenei's claim to pan-Shiite leadership by proclaiming himself an authority of Iraqi Shiites (ICG, 2006, p. 4).[29] Furthermore, according to Nicholas Krohley (2014), a strong case can be made that late Sadr's populist anti-Iranianism was a key reason that Saddam Hussein allowed the Sadrist movement to develop as it did in the 1990s. Furthermore, the Sadrists remained in Iraq while others, as the previous chapter demonstrated, lived in exile in Iran (Cochrane, 2009, p. 10). Thus, ideologically, there were irreconcilable disagreements between the nationalist Sadrists and Iran, although both were Shi'a and strongly opposed to the US occupation and military presence of coalition forces (Krohley, 2014).

Furthermore, in the 1990s, Khazali was a student and aide of Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr (Wyer, 2012, p. 13). After the latter's death in 1999, Khazali was one of the most important individuals in holding the movement together (Alaaldin, 2017b). However, when AAH was formed, Khazali openly stated his group's allegiance to Iran, which unarguably redefined his former identification as a Sadrist. Since its inception, AAH under Khazali's leadership has promoted Iran's revolutionary ideology, including Khomeini's concept of velayat e-faqih (Al-Tamimi, 2014; Wyer, 2012). On the contrary, the Sadrist movement has promoted an Iraqi nationalist form of Shiism that rejects the Iranian model, and is wary of Iran's influence in Iraq. Moreover, Sadr has attacked AAH for being beholden to Iranian interests, and dismisses that the group is part of the Sadr legacy because of their loyalty to Iran (Alaaldin, 2017a, p. 5). This implies, at least on the surface, that AAH has represented a shift of identities from its time as a unit within Sadr's JAM, although it is difficult to empirically determine when or how an indoctrination has taken place. However, there are undoubtedly irreconcilable differences between the two camps, which Yasir Kuoti also explained during our interview:

> Shi'as in Iran believe in velayat e-faqih, while Iraqi Shi'as don't, which is a major theological difference. Shi'as in Iraq believe that after the death of the Imams, with the exemption of the hidden Imam, Imam Mahdi, there is no one that can play the role of an Imam. They are unfollowable. On the contrary, the Twelvers believe that Khamenei can claim the role of an Imam, and that he again can be followed. This is a major difference.

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[29] More specifically, he proclaimed himself as *wali amr al-muslimin*, which is a title that has the same authority as the faqih (ICG, 2006, p. 4). It is therefore contradicting to the velayat-e faqih, and thus, challenges Khamenei's authority as leader.

Another indicator of indoctrination is the development of a new, or at least different transnational Shi'a identity as AAH became integrated into Iran's transnational network of armed resistance groups. AAH has fully committed itself to Iran's so-called "axis of resistance," and Khazali has stated that his group aims to establish a "Shiite full moon" rather than a "Shiite crescent" as it often is referred to in the media (Majidyar, 2017a). In a video published in various Arab media, he added that an alliance of Shiite forces across the region would be ready to achieve that goal by the time the hidden Shiite Imam Mahdi reappears (Majidyar, 2017a).

Another example of its transnational identity is that in September 2013, Ali Delfi, a singer associated with AAH, released the song "*Ashat al-Muqawama*" (Long Live the Resistance). The song featured the refrain "*Ashat al-Muqawama, Shia al-Muqawama*" (Long live the resistance, the Shiite resistance) (translated by Smyth, 2015, p. 8). The song's video showed Kata'ib Hizbullah and AAH attacks against US targets during the Iraq war of a decade ago, Lebanese Hizbullah attacks against Israelis, and speeches by Nasrallah. As such, it also advocates anti-Israelism, which is an important pillar of Iran's revolutionary ideology and raison d'être of its axis of resistance. When US president Donald Trump designated Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017, Khazali also wrote the following on Twitter (Majidyar, 2017c), using the same rhetoric as Khamenei uses when speaking of Israel:

> Trump's decision to designate Jerusalem the capital of the occupying Zionist entity marks the beginning of the end of the racist Israeli entity. We call on all the free and faithful to unite in a single front to confront arrogant [powers] and enemies of humanity.

Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen argued during the interview that Iran has capitalised on its transnational Shi'a identity among Iraqi Shiites:

> In the South [of Iraq], the word Shi'a says it all. This is because Shi'a is not a sect - it's an identity, it's a way of life, it's a culture, it's a spiritual appeal, it has to do with so much more that language becomes secondary. I am Arab, you are Persian, who cares, *we* are Shi'a. Shi'a is not religion anymore, its deeper, it's an identity. In Kurdistan, for an Iranian to come here and say to a Kurd that you are my brother, while suppressing Kurds in Iran, have not worked.

Hassan Barram, senior member in Coalition for Democracy and Justice and former senior member in the PUK, also supported this argument:

> Iran's approach [to militias in Iraq] is multi-faceted, but I believe Iran largely depends on the ideological side of it, which most important Is Shi'a Islam. The problem is that Shiites in Iraq

prioritise being Shi'a rather than being part of any ethnicity, and they prioritise Shiism over being Muslim. It is an identity. [Furthermore], Iran tops it off by financial and military support to the groups here.

Sadi Pire also forwarded a similar argument with regard to the transnational nature of AAH:

For Qassem Soleimani, the Iraqi Shi'a militias are Allah. Syrian units, Afghani jihadists, Somalian movements – they are all similar to the IRGC in Iran. Shi'a is no longer a religion, it's a nation, it's an identity. They [Iran's transnational network] are very strong now. (Sadi Pire)

In sum, there seems to have been an identity shift among Khazali and his followers after their split with JAM. AAH's endorsement of Iran's velayat e-faqih involve a religious and ideological shift from their time with the Sadrist movement. In addition, its promotion of a "Shiite full moon" and mutual signalling with Lebanese Hizbullah's against Israel indicates that Iran has indoctrinated AAH into its transnational network of allies, also referred to as the "axis of resistance." In other words, there are a few indicators suggest that indoctrination has been an important mechanism for Iran during the mobilisation process of AAH.

This is how they recruit, this is how they influence, this is how they extort, but inside Iran, the brain behind it is no longer ideologically thinking, empire builders are not ideologists themselves. If you go to Iran and speak to them and understand them, ideology doesn't mean anything anymore. – Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen (2018)

6.1.3 Coordinated action

As the previous section demonstrated, armed resistance against US coalition forces seems to have been the main reason why Iran encouraged Khazali to form AAH. As such, coordinated action against the US is the most apparent indicator of this mechanism being used during the mobilisation process. This argument is supported by the fact that Khazali decided to split with Sadr due to disagreements concerning JAM's commitment to engage in such activities, which is also what seems to have encouraged Iran to start the mobilisation process of AAH. Furthermore, between 2006 and 2011, AAH claimed responsibility for over 6000 attacks on US coalition forces, many of which were highly advanced operations (CEP, 2018, p. 1). The fact that AAH was capable to carry out these attacks was largely made possible due to the financial and military assistance it received from Iran, as well as Hizbullah. In other words, there is sufficient evidence to claim that coordinated action was a significant mechanism for Iran to

mobilise AAH. Moreover, in order for Iran to mobilise AAH, and for AAH to mobilise fighters, the shared goal to uphold the armed resistance against the US-led occupation appears to have been crucial.

In addition to engaging in collective violence against coalition forces, another example of coordinated action is Iran and AAH's joint effort to release Khazali. As previously mentioned, Khazali, his brother Laith al-Khazali, and Hizbullah's Ali Mussa Daqduq was captured by coalition forces in 2007 (Knights, 2010, p. 13). Two months later, more than 100 militia members from AAH kidnapped a British computer consultant and his four security guards from Iraq's Ministry of Finance in Baghdad (Mahmood, O'Kane, & Grandjean, 2009; Meikle & Sturcke, 2010). The operation had reportedly been masterminded by the IRGC-QF, with a primary goal to negotiate the release of Khazali (Meikle & Sturcke, 2010). Furthermore, an investigation carried out by The Guardian claimed that the hostages had been taken across the border to a prison in Iran led by the IRGC-QF within a day of their kidnapping (Mahmood et al., 2009). When Khazali was released in January 2010, AAH's leadership to direct attacks against the US from sanctuary in Iran (Wyer, 2012, p. 11). This again indicates that coordinated action was a useful mechanism to mobilise AAH, as both its leadership and its members largely depended on Iran to uphold their armed resistance activities.

Overall, covert or indirect intervention therefore seems to be a central aspect of Iran's coordinated action with AAH. As Iran wanted to influence Iraq's internal dynamics without risking conflict escalation with the governments in Baghdad and Washington DC, coordinated action with AAH was a convenient way to ensure this. However, coordinated action between Iran and AAH is no longer as covert in nature as it used to be during the early days of the latter's existence. In a broadcasted interview with journalist Martin Smith (2018), Khazali confirmed that AAH and other groups received support from Iran:

> During the occupation, we had close ties to [Iran]. That Iran supports all armed resistance movements in the region is no longer a secret.

Khazali also said the following in an interview with Mohammed al-Zaidi (2018):

> I want to emphasise that just because we make decisions independently, that doesn't mean that there might not be any common goals or interests. It is no secret that Iran supports all the militias in this area and we are obviously one of them.

Furthermore, in addition to material resources such as funds, arms, and training, non-material resources also seem to have contributed to Iran's capacity to use coordinated action to mobilise AAH. It is not unreasonable to argue that Iran's anti-American ideology mobilised potential AAH members to join in cause, not just its wallet or weaponry. Iran's role as a spokesperson against Western imperialism and foreign interference in the region made it a credible actor concerning to its commitment to expel the US from Iraq. While SCIRI and Badr Organisation were preoccupied with the political process, Sadr seems to have lost credibility among his most radical fighters due to lack of funding, failed uprisings, and controversial ceasefire agreements. For individuals who were determined to engage in armed resistance against coalition forces, Iran was therefore a natural partner to turn to. At the same time, Iran probably knew how to take advantage of this situation, like it did with the armed opposition during the 1980s. Yasir Kuoti, researcher at the Middle East Research Institute in Erbil, had some useful insights in how Iran has used its anti-Americanism to recruit fighters to the ranks of Iraqi Shi'a militias:

> [Anti-Americanism has been important], and in large part because there is some truth to it. The US government said that Iran was part of an axis of evil after 9/11, while none of the hijackers were Iranians. Some Shiites sees this as Iran being attacked because it is Shi'a. At the same time, some Iraqi and Iranian Shiites also think that Saddam could not have stayed in power without the support of the West. Conspiracy or not, it is a well-known fact that the West supported Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war, which cost millions of lives. So, Iran didn't create the anti-American rhetoric out of thin air, it has some ground to it, which makes it a fantastic language to mobilise people. Those who believe in Iran's anti-American statements will find evidence to support it. As such, to mobilise people in Iraq and the region, they say that what they are doing is a crusade against those who want to invade us. It's a fantastic and convenient way for them to cover over their activities.

Dr. Muthana Ameen Nader also agreed that Iran's outspoken resistance against US has been a significant factor in Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias during our interview in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, March 2018:

> Iran says they want to keep Americans out of our region, and have therefore been able to use the US' presence here as a justification to expand its influence and go out of their own borders into Iraq.

In sum, a common enemy seems to have been an effective way to mobilise AAH to engage in coordinated action. Furthermore, Iran's proclaimed "axis of resistance" also seems to have mobilised AAH to engage in collective violence and making of claims. As far back as AAH's official announcement as an independent unit in 2006, AAH has participated in coordinated military action with Lebanese Hizbullah outside Iraq. Its first engagement of this kind is considered to have been AAH's participation in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war (O'Driscoll & Van Zoonen, 2017, p. 19; Wyer, 2012, p. 7). Coordinated action between AAH

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and Hizbullah since the formers early years is also demonstrated through the fact that Hizbullah's senior commander Ali Mussa Daqduq was captured alongside Khazali in Iraq in 2007 (Knights, 2010, p. 13).

The engagement in coordinated action such as collective violence and making of claims has been maintained to this day. In December 2017, Khazali toured southern Lebanon with Hizbullah officials, which led to condemnation by both Lebanese and Israeli politicians (Majidyar, 2018a). Khazali stated that AAH "declare [its] full readiness to stand united with the Lebanese people and the Palestinian cause in the face of Israeli occupation" (Majidyar, 2018a). Furthermore, AAH has also been accused of attacking a Saudi border guard in 2013 to protest against Saudi Arabia's interference in Iraq (Cigar, 2015, p. 38). As mentioned in the background chapter, the axis of resistance can also be interpreted as being targeted against the Saudi kingdom. Dr. Ala'Aldeen confirmed during my interview with him that Shi'a militias have also been attracted to Iran's opposition to Saudi Arabia and Israel, not just the US:

> They use that [anti-Americanism], but it is not working that much. If anything, there is a lot more resentment towards Iran in Iraq. Iran knows that their argument against America is limited, because Iraqis know that the US did more than Iran – they removed Saddam, they sacrificed their money, and their soldiers. This has led [Iran] to use Israel and Saudi Arabia more than America as the enemy to promote those ideologies. The Iranians know that being anti-US is not as powerful as being anti-Saudi or anti-Israel in Iraq.

Concerning engagement in collective making of claims, AAH has also promoted Khamenei and the Iranian model of velayat e-faqih in Iraq, as mentioned in section 6.1.3. For example, AAH is known for having distributed 20,000 posters of Khamenei in Baghdad and other cities in southern Iraq in August 2012 (O'Driscoll & Van Zoonen, 2017, p. 19). This demonstrates that ideological appeal might have played a major role for Iran to mobilise AAH to engage in coordinated action. As previously mentioned, the religious establishment in Najaf has historically been an obstacle for Iran's spiritual outreach in Iraq. The Shi'a militias might therefore be an expedient way for Iran to mobilise Iraqis around its own Shi'a identity markers. In my interview with him, PUK's spokesperson Sadi Pire underlined how important the militias have been for Iran to promote its ideals by explaining how discontent Iranian leaders are with Iraqi religious leaders' disapproval of velayat e-faqih:

> From end of 2009 until end of 2011, I was in Baghdad. During these two years, I met with Ahmadinejad, Valeyati, Rafsanjani, and Larijani. Upon return in Baghdad after a visit to Najaf, they asked Talibani for a small meeting. They complained to us that Ayatollah Sistani had told them to keep distance from Iraq because Iraq is not Iran, and that velayat e-faqih cannot be successful here.

Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen also emphasised that Iran mobilises militias to engage in coordinated action such as strategic framing of commonalities:

> They [Iranians] don't need to use soft power to win hearts, minds, and influence, they have Iraqi militias doing that for them in the whole of Iraq.

With regard to Shiism as a meaningful category of identity for mobilisation, this has become far evident after the withdrawal of US forces in 2011. Although this did not occur during the mobilisation process of AAH, it deserves a mention as it demonstrates how successful indoctrination has been in this case. First of all, president Barack Obama's announcement that the US would withdraw its forces from Iraq in 2011 had major implications for the Iraqi Shi'a militias whose raison d'être was armed resistance. After the withdrawal, Khazali pledged in an interview with Reuters to lay down its arms and join the political process in Iraq (al-Salhy, 2012a):

> This stage of the military conflict between the Iraqi armed resistance and the occupation forces is over, with a distinct, historic Iraqi victory and a distinct, historic US failure. […] We believe that we have carried out our role regarding the liberation of our country and restoring its sovereignty. This political achievement could not have been done without the Iraqi armed resistance. […] We have concluded this stage, thank God.

Although watershed events occurred in Iraq the following years, including the rise of IS, what is interesting in the context of this section is that AAH reactivated its militant activities and extended its operations to Syria in 2013. In Syria, AAH claimed to be defending holy places such as the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus (CEP, 2018). In April 2014, AAH spokesman Ahmad Kanani said the following to the newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat (translated by Heras, 2014):

> Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has already stated that its official position is to defend the holy sites of Islam, which is the sacred duty of every Muslim, Sunni and Shi'a. Attacks on the holy shrines could trigger sectarian strife, which would bring about reprisals, as happened in Iraq with the destruction of the Askari Mosque, which led to sectarian strife. Therefore, we are trying to spare the region this conflict by defending the [Damascus] Shrine of Sayyida Zaynab and thus avoid the need for targeted reprisals.

AAH fought alongside Lebanese Hizbullah and other IRGC-QF-affiliated groups, including Kata'ib Hizbullah and Badr Organisation, in addition to Syrian, Afghani and Pakistani Shi'a militias. In this regard, Iran's non-material resources have again been crucial as

the claim that the holy Shiite shrines in Damascus needed protection was an effective way to mobilise. As such, it may seem as indoctrination is a necessary prerequisite. Moreover, it indicates that coordinated action was an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise AAH despite its pledge to lay down its arms. Akram al-Kaabi, who led AAH during Khazali's arrest, also founded Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba (HNN) in 2013 in conjunction with Iran's efforts to save the Syrian regime, which has emerged as the most prominent Iraqi Shi'a militia in Syria (Dury-Agri et. al, 2017, p. 39). Arif Qurbani described AAH's coordinated action between Iran's transnational network of armed resistance in Syria the following way during our interview in Chamchamal, Iraq, March 2018:

> In terms of military doctrine, they [AAH and other Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias] are all the same. This also includes Shi'a militias from Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the Houthis in Yemen as well. And in terms of military training, they are all graduates of the same Iranian school. There is undoubtedly a high level of coordination between them, in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. […] They are about to come one joint force, but under different names.

This again indicates that coordinated action between AAH and Iran can be said to be covert intervention. Iran publicly denied that it had military presence in Syria at the time. Through the deployment of these Shi'a militias, including AAH, Iran has been able to intervene and protect president Bashar al-Assad's regime in Dasmascus without risking escalation with adversaries such as Israel, who has become increasingly concerned about Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict. The covert intervention thesis was also emphasised by Kardo Mohammed, senior member in the Gorran movement, during my interview with him in Erbil, Iraq, March 2018:

> Iran has been a very powerful player in terms of maneuvering around events. For example, Iran has never engaged in directly in conflict in Yemen, Iraq, or Syria. It has always used its proxies, and has been successful in this. Although it might not be as powerful as it claims [in terms of conventional military capabilities], it has been powerful through its proxies and has therefore managed to achieve most of its goals in this region.

Kardo Mohammed also argued that the protection of Shrines has been a key factor for Iran to mobilise Iraqi Shiites since 2003 as well:

> After 2003, Iran wanted to achieve one goal, and that is the control of the shrines that are considered very holy and sacred by Shiites – the Imam Ali and Hossein shrine. The Sunni-American conflict in the aftermath of 2003 paved the way for the Iranians to promote the idea of Shiites themselves to form forces and protect those areas from terrorism in general. […] Iran managed to basically create the idea that Shi'as needed protection, the shrines needed protection, and that Shiites needed military forces now as the Sunnis were no longer in control [after 2003] – Kardo Mohammed (2018)

In sum, the most evident use of coordinated action as a mechanism during the mobilisation process has been AAH high number of advances attacks against US coalition forces with Iran's help. It is therefore not unreasonable to argue that a common enemy has been the most effective way for Iran to mobilise AAH. Furthermore, coordination between the two can largely be said to have been covert or indirect intervention, as AAH has helped Iran to engage in violence against the US without risking conflict escalation. Overall, armed resistance against the US occupation has undoubtedly been an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise AAH.

6.1.4 Social appropriation

AAH started transforming itself from an armed resistance group into a political organisation in after the release of Khazali in 2010 (Sly, 2013; Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2018). This was announced to the public at a press conference in Najaf on December 26, 2011, when Khazali stated that AAH planned to participate in the Iraqi political process (Wyer, 2012, p. 11). As mentioned in section 6.1.3, AAH announced that it would halt its armed resistance activities and join the political process after the US withdrawal in 2011. At one of AAH's political offices in Baghdad, there are portraits of Khomeini, Khamenei and Khazali on the walls (Sly, 2013). Despite this, AAH's political bureaus have attempted to reshape and promote AAH's image as a nationalist Iraqi political party (Wyer, 2012, p. 15).

In the 30. April 2014 parliamentary elections, AAH formed its own political wing, al-Sadiqun (the Honest Ones) which ran in alliance with former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Dawlat al-Qannon (State of Law) coalition (Heras, 2014). Today, al-Sadiqun holds one seat in the Iraqi parliament. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) is running on the unified list of Hashd al-Sha'bi militias called the Fatah Alliance in the upcoming parliamentary elections May 12, 2018, alongside other Iran-affiliates such as Kata'ib Hizbullah and Badr Organisation. On the third anniversary of Hashd al-Sha'abi's founding in June 2017, Khazali also stated that "a military victory without a political victory has no meaning or value" (Maliki, 2017). Khazali has been on a speaking tour on campuses across Iraq as part of an effort to organise political support for next year's national election (Arango, 2017). This is another indicator that AAH is transforming itself into a political actor.

Like SCIRI did in the 1980s and Badr continues to do to this day, AAH uses religious activism and education systems to recruit and indoctrinate members. Furthermore, AAH invested in the promotion and expansion of its social services in order to the reach other Shi'a

communities and various minorities in Iraq than its original constituency (Wyer, 2012, p. 18). AAH leaders give sermons at mosques, and it runs social services program for the poor, widows and orphans, as Hizbullah does in southern Lebanon (Farwell, 2017). It also has a network of religious schools that is named "Seal of the Apostles" to recruit new followers (Farwell, 2017, CEP, 2018). Today, according to Alaaldin (2018), AAH "runs extensive social and religious activities, including medical centers and clinics, independently of the Iraqi government," which is reportedly funded by Iran. Alaaldin (2018b) further argues that the IRGC has "helped AAH co-opt or take over local humanitarian organisations and charities as a way of acquiring legitimacy and popularity, and thus ensured that aid is provided." Wyer (2012, p. 27) also argues that Iran has helped AAH establish itself as an organisation that provides charitable and religious services.

However, although this has been evident after 2011, social appropriation can hardly be said to have been a mechanism used by Iran to mobilise AAH. There is little evidence that suggests that AAH engaged in this type of activities during its mobilisation process. For Iran to mobilise AAH, it was first and foremost armed resistance against the US coalition forces that was crucial. Moreover, the fact that AAH did not transform into a political actor that provides religious and social welfare services until later down the late indicates that social appropriation was not deployed by Iran during the mobilisation process.

6.2 Chapter summary

This chapter has demonstrated that brokerage, indoctrination, and coordinated action have been mechanism deployed by Iran during the mobilisation process of AAH. Concerning brokerage, this seem to have consisted of connecting IRGC-QF with Khazali's unit, connecting Khazali's unit with Lebanese Hizbullah, and disconnecting Khazali from JAM. For Iran to mobilise AAH, shared commitment to fight US coalition forces appears to have been crucial. In addition, the process of forming KH indicates that Iran works closely with individuals when mobilising militias, as it seems to have been Khazali and the IRGC-QF who were the main drivers behind it. Moreover, indoctrination seem to have occurred prior to brokerage, as AAH was promoting Iran's religious and ideological ideals already at its inception. As such, AAH engaged in collective making of claims and strategic framing within the repertoire of Iran's axis of resistance. This indicated an identity shift from Khazali and his follower's tenure with the Sadrist movement, who did not accept Khomeini's concept of velayat e-faqih. While AAH

transformed into a political actor in 2011 after the US withdrawal of Iraq, social appropriation does not seem to have been a mechanism used by Iran during the mobilisation process.

7 Analysis Part III: Kata'ib Hizbullah

In this chapter, I will examine how Iran contributed to the mobilisation of Kata'ib Hizbullah, which is another prominent militia that was established during the US occupation of Iraq. In order to do this, I will use process tracing as a method to observe whether the following mechanisms have been used, and in which order they occurred: brokerage, indoctrination, coordinated action, and social appropriation.

7.1.1 Brokerage

Examining if, or how Iran acted as a broker during the mobilisation process of KH is a challenging task, as the group is known for being one of Iraq's most secretive Shi'a militias (CEP, 2018, p. 2; Dehghanpisheh, 2014). However, there are some empirical findings that can help shed light on whether brokerage has been used.

First and foremost, Iran's connection to KH's founder and leading figure Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis is of particular importance. Although KH was founded in 2007, we have to go back to the 1970s to fully understand its origins. At that time, Muhandis was a member of the Da'wa party (Strouse, 2010; Wing, 2014; Knights, 2010, p. 12). After Saddam Hussein's crackdown on Iraqi Shi'a Islamists following the 1979 Iranian revolution, Muhandis was one of many Shiites who fled across the border. However, unlike many others, he decided to settle in Kuwait's capital, where he worked as an engineer (Strouse, 2010, p. 4).[30] According to several accounts, Muhandis was part of the Da'wa cell that worked with the IRGC to undertake terrorist operations against the US and French embassies in Kuwait in 1983, and the Kuwaiti royal family in 1985 (Knights, 2010, pp. 12-13; Felter & Fishman, 2008, p. 24). Following the attacks, he fled to Iran, where he reportedly ended up in a training camp in Ahvaz for Iraqi dissidents run by the IRGC (Glanz & Santora, 2007; Filkins, 2014). In 1985, he joined SCIRI, and became a senior commander in the Badr Brigades (Knights, 2010, p. 13; Strouse, 2010, p. 4).

In other words, Muhandis was had already been cooperating with Iran and the IRGC for decades when he founded KH in 2007. Qassem Soleimani has for example called Muhandis a "living martyr" and a "mujahid with [a record] of 40 years of resistance" (Toumaj, 2017). In addition, according to a former adviser to Nuri al-Maliki, in a 2006 bilateral meeting between

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[30] There is conflicting evidence whether Muhandis fled to Iran prior to settling in Kuwait, or if Kuwait was his first destination.

Iran and Iraq in Tehran, "he [Muhandis] sat with the Iranians […] This was not normal" (Dehghanpisheh, 2014). This indicates that Muhandis had close relationship with the Iranians only one year prior to founding KH. Furthermore, according to Michael Knights (2010, p. 12), IRGC-QF's contributed to the founding of KH as they wanted the group to function as "a vehicle through which [they] could deploy its most experienced operators and its most sensitive equipment." Following this assessment, it might not be a coincidence that it was Muhandis who founded KH, as he had likely acquired such expertise during his time with the IRGC and Badr Brigades, which his involvement in the Kuwaiti attacks demonstrate.

In sum, there is little reason to doubt that the connection between Iran and Muhandis had already existed for decades when he founded KH in 2007. The empirical evidence therefore suggests that Iran's use of brokerage during the mobilisation process of KH did not involve the facilitation of a new connection with Muhandis. First, it is improbable that Muhandis left the Badr Brigades to form a new militia without consulting Iran first. This is evident, not only because KH received material support from Iran already from its inception, but also because of the well-established relationship that existed between the two entities. In line with the findings in the previous chapter, this again indicates that an important aspect of Iran's mobilisation of militias seems to be working closely with individuals. Furthermore, Muhandis might have been a "safe bet" as he had already proven loyal towards Iran during his time in exile, in addition to his overlapping ideological and religious base as member of SCIRI and the Badr Brigades. Furthermore, Hassan Barram argued during our interview in Sulaymaniyah that leaders like Muhandis have been important for Iran in post-2003 Iraq:

> At the end of the day, it is the political leaders that were in opposition to the previous regime and resided in Iran that control the communities in Iraq today. Iran supported them, and had already established links with them before they became political leaders in Iraq.

Second, as the previous chapter demonstrated, it is equally important to assess Iran's role in Muhandis split from the Badr Brigades when examining the use of brokerage. According to Muhandis himself, he left the Badr Brigades in 2002 (Posch, 2018, p. 20). As already mentioned, Muhandis served as a senior commander in the Badr Brigades during the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, his chief of staff was reportedly Hadi al-Ameri, the current head of Badr Organisation (Ohlers, 2018). As such, Ameri and Muhandis had been cooperating closely for decades when the latter founded KH in 2007. According to Brennan et. al (2013, p. 139), the

relationship between the two is "both personal and professional". Furthermore, both Ameri and Muhandis had a well-established connection with Iran; they had fought alongside the IRGC during the 1980s, and were also dependent on the material support it received from them. As Muhandis continued to receive such support from Iran after founding his own militia, it seems reasonable to argue that his decision to leave the Badr Brigades is unlikely to have been independent from Iranian involvement. Furthermore, Ameri might also have supported his decision, as KH reportedly received support from the Badr Brigades during its early years (Posch, 2018, p. 13). Furthermore, Ameri, Muhandis, and Soleimani remain close to this day.[31]

In this context, it should be noted that SCIRI changed the Badr Brigades' name to the Badr Organisation for Reconstruction and Development in 2003 due to pressure from the US to disarm its militia (Beehner, 2006; Stanford University, 2016). There is also evidence that this is the reason why Muhandis resigned from the Badr Brigades in 2002, as he disapproved of SCIRI holding talks with the US coalition (Knights, 2011a, p. 2; Felter & Fishman, 2008, p. 24). The fact that Muhandis disagreed with SCIRI's constructive engagement with the US might have created an opportunity for Iran to ask him to form a new militia that was fully committed to attacking coalition forces. In fact, KH is the only designated terrorist group among all the Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias in Iraq, which is a testament to how committed it was to attack the coalition.

Moreover, Levitt and Smyth (2015) argues that Iran "encouraged extremists to splinter off and form their own militias" when SCIRI and Badr Brigades started their transformation into a political actors. This argument is supported by the fact that Iran wanted SCIRI to participate in the political process in Iraq, since democratic transition would allow the Shi'a majority to consolidate power (Takeyh, 2008, p. 14). According to Posch (2018, p. 13), the Americans recognised SCIRI and the Badr Brigades' cooperation. As such, attacks by Badr Brigades against the coalition forces could put this at risk, which is doubtful to have been in Iran's interest (Posch, 2018, p. 29). On the other hand, making it difficult for US to sustain their military presence in Iran's close neighbourhood was equally important (Barzegar, 2008, p. 53). It was later known that Badr officers were involved with training groups such as AAH and KH, which also indicates that there was a coordinated plan to form a new militia (Posch, 2018, p. 13). This is similar to what seems to have happened during the mobilisation process of AAH, but it also resembles what Iran did when they encouraged Shiite radicals to split from Lebanon's Amal Party to form Hizbullah in the early 1980s (Levitt & Smyth, 2015). Moreover, it does not

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[31] Looking up their names on Google returns several pictures of them together from the last year.

seem farfetched to argue that Iran has deployed brokerage as a mechanism to *disconnect* Muhandis' and his new unit from the Badr Brigades.

If Iran did in fact encourage Muhandis and other Badr members to help establish KH, offering material resources might have been an effective tool in the mobilisation process. Indeed, if KH's main objective was to attack coalition forces, they needed the material means to do so. In order to recruit fighters, they also depended on being able to pay salaries. According to Levitt and Phillips (2015), KH started to receive more sophisticated training and sensitive equipment than any other Shi'a militia in Iraq as soon it was formed. Other scholars have argued that the IRGC-QF provided KH with the assistance necessary to turn it into an "elite unit", with its 400 fighters among the most experienced in Iraq (Juneau, 2015, p. 110; Knights, 2010). Furthermore, Qassem Soleimani has said that Muhandis has held the "key to the Islamic Republic's weapons depot" (Toumaj, 2018). According to Michael Knights (2010, p. 12), IRGC-QF's contributed to the founding of KH as they wanted the group to function as "a vehicle through which [they] could deploy its most experienced operators and its most sensitive equipment." In sum, sufficient evidence points to Iran's use of brokerage, materially connecting KH to the conflict in Iraq by offering training, equipment, funding, and possibly intelligence. Moreover, the mobilisation of resources also helped KH to mobilise fighters to join its cause.

Taking into consideration the already well-established relationship between Muhandis, Iran, and the Badr Brigades when KH was founded in 2007, an indicator of Iranian brokerage involving the production of a *new* connection between previously unconnected sites is KH's cooperation with AAH. Khazali, AAH's, came from the Sadrist movement, while Muhandis and most of KH's members had served in the Badr Brigades. Little evidence that suggests that there was a well-established connection between Muhandis and Khazali during that time. SCIRI and the Sadrists were rivals at the time, and there are even some reports that claim that there were violent clashes between Sadr's JAM militia and Badr Organisation (ICG, 2007, p. I; Posch, 2018, p. 14; Williams, 2009, p. 83). As such, it is not unreasonable to argue that the connection between KH and AAH was facilitated by Iran, especially when taking into account the IRGC-QF's close coordination with and support to the two newly-established militias.

In addition, Iran seems to have connected KH with Lebanese Hizbullah, as it did with AAH a few years back. The same year as Muhandis formed KH, he employed Hizbullah instructors to train KH's fighters in guerrilla warfare techniques, explosives, and other types of advanced weaponry (Levitt & Smyth, 2015). Furthermore, Hizbullah's Unit 3800 was coordinating with KH from the latter's inception, which is an entity that coordinates closely

with the IRGC-QF to arm and train Iraqi Shi'a militias (Levitt & Smyth, 2015). As such, Hizbullah played a key role in channeling Iran's support to KH (and AAH), which was useful for the Iranians because of its knowledge of Arabic and its experience in dealing with the transferred weaponry (Katzman, 2010, p. 4). Thus, Iranian brokerage in the case of KH also involved connecting the group with Iran's transnational network of armed resistance, which at the time consisted mainly of Shiite militias such as Lebanese Hizbullah, Badr Organisation, and AAH. It also fights alongside Lebanese Hizbullah and other IRGC-QF trained groups such as AAH and Syrian, Afghani and Pakistani Shi'ite militias, which is another indicator of Iran connecting AAH to its transnational network of armed resistance.

To sum up, brokerage in the case of KH seems to have included 1) disconnecting Muhandis from Badr Brigades; 2) materially connecting KH to the conflict; 3) connecting KH to Lebanese Hizbullah and AAH, or in other words, Iran's transnational network of armed resistance, and 4) an overall strengthened connection between the IRGC-QF and KH.

7.1.2 Indoctrination

In terms of Iran's use of indoctrination as a mechanism to mobilise KH, the lines are a bit blurred. First of all, there is little doubt that KH is ideologically and religiously aligned to Iran. On KH's website, it is stated that KH's goal is to set up an Islamic government in Iraq based on the Iranian model and Khomeini's concept of velayat-e faqih, in addition to referring to Khamenei as "the leading Imam" (Stanford University, 2016; Felter & Fishman, 2008, Levitt & Smyth; 2015). As such, KH's members swear loyalty to Khamenei and openly declare him as their spiritual leader (Stanford University, 2016). As previously mentioned, it might not have been a coincidence that a senior commander of the Badr Brigades was selected to form and lead KH. This was also underlined by Dr. Muthana Nader Ameen, leader of the Islamic Union in Kurdistan:

> When Iran decides to provide a group with material support, the group needs to have the same ideology first.

Second, KH's alignment with Iran is not merely in religious terms, but also in the group's strong resentment towards the US and its presence in Iraq and the region. In this regard, KH also has a strong focus on the relations between the US and Iran on its website, with a clear pro-Iranian profile (Visser, 2011). Although KH began fighting the Sunni insurgency in Iraq

and for Assad's regime in Syria after the withdrawal of US forces in 2011, KH has continued to prioritise its anti-American agenda, and rejected calls to put down its arms against Americans (CS, 2018; TRAC, 2018). This was also demonstrated in 2014, when KH released a statement stating that they "will not fight alongside the American troops under any kind of conditions whatsoever. [Our only contact with Americans will be] if we fight each other." (Kirkpatrick, 2014). As such, it has kept its anti-American ideological profile, and remains a resistance group against US presence in Iraq and the region.

As the promotion of Khamenei, and velayat e-faqih in particular, is a very specific feature of Iran's revolutionary ideology, as along with the strong resentment against Israel and the US, this clearly indicates KH's alignment with the leadership in Iran. However, it should be noted that indoctrination can hardly be said to stem from the group's founding in 2007. As most of KH's members also came from Badr, like Muhandis himself, indoctrination had probably already taken place prior to the founding of KH. This, I argue, suggests that the discussion on indoctrination in section 5.1.2 is applicable to the case of KH as well. Moreover, this again points to the current observation that indoctrination is a mechanism used by Iran prior to brokerage.

It is also important to acknowledge that Iran's ability to mobilise around these markers is also largely due to the internal situation in Iraq. When being offered patronage in order to be a more effective force in fighting, it is not surprising that armed groups look like KH and AAH towards Iran. Another important assessment is that alignment with Iran might be a marriage of convenience, or a tactical coincidence of interests rather than de facto indoctrination. For example, Vice President of the Security and Defense Committee in Iraq's Council of Representatives, Shakhawan A. Ahmed, said the following:

> The relationship between [Iran and the Shi'a militias] is purely pragmatic. The militia leaders do not believe in Iranian values, beliefs, ideologies, or foreign policies – they just know they are dependent on them to gain power. The same goes for Iran – they are not approaching these groups because they are Shi'a – Shiism isn't a goal in itself, it is means to achieve a goal.

On the other hand, the fact that KH remains ideologically and religiously aligned with Iran lends credence to the argument that indoctrination has been a mechanism used to mobilise the militia. A marriage of convenience or not, the fact that Iran could effectively organise KH as an elite unit to target US presence in Iraq, which also promoted its concept of velayat e-faqih, strongly suggests that indoctrination has been an effective

way to mobilise the militia. After all, if Muhandis and KH's fighters had not been indoctrinated during their time with the Badr Brigades, this might have been impossible. In sum, this only demonstrates that indoctrination is a continuous process, and although it began decades prior to KH founding, it was still crucial during the mobilisation process.

7.1.3 Coordinated action

As the previous sections have demonstrated, the empirical findings suggest that Muhandis left the Badr Brigades in 2002 as he disagreed with the SCIRI leadership's engagement with the US. Moreover, there is sufficient evidence that Iran facilitated Muhandis break with the Badr Brigades as it needed a militia that could stay committed to attacking coalition forces without risking conflict escalation with the governments in Baghdad and Washington D.C. Furthermore, section 7.1.1 and 7.1.2 have already discussed how KH was mobilised by Iran and Muhandis as an "elite unit," and that coordination between them, in addition to Lebanese Hizbullah, is well-documented.

During occupation, KH was one of the most active militias in attacking US coalition forces. Its first attack is reported as being an improvised rocket-assisted mortar (IRAM) attack at a US base southeast of Baghdad on February 19, 2008, which killed one American civilian (Stanford, 2016). In July 2009, the US Department of the Treasury (2009) designated Muhandis and KH as terrorists for having "committed, directed, supported, or posed a significant risk of committing acts of violence against coalition and Iraqi Security Forces." According to the American diplomat Ali Khedery, KH is responsible for "some of the most lethal attacks against the US coalition forces" during the US' presence in Iraq (Stanford University, 2016a). KH also filmed many of these attacks, and published them online as a way to attract new recruits (US Department of the Treasury, 2009).

Iran's involvement in KH's attacks against US coalition forces has been crucial. Muhandis led smuggling networks that moved ammunition and from Iran to Iraq for KH and other Iran-affiliated groups such as AAH (Levitt & Smyth, 2015). Furthermore, Knights (2011, p. 12) argues that Muhandis has even acted as an adviser to Soleimani. Muhandis has called himself a proud soldier of Soleimani, and is referred to as "Iran's most powerful militia leader in Iraq" (Knights, 2011, p. 12). Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen explained this the following way:

> Iran leaves the [Iraqi Shi'a militias] to do the job, under the name of Iraqism and Iraq being one people. They know it is bad for them to be and to be seen in the frontline. So, the fighters are Iraqis, but Iranians are the brain behind. Furthermore, they don't need to use soft power to win minds, hearts and influence, they have Iraqi militias doing that for them in the whole of Iraq.

As such, coordinated action between Iran and KH can be understood as a form for covert and indirect intervention. Through the mobilisation of KH, Iran managed to maintain good relations with Washington D.C. and Baghdad, while at the same making it difficult for US coalition to remain in Iraq. As previously discussed, American military presence in Iraq was considered both an imminent threat and an obstacle to Iran's interests in the region. Moreover, the Badr Brigades was also being recognised by the US for its efforts to lay down arms, which Iran considered convenient as it contributed to increasing SCIRI's political influence in Iraq's democratic transition.

Moreover, section 6.1.3 has already discussed how Iran mobilised both AAH and KH to engage in collective violence and making of claims in the Syrian civil war after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Although this is considered to have occurred after the initial mobilisation process of KH, it is another example of how Iran mobilises militias to engage in coordinated action through its ideological and religious appeal.

KH fighters were reportedly trained at a base near Tehran prior to engaging in the battle in Syria, and it also helped the IRGC-QF to form militias such as Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) and Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba (HNN) alongside AAH (Fassihi et al., 2013; Levitt & Smyth, 2015). According to Reuters, IRGC-QF appointed a senior leader from the Badr Brigades to coordinate between the Syrian government and the Iraqi Shi'a militias, including AAH and KH (al-Salhy, 2012b). Muhandis is also known for being a central figure in the Shi'a militia Kata'ib Imam Ali, although this is disputed (Levitt & Smyth, 2015). In April 2014, KH also announced the formation of Saraya al-Difa al-Shabi, a fighting force dedicated specifically to fighting in Iraq. Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada is also considered to be a splinter from KH. In sum, it is well-documented that both AAH and KH assisted the new groups and fought alongside each other to help defend the Assad regime (Clarke & Smyth, 2017, p. 14).

In sum, in terms of coordinated action, its allocation of material resources to make KH an effective force in fighting, and the common goal of attacking coalition forces, seems to have been an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise KH, and for KH to mobilise fighters to join its cause. Coordinated action against coalition forces seems to have been an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise KH. With regard to coordination action, this also seems to have been characterised by covert intervention in the sense that Iran needed a militia that committed to attacking coalition forces while Muhandis' initial organisation, SCIRI and Badr Organisation, was approaching the US and entering the political process. In order not to risk conflict escalation with the US as Iran wanted SCIRI and Badr Organisation to consolidate

political power, KH might have been important to continue targeting coalition forces, which also was an important objective.

7.1.4 Social appropriation

Social appropriation does not seem to have been a mechanism used by Iran during the mobilisation process of KH. To this day, KH has refrained from entering the formal political process in Iraq, and there is no evidence that it provides any social welfare services. Although KH of course does influence Iraq's internal affairs through its militant activities, it has not been transformed into a political actor by launching a movement campaign of any kind. For example, while Badr Organisation and AAH were running on the Fatah alliance list in the 2018 parliamentary elections, KH announced in a statement on their website that they would not do the same (Nada & Rowan, 2018). Of course, it is important to mention that Muhandis was an elected member of parliament from 2005 until 2010, although he spent most of his time in Iran (Glanz & Santora, 2007; Knights, 2010, p. 13).

The fact that KH has remained an armed resistance group makes it a deviant case from the two other cases, including other prominent Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias in the region such as Lebanese Hizbullah. Muhandis' incentive is more difficult to explain, but it might be because he does not seek to compete with other Iran-affiliated militia groups in the political or religious domain. Furthermore, it might be that Iran's objective was to use KH merely for covert or indirect intervention against the US in Iraq, while other groups are to influence the process through non-violent means as well.

In sum, social appropriation has not been a mechanism used by Iran to mobilise KH.

7.2 Chapter summary

KH is a very secretive militia group, which has made it a challenging case to examine. However, the empirical findings have some implications with regard to how Iran has mobilised the militia. First, in terms of brokerage, this seems to have consisted of 1) disconnecting Muhandis from Badr Brigades; 2) materially connecting KH to the conflict; 3) connecting KH to Lebanese Hizbullah and AAH, or in other words, Iran's transnational network of armed resistance, and 4) an overall strengthened connection between the IRGC-QF and KH. Moreover, KH is another case that demonstrates that Iran works closely with individuals before selecting them to lead a

new militia. Furthermore, the allocation of material resources was an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise KH, and for KH to mobilise fighters to join its cause.

Second, indoctrination is considered to have been deployed prior to the mobilisation process of KH, as Muhandis and his followers had already aligned to Iran's ideological and religious identity markers during their time in SCIRI and the Badr Brigades during the 1980s. As such, indoctrination has been an effective mechanism as KH was promoting Iran's velayat e-faqih and anti-Americanism already at its inception.

Third, coordinated action against coalition forces seems to have been an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise KH. With regard to coordination action, this also seems to have been characterised by covert intervention in the sense that Iran needed a militia that committed to attacking coalition forces while Muhandis' initial organisation, SCIRI and Badr Organisation, was approaching the US and entering the political process. In order not to risk conflict escalation with the US as Iran wanted SCIRI and Badr Organisation to consolidate political power, KH might have been important to continue targeting coalition forces, which also was an important objective. Finally, social appropriation has not been a mechanism used by Iran.

Analysis Part IV: Discussion of findings

The previous chapters have examined Iran's use of different mechanisms in three mobilisation processes; Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq and its Badr Brigades, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hizbullah. In this chapter, I will compare the three cases by discussing the empirical findings with regard to the mechanisms that have guided the analysis; brokerage, indoctrination, coordinated action, and social appropriation. This way, I will attempt to identify differences or similarities in the use of mechanisms across the three cases. The findings will be presented in a systematic overview in section 7.4.

7.3 Comparison of mobilisation processes

7.3.1 Brokerage

Following Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) definition, brokerage consists of the production a connection between previously unconnected sites. To make this mechanism measurable, I identified that indicators of brokerage can be if Iran facilitates a connection between itself and a militia, but also between militias. While this was intuitive at the onset of this project, the empirical findings suggest that reality is far more complex.

First, it seems as though the *disconnection* of previously connected sites has been an important mechanism for Iran in all three cases. This is an aspect of brokerage that was not included when the mechanisms and their indicators were outlined, and therefore not theoretically expected. In the case of SCIRI, the empirical findings suggest that Iran contributed to a divergence between the Hakim faction and the Da'wa party during the 1980s. There are also some indications that Khomeini might have caused fragmentation in the Shi'a community Iraq in the late 1970s, as the Hakims and other activists further distanced themselves from the quietist religious establishment in Najaf. In the case of AAH, Iran appears to have facilitated the split between Khazali's unit and the Sadrist movement. Furthermore, the empirical findings also suggest that Iran facilitated Muhandis' decision to leave Badr Organisation to form KH. In other words, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that brokerage also consists of disconnection.

An interesting question in this regard is *how* Iran deployed this mechanism. The main explanation for the growing divergence between the Hakim faction and the Da'wa party appears

to be the latter's refusal to commit to Iran's concept of velayat e-faqih. Another explanation is that the Da'wa party's members were reluctant to fight fellow Iraqis on the battlefield during the Iran-Iraq war. This underlines the importance of ideological and religious alignment, in addition to not being an obstacle for Iran's interests. Moreover, it supports the argument that Iran's mobilisation of Iraqi Shi'a militias is instrumental. On the other hand, non-alignment to Iran's religious and ideological guidance does not seem to have caused Iran's use of this type of brokerage in the case of AAH. The main explanation in this case seems to have been Sadr's unpredictability, and lack of commitment to attack US coalition forces. In fact, both Khazali and Muhandis left their mother organisations following more constructive engagement with the US coalition and Iraqi government. The "divide and conquer" technique may therefore be an aspect of brokerage in order for Iran to mobilise militias that are easier to exert control over and that are more prone to its own unofficial agenda. As such, Iran has also contributed to the proliferation of militias in Iraq by encouraging more extremist elements to splinter off from their mother organisations to form new groups.

Furthermore, another factor that influenced Iran's ability to deploy this aspect of brokerage seems to have been its ability to work closely with individuals. In all three cases, the first type of brokerage to occur has been Iran's production of a connection with an individual that later became the militia's leader. Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, Qais al-Khazali, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis all appear to have been carefully vetted and selected by Iran. As such, the disconnection of sites has also involved the strengthening or formalisation of another one. This is supported by the fact that indoctrination seems to have taken place *prior* to brokerage in all three cases. This might imply that an important dimension of Iran's militia strategy is to select ideologically and religiously aligned individuals as militia leaders, in order to ensure the loyalty of the group in terms of coordinated action. Thus, brokerage also appears to have consisted of strengthening Iran's connection to individuals.

The mobilisation processes of AAH and KH also suggest that brokerage included integrating the groups into to Iran's transnational network of armed resistance. In addition to connecting AAH and KH with each other, Lebanese Hizbullah was involved from day one, which seems to have been facilitated by Iran. AAH and KH have also maintained close ties with Badr Organisation. Furthermore, AAH and KH's participation in the transnational network of armed resistance was clearly demonstrated later down the line with their participation pro-Assad operations in Syria in coordination with the IRGC-QF, Hizbullah, and other Iran-affiliated Shi'a militias. Strategic framing within the repertoire of "the axis of resistance" has

also been evident within both groups. However, I have not been able to find evidence for this in the case of SCIRI. In SCIRI's case, this instead involved connecting the various Iraqi opposition groups with each other, and with Iraqi prisoners of war and refugees.

Finally, in order for Iran to deploy these different variants of brokerage, both material and non-material resources appear to have been crucial. Offering much needed material assistance such as sanctuary, training, and funding seems to have been an important mechanism for Iran to connect with the groups. Furthermore, Iran's religious and ideological appeal also seems to have been an important facilitator. During the 1980s, the introduction of Iran's distinct revolutionary Shi'a doctrine had unique salience among oppressed Shiites in Iraq, and in particular the activists who were determined for political change. In the post-2003 period, its resistance slogans such as anti-Americanism and anti-Israelism have also been an effective identity marker to mobilise Iraqi Shi'a militias.

7.3.2 Indoctrination

First and foremost, it is important to emphasise that Iran's religious and ideological influence or appeal is the result of a long and continuous process. Iran's non-material resources are not used once during the mobilisation and then never used again, and the mechanism does not cease to exist even after it has been successfully deployed. However, the empirical evidence does provide some insight into how this mechanism has been used.

It seems evident that indoctrination has often been deployed prior to (or simultaneously with) brokerage. In other words, Iran does not seem to establish a close connection with a group unless they are ideologically and religiously aligned. This implies that indoctrination might be a prerequisite for Iran in order to formalise or strengthen a connection with a group. An illustrative example of this is that while Iran provided Sadr's JAM militia with material resources, the relationship was a marriage of convenience rather than a well-established one. In contrast, Iran has worked with SCIRI, AAH, and KH on a completely different level during their mobilisation processes. Rather than a marriage of convenience, this more closely resembles Iran's relationship with Lebanese Hizbullah, as discussed in section 4.2.2. In other words, it does not appear that brokerage has been deployed prior to indoctrination, at least when brokerage has involved the strengthening of an already existing connection. Moreover, it also seems reasonable to argue that indoctrination is important to mobilise fighters to join the militias' cause.

In the case of SCIRI, the most apparent indicator of indoctrination is the Hakim camp's adoption of Iran's velayat e-faqih, which represented an identity shift from the Shi'a Islamist movement the Hakims represented in Iraq. There seems to have been a process of indecision, or even negotiations between Iran and Hakim before he was finally appointed leader of the Iraqi opposition. Furthermore, a similar identity shift seems to have occurred among Khazali and his followers after their split with JAM and the Sadrist movement. In contrast with the Sadrist movement, AAH has been promoting Iran's velayat e-faqih since its inception. However, this is less straightforward in the case of KH. Indoctrination cannot be said to have occurred during the mobilisation of the group, but rather the mobilisation of process of SCIRI and the Badr Brigades during the 1980s as its leadership had its origins there. On the other hand, this clearly signals the successful indoctrination of SCIRI and the Badr Brigades, as Iran was able to help establish a new militia that was already fully aligned and committed to Iran's agenda. It also supports the argument that indoctrination is a continuous process.

In addition to promoting velayat-e faqih, AAH and KH has also promoted Iran's "axis of resistance." Khazali has for example promoted a "Shiite full moon" rather than a "Shiite crescent," which Iran's transnational network of Shi'a allies is commonly referred to as. Iran's use of indoctrination in the case of AAH and KH has therefore not been limited to the velayat e-faqih, but also included anti-Israelism and anti-Americanism. In the case of Iran, sectarian entrepreneurship should thus include the mobilisation under ideological identity markers, such as anti-Americanism and anti-Israelism. As such, it might be misleading to view Iran as merely a sectarian entrepreneur rather than a political or ideological one. However, this type of strategic framing is less evident in the case of SCIRI. Moreover, indoctrination along these ideological lines was not apparent during the 1980s, with the replacement of the Ba'athist regime with an Islamic Republic at the core of collective violence and making of claims. In sum, although all three groups seem to have been indoctrinated into Iran's religious and ideological doctrine, there is some variation in terms of how this has taken place. As the case of KH demonstrates, it seems to have been sustainable for Iran to establish patron-client relationships with overlapping ideological or religious bases.

7.3.3 Coordinated action

The empirical findings strongly suggest that coordinated action has been an important mechanism in all three cases. In the case of SCIRI, the engagement in collective violence and making of claims was of crucial importance for Iran in order to mobilise the various opposition

groups. In particular, a common enemy is what seems to have allowed Iran to mobilise the various opposition groups under the SCIRI umbrella in 1982. There are also indicators that the goal of overthrowing the Ba'athist regime is what made the Iraqi Shi'a opposition look to Iran in the first place. Furthermore, Iran's ability to capitalise on its ideological and religious appeal was also crucial, as the opposition was inspired by Khomeini's successful revolution and Shi'a revival. Moreover, coordinated action between them was unarguably coherent with Iran's long-term goal of replacing the Ba'athist regime with a Shi'a Islamic Republic, but also the short-term goal of winning the war against Saddam Hussein.

Coordinated action has functioned in a similar way in the cases of AAH and KH. In both these cases, coordinated action during the mobilisation process mostly involved attacking US coalition forces. The US-led invasion in 2003 created the environment for Iran to use coordinated action as a mechanism to mobilise the armed resistance movement that emerged. Their leaders and members' commitment to resist the US-led occupation through the deployment of violent means was unarguably crucial to Iran's ability to mobilise the groups. Moreover, Iran's allocation of material resources to make AAH and KH an effective force in fighting, and the shared goal of upholding the armed resistance against the US, seems to have been an important mechanism for Iran to mobilise AAH and KH, and for the militias to mobilise fighters to join this cause. In addition to material resources such as funds, arms, and training, Iran's credibility in its commitment to resist US presence in Iraq and the region might also have influenced potential recruits. As such, while the mobilisation processes of AAH and KH are largely a result of Iraq's internal dynamics after 2003, Iran has taken advantage of it by combining its material and non-material resources to mobilise the groups.

Coordinated action later developed into engagement in the "axis of resistance", including the protection of shrines and fighting for Bashar al-Assad in Syria in the cases of AAH and KH.[32] The groups have also targeted Israel in cooperation with Lebanese Hizbullah, with AAH even participating military in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war. Furthermore, strategic framing of commonalities within the repertoire of the "axis of resistance" is evident. As such, coordinated action seems to have involved covert and indirect intervention as Iran wanted to form militias that could attack US coalition forces, without risking conflict escalation with the governments in Baghdad and Washington D.C, and even Tel Aviv later down the line. As such, coordinated action based on shared goals and a common enemy appears to have been an

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[32] Badr Organisation has also been engaged in coordinated action with Iran in Syria, but this is out of this thesis' scope and will therefore not be included in the discussion here.

effective way of mobilising groups in all three cases. Moreover, both material and non-material resources have been useful for AAH and KH's foreign operations as well. While Iran's ideological and religious appeal has encouraged fighters to join the resistance, material support was equally important, as this is what ensured that the militias would be effective combat units.

In sum, shared goals and a common enemy, which allows coordinated action, seems to be an effective mechanism for Iran in order to mobilise groups in all three cases. Furthermore, significant material support appears to be allocated when Iran is sure that the group will engage in coordinated action and collective making of claims. All three cases have strong evidence that suggests that coordinated action is an important component of cooperation between them. However, with the cases of AAH and KH, it seems to be more covert than the case of SCIRI. While the Sadrists and Badr Organisation were also supported by Iran, it also seems to have wanted to mobilise groups that could attack US forces without severing the relations between Iran and the US, including SCIRI's relations with the latter.

7.3.4 Social appropriation

Building on existing literature on militias as a form of contentious politics, I expected to find that social appropriation might have been a mechanism used by Iran during the mobilisation processes of SCIRI, AAH, and KH. However, this mechanism does not seem to have been an important mechanism for Iran in two out of three cases.

Empirical findings suggest that Iran's use of social appropriation has only been present in the case of SCIRI. The most important indicator is that Iran helped SCIRI to provide social services to its constituents already during the early days of its existence. This is in line with the theoretical expectations, namely that Iran might have used social appropriation to ensure that SCIRI would gain popular legitimacy. I have suggested that this was of particular importance to SCIRI, as its leadership represented a quietist religious establishment in Najaf who disapproved of its militant activities. Although SCIRI activities during exile were highly political, SCIRI did not become an official Iraqi political party until it returned to Iraq in 2003. The full-fledged political transformation from an armed opposition group into a political entity thus did not occur during the mobilisation process.

In the case of AAH, social appropriation is far less evident. Although Iran has reportedly helped AAH to transform into a political party with its own social services, this did not happen until 2011, after the mobilisation process of the group was completed. Moreover, it did not rebrand itself as a political party until the US withdrew in 2011, and the need for a new raison

d'être arose. As such, although both SCIRI and AAH are considered to be compatible with Sadeghi-Boroujerdi's (2017, p. 169) definition of militias as armed and politicised social action, social appropriation was only influential during the mobilisation process of the former.

Furthermore, this mechanism is non-existent in the case of KH. KH remains a traditional militia that has refrained from entering the political process in Iraq, despite the fact that KH's founding leader Muhandis was an elected member of parliament for years. A reason might be that Iran needed a close ally it could trust to carry out controversial attacks or "covert" interventions in Iraq and Syria. Although this is speculative, a broader explanation might be that Iran fosters two kinds of groups: those who enter the political process (and thus helps Iran increase its influence in the political sphere), and others that are traditional armed resistance groups (used for tactical and military means).

While SCIRI provided its constituents with social welfare services from its inception, AAH did not engage with political or social activities until many years later. On the other hand, KH has not transformed itself into a political party with a social welfare wing at all, and has remained an armed resistance group. This might imply that Iran has different goals for its affiliated militias – while some are encouraged to enter the political process and ensure Iranian influence in that sphere, others are tactically used for covert intervention. In the case of SCIRI, it would possibly be more meaningful to analyse SCIRI's transformation into a political actor after its return to Iraq in 2003. This is applicable for the Badr Brigades as well, who also went through a significant change after 2003 (particularly after its split with SCIRI in 2007). In other words, this mechanism might have been more suitable if this study was concerned with the development of these groups over a longer time period.

7.4 Summary of findings

Table 5. Overview of mechanisms identified in cases

	SCIRI and the Badr Brigades	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	Kata'ib Hizbullah
Mechanism 1: Brokerage	Connection between Iran and Hakim, connection between Iraqi Shi'a opposition groups, connection between Iraqi Shi'a dissidents and Iraqi prisoners of war/refugees, material connection to intrastate *and* interstate conflict, facilitation of divergence between Hakim camp and Da'wa party	Disconnection between AAH and JAM, connection between IRGC-QF and AAH, connection between AAH and Badr Brigades, connection between AAH and Lebanese Hizbullah, materially connection to intrastate *and* interstate conflict	Disconnection between KH and Badr Brigades, connection between KH and AAH, connection between KH and Lebanese Hizbullah, material connection to intrastate and interstate conflict
Mechanism 2: Indoctrination	Religious identity shift, ideological identity shift, strategic framing of commonalities	Religious identity shift, ideological identity shift, strategic framing of commonalities	Indoctrination occurred during KH leadership and members' time in SCIRI/Badr Brigades
Mechanism 3: Coordinated action	Collective violence against Ba'athist regime, collective violence against Mujahideen e-Khalq, collective making of claims to replace the Ba'athist regime with an Islamic Republic	Covert and indirect intervention, collective violence against coalition forces, coordinated military action between AAH and Hizbullah in Lebanon, coordinated military action in Syria (later down the line), collective making of claims, strategic framing	Covert and indirect intervention, collective violence coalition forces, coordinated military action in Syria (later down the line), collective making of claims, strategic framing
Mechanism 4: Social appropriation	Provided social welfare services to constituency	N/A [33]	N/A

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[33] Transformation from armed resistance group to political party with social welfare arm has taken place after mobilisation process completed.

8 Conclusion

The objective of this study has been to explain how the Islamic Republic of Iran has mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979. Mobilisation has been understood as "an increase of the resources available to a political actor for collective making of claims" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 120). I have addressed this question by examining the mobilisation processes of three prominent Iraqi Shi'a militias: Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hizbullah. These militias represent cases that were mobilised under very different contexts. While SCIRI and its Badr Brigades came into existence as exiled opposition groups that sought to replace the Ba'athist regime with an Islamic Republic, Asai'b Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbullah were formed during the US-led occupation of Iraq with the aim of attacking coalition forces. At the same time, the selected cases can be said to be cases of Iran's transnational mobilisation of armed resistance, which have allowed it to engage in covert or indirect conflict intervention in the region. In other words, both variation and consistence exist across cases.

To logically connect the empirical data with the study's research question, I have used a case study research design, with process tracing and the semi-structured interview as methods for data collection. Furthermore, the empirical analysis has been guided by a theoretical framework that has attempted to build a bridge between the literatures on state-militia dynamics and contentious politics. Within this framework, Iran has been viewed as a sectarian entrepreneur that has used its material and non-material resources to mobilise likeminded militia groups as means to further its own interests in the region. I have therefore had an instrumentalist approach to mobilisation in this thesis, which considers it as a by-product of realpolitik. Furthermore, four mechanisms have been identified to structure the analysis; brokerage, indoctrination, coordinated action, and social appropriation.

So, how has Iran's mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979? The empirical findings have pointed to some variation between the cases in terms of the mechanisms being used. However, in terms of a potential causal chain, the process tracing has indicated that indoctrination is the first mechanism used in all three cases, while brokerage and coordinated action follows. In terms of indoctrination, Iran's concept of velayat-e faqih appears to be at the core of it. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that this mechanism does not cease to exist after it has been successfully deployed. Iran's indoctrination of Iraqi Shi'a militias through ideological and religious appeal must be understood as continuous process rather than a "quick

fix" used to mobilise groups. Moreover, Iran's revolutionary ideals such as anti-Americanism and resistance against foreign interference has been a meaningful collective identity that mobilised militias to engage in coordinated action.

Concerning brokerage, some main findings have been outlined. First, the *disconnection* of previously connected sites seems to be a key mechanism for Iran to mobilise groups. The empirical findings suggest that Iran played a central role in the growing divergence between the Hakim camp and the Da'wa party during the mobilisation process of SCIRI, in addition to disconnecting the leaders of Asai'b Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbullah's from their initial groups. This appears to have been possible largely due to Iran's approach to individuals, which might be to ensure the loyalty of the militia. In the cases of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbullah, brokerage has also consisted of integrating them into Iran's transnational network of Shi'a allies, and Lebanese Hizbullah in particular. Strategic framing has been evident between Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hizbullah, Lebanese Hizbullah, and Iran. Moreover, both material and non-material resources have been useful. While Iran's ideological and religious appeal has been important to recruit fighters to the resistance, material support was equally predominant, as this is what ensured that the militias would be effective combat forces.

Furthermore, the empirical findings suggest that the engagement in coordinated action has been an important mechanism in all three cases. In the case of SCIRI, engaging in collective violence and making of claims against the Ba'athist regime was principal for Iran to mobilise the various opposition groups. In the cases of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbullah, the commitment to resist the US-led occupation through the deployment of violent means was unarguably predominant for Iran's ability to mobilise the groups. In these two cases, coordinated action seems to have involved covert and indirect intervention as Iran wanted to form militias that could attack US coalition forces, without risking conflict escalation with the governments in Baghdad and Washington D.C. As such, coordinated action based on shared goals and a common enemy seems to have been an effective way of mobilising groups in all three cases. Moreover, both material and non-material resources have been useful. While Iran's ideological and religious appeal has been salient to encourage to join the resistance, material support was equally predominant at this is what ensured that the militias would be effective forces in fighting.

Finally, social appropriation does not seem to have been dominant during the mobilisation process. Although it seems to have occurred with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq later down the line, this mechanism has only been evident in the case of SCIRI. Moreover, Kata'ib

Hizbullah has not transformed into a political actor at all, and remains an armed resistance group until this today. This might imply that Iran has different goals for militias – while some enter the political process and ensure Iranian influence in that sphere, others are tactically used for covert and indirect intervention. However, it must be clarified that in the case of SCIRI and the Badr Brigades, it would be more meaningful to examine their transformation into political actors after their return to Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. In other words, this mechanism might be more suitable for a study concerned with the long-term development of these groups, and not their initial mobilisation processes.

In sum, the empirical findings suggest that Iran has acted as a sectarian entrepreneur that has used both its material and non-material resources to mobilise likeminded militias to engage in collective violence and making of claims. Moreover, Iran has pragmatically combined material assistance and ideological or religious appeal to mobilise militias as means to further its own interests in the region. As such, both the literatures on contentious politics and state-militia dynamics have been useful to explain how Iran has mobilised Iraqi Shi'a militias since 1979. This has largely been possible due to shared goals and a common enemy. Although this does not mean that Iran has activated sectarian tensions and violence in Iraq, it demonstrates that it has indeed taken advantage of it. However, due to the small and non-representative sample of cases in this study, these findings are not generalisable and further research is necessary to confirm the causality between the mechanisms identified. In terms of external validity, this study's strength has rather been the testing and developing of theories by building a bridge between the literatures on state-militia dynamics and contentious politics.

8.1 Implications for future research

Based on the findings in this study, it would be fruitful with more research on how Iran works with religious leaders, and to which degree this has facilitated the mobilisation of militias. For example, the recruitment of fighters has largely occurred in Shi'a communities where there has been a central religious authority. In all three cases, it was evident that Iran's approach to individuals was crucial during the early stages of the mobilisation process. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine how the mass mobilisation that occurred after Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa in 2014 was influenced by Iran and their affiliated militias, and particularly the units of analysis in this study. In this regard, the later development of Badr Organisation and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq could also be an interesting topic to explore.

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Appendix 1. List of informants

	Participants in research project (all interviews conducted in Iraq, 1. – 14. March 2018)	
	Name	**Affiliation**
1	Shakhawan A. Ahmed	Senior member, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Elected Member, Iraq's Council of Representatives Vice President, Iraq's Council of Representatives' Security and Defense Committee
2	Dlawer Ala'Aldeen	Founding President, Middle East Institute Former Minister of Education, Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq
3	Sadi Ahmed Pire	Spokesperson for Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Senior Member, PUK's Special Bureau for Foreign Affairs Former Career Diplomat in Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs
4	Arif Qurbani	Editor in Chief, Xendan newspaper
5	Muthana Ameen Nader	Leader, Islamic Union of Kurdistan Elected Member, Iraq's Council of Representatives Member, Iraq's Council of Representatives' Council of Foreign Relations

6	Kardo Mohammed	Senior Member, Gorran Movement Representative, Gorran Movement's National Council
7	Hassan Barram	Senior Member, Coalition for Democracy and Justice Former Senior Member, PUK
8	Yasir Kuoti	Research Fellow, Middle East Research Institute